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ARTICLE



God, [political] family... and Europe? The selective resilience of religion in shaping the work of Italian members of the European Parliament

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on data from an original survey and the qualitative content analysis of parliamentary written questions, the contribution studies how religion shapes the political activity of Italian MEPs. It claims that Italian MEPs show some resilient attachment to the Catholic identity of Europe, although they do not take religious values much into consideration for policy decisions. To highlight the role of religion in European politics, this contribution also compares its impact on some policy issues in the EU and Italian political arenas. In both spheres, religious tropes and values, considered as a cultural reference, are more politicised on security issues than on other questions. Such politicisation is undertaken by populist radical right MEPs, who adopt a securitisation framework to emphasise the threat posed by Muslim communities. In the Italian polity, religious values as Christian cultural norms are also politicised on identity issues and morality questions to sustain value-driven restrictive policies.

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Introduction

Relationships between religion and politics in Italy have undergone significant changes since the mid-1990s, within the broader context of the ambivalent transformations of the role played by religion in secular societies and the process of Europeanisation. The decline of religious practices and beliefs, the collapse of the Christian Democratic party (*Democrazia Cristiana*, DC), and the retreat of Catholic activists from the political arena have drastically reduced the influence of religion on Italian politics (Diotallevi 2017). However, Italian politics still shows some attachment to Christian Democratic principles (Bolzonar 2016) and Catholicism has come back into the public sphere (Garelli 2020). Catholic values and symbols have increasing salience in public debates and there is growing recognition of the social contribution of Catholics. This return to the public sphere has happened in three ways. First, Catholic tropes and norms have punctuated the discourses of political elites that used them as a symbolic reservoir to strengthen the declining legitimacy of public institutions (Garelli 2011). Second, lay intellectuals have appealed to Catholics to

contribute to the renewal of the ruling class (Galli della Loggia 2022). Third, Catholicism is used as an identity marker evoked by populist radical right parties to support exclusionary political agendas (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016).

These three forms of the return of religion share a kind of culturalisation of Catholicism, the effort to present Catholic values and tropes as common cultural elements while hollowing them out of the formal religious matrix. In other words, in Italy, as in other western countries, the kind of religion that has come back to the fore is more 'perceived or portrayed as "culture" rather than "religion"', a set of cultural forms that are cast as heritage and tradition, despite being linked to religious formations (Astor and Mayrl 2020, 210). However, this renewed salience of Catholicism should not be conceived of as a return to religion. Instead, it is a byproduct of the process of secularisation that has undermined religious beliefs and weakened religious affiliations, while leaving some room, if not opening larger spaces, for the coexistence of religious and secular elements in our secularised societies (Portier and Willaime 2021).

Against this background, this contribution investigates the role played by religion in shaping the attitudes, beliefs, and decisions of Italian members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Our analysis relies on two kinds of sources. First, we draw on the Religion and the European Parliament and in European multilevel governance II survey (RelEP2),¹ a questionnaire we submitted to Italian MEPs in 2019–2020 and an interview with a senior member of the Italian delegation at the EP who preferred to be interviewed instead of answering our questionnaire. Second, we use the qualitative content analysis of written questions dealing with religion tabled by Italian MEPs in the ninth EP. The low response rate to the aforementioned survey may have been affected by a 'self-selection' bias, as those MEPs who were the most sensitive to religious issues were more likely to have answered our survey. To overcome this bias we considered the written questions tabled by MEPs. Furthermore, to highlight distinct features of the role of religion we also studied the written questions and interpellations (*interrogazioni a risposta scritta and interpellanze*) presented by Italian MPs at the Chamber of Deputies (*Camera dei Deputati*), the lower chamber and more politically influential branch of the Italian national parliament, during the eighteenth legislature. These parliamentary documents are the most similar to MEPs' written questions, in terms of aims, scope, and method of use, thus allowing for a qualitative comparison of the national and supranational spheres. As for the time horizon, we selected the period that ranged from 2 July 2019, the day of the first session of the ninth EP, to 12 October 2022, the last session of the eighteenth legislature of the Italian parliament.

The contribution claims that Italian MEPs show some resilient attachment to the idea of a Catholic identity of Europe, namely the traditions and heritage of the 'old Continent' shaped by its Catholic background, rather than to doctrinal religious principles. It also confirms the conclusions of previous works that showed that national political actors, notably populist radical right parties, tend to politicise an instrumental religiosity, vaguely defined principles hijacked to seize political opportunities and increase consensus (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Roy 2020). To emphasise their role as defenders of Catholicism, Italian conservative and populist radical right members of parliament (MPs) politicise the religion of 'the others', notably Islam, depicted as a threat to Judeo-Christian European culture. Finally, this contribution also notes some similarities and differences in the politicisation of religion at the European and national levels.

This contribution is composed of four sections. After this introduction, the second section describes the recent developments in the relationships between religion and politics in Italy that influence the ways in which Italian MEPs deal with religion in the European arena. The third section presents the result of our survey as well as the analysis of parliamentary written questions. The final section summarises the main findings of this contribution.

Religion and politics in Italy: patterns of a dramatic change

It is almost a truism to say that Catholicism has influenced Italian politics. Because of the geographical proximity of the Vatican, the higher levels of religious affiliation of Italian people in comparison to the European average, and the historical contribution of Catholics to the national political culture, in Italy Catholicism has been rooted in and continuously intertwined with the political and public sphere (De Luna 2013, 5). However, the relationships between religion and Italian politics have dramatically changed since the mid-1990s. To understand the impact of religion on the attitudes and activities of Italian MEPs, it is appropriate to consider these changes and ongoing developments.

From the mid-1940s to the late 1970s these relationships were shaped by a kind of 'mediation model'. The Church and its vast array of ancillary organisations moulded the spaces of socialisation, channelled the votes of Catholic electors towards the Christian Democratic party (*Democrazia Cristiana*, DC), and Catholic hierarchies entrusted this party to mediate their political demands (Santagata 2014, 438). The interactions between the Church and the DC were not always smooth. The DC was not a confessional party and its political leaders often stressed their autonomy from the Vatican. However, the DC represented the party of the political unity of Italian Catholics for almost half a century and Christian Democrats helped consolidate the fragile Italian democracy while the Church took a vicarious role as 'a guardian' of the unity of the country (Donovan 2003).

The early post-war Christian Democratic elites did not limit their efforts to the domestic political arena. The construction of a European community was a core element of Christian Democratic ideology (Durand 1995). Alcide De Gasperi, along with other Christian Democratic leaders such as Konrad Adenauer and Robert Schuman, laid down the foundations of the European Union (EU) to the extent that the European institutions and governance still bear the imprint of Christian Democratic political culture (Invernizzi-Accetti 2020). The European politics of Christian Democracy was not inconsistent with national politics. The Christian Democratic option for Europe was intended to prevent the surge of nationalism by creating a space of dialogue and a venue of cooperation across national borders on the ground of Christian universalism.

The 'mediation model' entered into crisis in the late 1970s. While Italy revealed the early signs of secularisation, the increasing involvement of the DC in bribery scandals weakened the linkages between this party and the Catholic milieu, which was showing a growing internal political pluralism. The defeat of the referendum to abrogate divorce in 1974 and abortion in 1981 highlighted the increasing secularisation of Italy and the declining political influence of the Church. By the late 1980s, Italy was no longer a Catholic country (Donovan 2003).

At the demise of the DC in 1994 the Church revised its strategy of intervening in Italian politics. Italian bishops, under the leadership of Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the president of

the Italian bishops' conference, elaborated a cultural project – a set of non-negotiable values, notably on morality issues – which Catholic authorities asked all political actors to support. In doing that, Italian bishops opted for a culturalisation of Catholicism in Italian politics 'to oppose the secularisation of consciences, and not to lose the patrimony of values and experience that it [the Church] considers constitutes the nation' (Garelli 2011, 223). The identitarian season of the Catholic Church opened highly divisive debates in Italian society and was not endorsed by all bishops. The conclave that elected Jorge Bergoglio as pope in 2013 was discontented with the political engagement of Italian hierarchies (Franco 2020). In contrast with his predecessors, Pope Francis promoted a distinct 'political project' for the Church by encouraging Italian bishops to focus on social solidarity and environmental questions (Faggioli 2018).

The involvement of the Church in Italian politics has been also undermined by the progression of secularisation. Although the great majority of Italians consider themselves Catholic, the surveys conducted since the second half of the 2010s almost unanimously show the weakening of Catholic values, the rise of atheism, and the increasing religious pluralism of Italy (Cipriani 2021). These developments have led some scholars to describe Italian Catholicism as a 'low-intensity Catholicism' (Diotallevi 2016). In other words, in secular Italy the authority of Catholic beliefs and institutions have weakened and this phenomenon is reflected in their declining capacity to shape personal decisions and influence collective choices.

Despite the increasing secularisation of Italy, since the late 1990s there has been a growing number of public appeals by leading intellectuals to push Catholics to play a more active role in Italian politics. These appeals are based on the assumption that the value system created by Catholicism still persists and is embedded in national institutions, even though Italy has become a secular country and Catholics are now a minority in the Italian population (Diamanti and Ceccarini 2007). In light of that, Catholicism still has an important role to play in political life (De Bortoli 2011). However, the 'cultural re-proposition' of Catholicism has not led to the re-establishment of a new Catholic-oriented party. All the efforts in this direction have failed. Although this result shows the weakness of political Catholicism (Diotallevi 2017), after the second half of the 1990s, the 'influence of the religious factor became almost ubiquitous, with most parties—both in the center-right and the center-left—showing some degree of religious orientation' (Ozzano 2020, 131). The final demise of the DC was followed by a 'diaspora' of Catholic politicians across the Italian party system, who brought with them their baggage of ideals and values. As a consequence, we should not be surprised Catholicism has survived as a symbolic element that political actors invoke to counterbalance the weakening legitimacy of political institutions.

Furthermore, Catholic tropes have been increasingly invoked by populist radical right parties. The League (*Lega*), and, more recently, Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FdI), the post-fascist party led by Giorgia Meloni, are the most remarkable examples. Since the late 1990s the League has presented itself as the best defender of Italy's Catholic identity, which is supposed to be threatened by Muslim communities and permissive policies on value-laden issues (Ozzano and Bolzonar 2021). Through a framing-bridging strategy, the League extended this discursive repertoire to criticise the European political elites that it blamed for weakening countries' sovereignties and watering down national identities (Brubaker 2017; Molle 2019). While Catholic values were the underlying principles of the

European project of post-war Christian Democratic leaders, in the polarising discourse of the League, Catholic tropes have become symbolic elements used to oppose the secular multiculturalism of Europe and sustain a Euro-sceptic political agenda.

The ReIEP2 survey

The Italian results of the European elections of 26 May 2019 showed a remarkable discontinuity in comparison with the previous elections held in 2014. From 2014 to 2019, Go Italy (*Forza Italia*, FI) saw its share of the votes dramatically decline from 18.8 to 8.8% (going from 20 to 13 seats), while the League increased its votes almost six times, growing from 6.1 to 34.3% (from 5 to 28 seats). Also noteworthy was the success of FdI, which progressed from 3.7 to 6.4% and managed to enter the EP for the first time (5 seats). Whereas the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*, M5S) decreased from 21.2 to 17.1% (from 17 to 14 seats), the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) almost halved its votes, decreasing from 40.8 to 22.7% (from 31 to 19 seats) (Ministero dell'Interno 2022).

In such a radically changing landscape, the response rate of Italian MEPs was low. Only 11 out of 76 MEPs completed our questionnaire. One accepted but later returned it unfilled due to 'the intimate nature of the questions'. Four refused to, and 60 did not reply. With such a small sample, not all political groups are equally represented (see Table 1). Three MEPs come from the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats group (S&D), three from the Identity and Democracy group (ID) two respondents come from the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), one belongs to European People's Party, and two are non-attached.

The answers to the questionnaire reveal that the majority of those Italian MEPs who chose to respond have some attachment to Catholicism. Seven out of 11 respondents consider themselves Catholic, one belongs to another Christian confession, and two to none. However, moving from religious belonging to religious practices and beliefs, these Italian MEPs seldom attend religious services: two say that they take part in religious services 'once a month', five 'only on holy days', one 'once a year', one 'never', one chose 'no answer', and one 'does not know'.

Although the answers suggest that these Italian MEPs are not regularly practising, the majority of them claim to be religious persons. Seven out of 11 define

Table 1. Composition of the Italian sample and the Italian delegation at the EP.

Political group	MEPs in the Italian delegation - Constitutive session	Actual distribution of MEPs in the Italian delegation ^a	Number of MEPs in the sample
European People's Party	7 (9.58%)	11 (14.4%)	1 (9.1%)
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	19 (26%)	17 (22.3%)	3 (27.3%)
Identity and Democracy	28 (38.3%)	24 (31.5%)	3 (27.3%)
European Conservatives and Reformists	5 (6.8%)	8 (1.5%)	2 (18.2%)
Greens/EFA	-	4 (5.2%)	
Renew Europe	-	3 (3.9%)	
Non-attached	14 (19.1%)	9 (11.8%)	2 (18.2%)
Total	73	76	11

Source: Authors' elaboration on www.europarl.europa.eu.

^aThe table indicates the composition of Italian delegation on 21 September 2022.

themselves as religious persons, one says s/he is not, and two have no opinion or prefer not to answer this question. When asked about which kind of god they believe in, three MEPs say that they think 'there is some sort of spirit or life force', two believe in 'a personal God', one that there is not 'any god, sort of spirit or life force', one does not know what to answer, and four either do not reply or do not have an idea of this matter.

Shifting from individual attitudes to the perceived salience of religion on MEPs' activities, the respondents to our questionnaire reflect mixed opinions on this subject. Six out of the 11 Italian MEPs who replied to our questions claim that religion does not have a relevant role, whereas five deem that religion does have a relevant effect. One of our respondents provides an interpretation that may help conciliate these diverging opinions. According to this MEP:

Religion does not have a direct influence on the EP. Although there are parties that are called Christian Democratic, they are parties whose Christian inspiration is, in my opinion, largely cultural and not particularly linked to religious issues. At the same time, we can identify a group of right-wing parties, mostly within the ECR group, that do not have religious references in their official names, but rather put greater emphasis on religion in their political activities. However, these are mostly fringe parties. (Italian MEP, personal interview, our translation).

Interestingly, by considering the variation in terms of party affiliation, we can identify polarisation along the right–left continuum. All three respondents from S&D believe that religion has no role in the EP activities; all five respondents who consider religion does have a role to play belong to centre-right and right-wing parliamentary groups (ID, EPP, ECR) or are non-attached members.

The same polarisation can be traced and identified when we consider the frequency with which our MEP respondents take religion into account in their activities. While the three S&D and two non-attached MEPs claim to consider religion 'never' or 'rarely', the MEPs from ECR and ID have mixed opinions. The only EPP MEP who answered our questionnaire claimed to consider religion 'often' in their activities.

To investigate the proximity and impact of religious or philosophical groups on the activities of Italian MEPs, we asked them how often they are in contact with these actors. The answers provided by those Italian MEPs who responded reveal that contacts are sporadic and far from being structural to their parliamentary activity: one MEP says s/he is in contact 'once a week or more', two MEPs 'once a month or more'. Four, however, reply 'a few times a year' and three 'never'. When provided with a list of religious and philosophical organisations that are present in the Brussels bubble, only four MEPs were willing to indicate a few: two MEPs said they have contacts with the Catholic organisation Caritas, the charitable organisation of the Italian Bishops Conference;² two of them with the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE);³ one with the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA), the interdenominational organisation of evangelical Christian churches in Europe,⁴ and one with Eurodiaconia, a European network of 58 churches and Christian NGOs.⁵

Such an unstructured and/or informal communication network, however, is far from being related to a rejection of dialogue with religious and philosophical communities. Not by coincidence, ten MEPs out of 11 have a favourable view of the president of the EP regularly meeting with representatives of major European religions to discuss current affairs.

Religion as a policy issue

Researchers can find it challenging to investigate the role played by religious values in the public sphere as these symbolic elements are polysemic items (Heinich 2017). Notwithstanding these methodological limitations, we gained some insights into the influence of religion on Italian MEPs' activities with the analysis of three policy domains in which religion has attained great salience: identity politics, securitisation, and morality issues.

Religion and identity politics

The growing influx of migrants and the ease of transnational communication have made multiculturalism a salient feature of European societies. At the same time, these developments have also strengthened awareness of the distinctiveness of national cultures. Populist radical right parties have politicised religious tropes to exploit the concerns of social conservatives over the withering of cultural identities (Norris and Inglehart 2019). To what extent has religion shaped the political posturing of Italian MEPs?

Our keyword-based search has shown that religious identity issues received limited attention from Italian MEPs, as they presented only eight written questions dealing with these issues.⁶ As shown by Table 2, three of them were tabled by EPP MEPs, three questions from ID MEPs, two from ECR MEPs, and one was submitted by an S&D MEP.

Both ID and ECR MEPs, respectively from the League and FdI, used at the European level the same polarising discursive framing employed at the national level by their parties, which emphasises the putative need to defend the Judeo-Christian traditions of Europe.⁷ A written question, jointly tabled by several ID MEPs and all ECR MEPs, strongly stigmatised immigrant [Muslim] communities. According to these MEPs, immigrant communities trigger conflictual reactions that are supposed to undermine the right to practise Christian religion and promote European cultural heritage and identity.⁸ Interestingly, the two questions presented by Silvio Berlusconi and the former EP president, Antonio Tajani, also linked Islam, terrorism, and European identity, as they asked for the introduction of some measures to combat Islamist terrorism to 'uphold freedom of religion and our European identity'.⁹

The small number of questions suggests caution is required in drawing any conclusions about the role played by religion in shaping identity issues. However, it is safe enough to say that rightist MEPs, particularly those who are members of populist radical right parties, are likely to politicise the religion of the 'others', Islam, portraying it as a threat to the religion of 'ours', while presenting Christianity as the foundation of 'our civilisation'. In doing so, also in the European polity, we note that populist parties depict Islam and Muslim communities through a negative framing while conveying a positive tone for Christianity (Schwörer and Romero-Vidal 2020). Furthermore, as we

Table 2. Written questions involving religious identity issues presented by Italian MEPs.

European People's Party	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	Renew Europe	Greens European Free Alliance	Identity and Democracy	European Conservatives and Reformists	Non-attached Members
3	1	-	-	3	2	-

Source: Authors' elaboration on data from www.europarl.europa.eu.

will explain in the following section of this contribution, there is some overlap between securitisation and religious identity as the religion of the ‘others’ is viewed through a securitisation lens.

In the domestic political arena, religious identity issues have received no more attention than in the European sphere. We individuated nine written questions dealing with this topic. Unsurprisingly, as shown by Table 3, all of them were tabled by the League and Fdl. None were presented by FI, PD, the M5S, the centrist party Italy Alive (*Italia Viva*), and those MPs who belonged to the mixed group.¹⁰

Populist radical right parties focused on ‘our’ religion, Christianity and its symbols. For instance, the questions tabled by the Fdl and League MPs pointed out the cultural salience of the crucifix and the crib, conceived of as symbols of a transhistorical identity of the Italian national community that needs to be protected. In this sense, these questions and interpellations can be considered examples of what Avi Astor and Damon Mayrl label culturalised religion as a pragmatic culture, namely the instrumental framing of religion as culture in political discourses on the nation and its heritage (2020, 215–216). In doing so, MEPs highlight nationalistic stances and mould them together with religious tropes. For instance, a motion presented by the current vice president of the Chamber of Deputies, Fabio Rampelli, criticised the Italian educational system ‘in which continuous proposals aimed at undermining culture and national identity follow one another, from the removal of crucifixes to the ban on nativity scenes’.¹¹ Likewise, a written question presented by the League MPs pointed out that ‘the [Christmas] crib has always been one of the most important symbols of the Christian tradition of our country [Italy]’.¹² This written question also cited the Lautsi and Others v. Italy ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which on 18 March 2011 established that the crucifix ‘was a historical and cultural symbol, possessing an “identity-linked value” for the Italian people, and that it should also be considered a symbol of a value system underpinning the Italian Constitution’ (European Court of Human Rights 2011, 2). According to the League MPs, if what the ECHR deems is true for the crucifix, ‘it must equally be true for the nativity scene’, which is a symbol of Italian culture.¹³ In this sense, for the League MPs, Italian culture is embedded in Catholicism. To defend the former, they demanded that Catholic symbols be displayed in public buildings, despite the criticisms raised by Catholic authorities against the use of these symbols for non-religious purposes (Ozzano and Bolzonar 2021).

Securitisation of religion

Current scholarship has documented the securitisation of religion in Europe since the beginning of the 2000s, leading to its treatment as a risk factor and its association with violence (Roy 2007; Schmid 2013). Gradually, such securitisation

Table 3. Written questions and interpellations involving religious identity issues presented by Italian MPs at the Chamber of Deputies.

Go Italy (EPP)	Democratic Party (S&D)	Italy Alive (Renew)	League (ID)	Brothers of Italy (ECR)	Five Star Movement (Non-attached members)	Mixed Group
-	-	-	7	2	-	-

Source: Authors’ elaboration on data from <https://www.camera.it>.

has gone beyond the boundaries of anti-terrorism measures to take on cultural and identitarian characteristics, with a focus on the so-called 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1996) and Islam framed as a threat to social cohesion and identity (Ragazzi 2017).

In Italy, the collapse of the traditional party system in the 1990s and the gradual decline of Christian Democracy-based political offer has opened a window of opportunity for radical political actors to re-politicise religion as a cultural and symbolic marker. This may be seen in the case of the League. The party, which originally had a 'mass party' organisational model grounded on a secular, pro-European, and anti-nationalist platform (Albertazzi 2016), gradually embraced a secessionist stance in the second half of the 1990s. Eventually, it incorporated 'some aspects of an early stage European nativist agenda, particularly the claim of Judeo-Christian roots and a belligerent stance towards immigration from Muslim countries' (Molle 2019).

Catholicism is now promoted as the first line of resistance against both immigration and secular European identity: Italian MEPs of the League sustain an idea of a Europe 'proud of its cultural and religious roots [. . .] in defence of the Family and Christian values' (Foret and Trino 2022, 973). They argue that 'Christianophobia' should be addressed as a major discrimination and that the defence of freedom of religion and belief should also – and primarily – benefit Christians.

Similarly, the post-fascist party Fdl opposes the EU in its current configuration and embraces the narrative of an 'ethnic substitution' that menaces European Christendom, a frame shared by several other European populist radical right parties (Hobolt et al. 2011). They also advocate the idea of selecting migrants or asylum seekers on the basis of their denominational belonging with the postulate that Christians will fit better in European societies (Fine 2017, 105–124). At the institutional level, the first documents produced in 2018 by the Special Committee on Terrorism embraced the same frame, asking member states to 'encourage and tolerate only [those] practices of Islam fully in accordance with European values' (Foret and Markoviti 2020, 557).

Analogously, the Counter-Terrorism Agenda presented by the European Commission on December 2020 reinforces the securitisation approach and inserts the strategy against terrorism within the broader framework of the European Way of Life's portfolio (EWOL) (Foret and Trino 2023). To use the words of Vice-president Promoting our European Way of Life Margaritis Schinas, commenting on the agenda in 2020, 'the European way of life is not optional and we must do all in our power to prevent those that seek to undo it. With today's Counter-Terrorism Agenda we are putting the focus on investing in the resilience of our societies with measures to better counter-radicalisation and to protect our public spaces from attacks through targeted measures'.¹⁴

The agenda identifies a number of measures aimed at preventing attacks by addressing radicalisation online and offline, envisages the reinforcement of Europol's mandate, and the enhancement of police cooperation and information exchange across the EU. Following the EWOL approach, it is formulated as a search for a balance between a protective discourse against social, economic, security and identity risks and/or fears, and respect for European values.

To understand the dynamics of the politicisation of religion in a framework of securitisation within the EP, we rely on analysis of parliamentary questions presented by Italian MEPs on securitisation and religion. We draw on content analysis of the MEPs' written

questions tabled since the beginning of the 2019–2024 term. From a keyword-based search, we identify a total number of 35 questions.¹⁵

Table 4 illustrates the political groups of MEPs that referred to the securitisation of religion from 2019 onwards. The narrative is owned by right-wing MEPs, with ID MEPs acting as the protagonists with 25 questions. A further six are from Italian MEPs in the ECR group, two are from S&D members and two from EPP's representatives.

Content analysis of the questions shows how religion is mobilised to call for a fight against Muslim influence and/or threat; or for the protection of the Christian identity of Europe. One question presented by an ID MEP declares: 'cases of Christianophobia are on the rise in Europe, and it would be desirable for the EU to take action in this regard, too'.¹⁷

A peculiar case involved the *#Union of Equality. European Commission Inclusive Communication Guidelines* issued by the Commission in October 2021. The document is the object of five different written questions, in which the Commission is accused of embodying 'a certain ideological and political vision of society while failing to respect the roots and traditions of the Old Continent' and rejecting 'the Judaeo-Christian traditions, cultures, values and roots of the European Union'¹⁸ (ID); neglecting that 'the Christians are the most at risk' and promoting a 'pro-Islamic attitude to the detriment of our Christian roots'¹⁹ (ID); again, failing to 'comply with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights on the principle of freedom of expression' and failing to 'respect the Christian roots of Europe' (EPP).²⁰ One question, signed by an S&D representative, asks why a 'full recognition of the identity of the Christian heritage' would not be in line 'with the European ideal of "Unity in Diversity"'.²¹

At the national level, we resorted to the analysis of both written questions and the interpellations made by members of the Chamber of Deputies. As shown by Table 5, the keyword-based search allowed the identification of 24 documents that referred to the securitisation of religion. In terms of content, compared to the written questions of MEPs, the questions of MPs focus on events of national and/or local interest. In particular, all but one cites news events and/or reports concerning the integration of foreign citizens and citizens of different faiths.

In terms of rhetoric, content analysis of the questions shows how the securitisation frame is proposed again along the same patterns of the supranational sphere: religion is

Table 4. Written questions involving the securitisation of religion presented by Italian MEPs.¹⁶

European People's Party	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	Renew Europe	Greens European Free Alliance	Identity and Democracy	European Conservatives and Reformists	Non-attached Members
2	3	-	-	25	6	-

Source: Authors' elaboration on www.europarl.europa.eu.

Table 5. Written questions and interpellations involving the securitisation of religion presented by Italian MPs at the Chamber of Deputies.

Go Italy (EPP)	Democratic Party (S&D)	Italy Alive (Renew)	League (ID)	Brothers of Italy (ECR)	Five Star Movement (Non-attached Members)	Mixed Group
1	3	-	-	10	8	2

Source: Authors' elaboration on data from: <https://www.camera.it>.

primarily instrumentally mobilised to demonstrate the actual or potential threat of Muslims, as in the case of interrogations involving the financing and/or membership of Islamic organisations in Italy ('the uncontrolled funding of Italian Islamic organisations by foreign states, groups or institutions, particularly those suspected of extremism or supporting jihadism'),²² and the risk of radicalisation of Islamic inmates in Italian prisons.²³

The securitisation of religion is also mobilised to call for the protection of the Christian identity of Europe, as in the case of questions relating to the construction of new mosques ('the implementation of this project would expose not only the city of Milan, but the whole country, to very serious risks and dangers'),²⁴ or the risks of radicalisation due to the role of imams in local cultural centres ('proselytism to support Islamic fundamentalism which, more and more frequently, through initiatives defined as cultural, is being developed in our Country').²⁵

As we have seen at the supranational level, the narrative is mainly owned by right-wing representatives; ID MPs lead the politicisation of the frame, with ten questions, followed by ID MPs who proposed two questions; three questions are from S&D members, and only one is from an EPP MP. In both political levels, the prevalent modality of mobilisation of religion is a 'pragmatic culturalisation', which allows political subjects to draw upon religious identities as a resource to build support for their struggles (Astor and Mayrl 2020, 221), by leveraging culturally religious identities to bolster anti-Muslim sentiment (Joppke 2018, 328).

Religion and morality issues

Morality issues are a policy field in which religion plays a critical role in conditioning the agenda-setting, the policy process, and its outcome (Knill et al. 2020). Despite these issues having acquired a growing salience in several European countries since the early 2000s, European institutions have limited remits in this policy field. However, through the prism of the defence of human rights and the promotion of gender equality, European institutions have gradually enlarged their sphere of action to include some morality issues, notably LGBTQ rights and abortion (Foret and Bolzonar 2021).

Abortion is arguably one of the most controversial morality issues that mobilises religious authorities (Dobbelaere and Pérez-Agote 2015). Notwithstanding the opposition to abortion by religious actors, the EP has played a leading role in supporting legal and safe access to abortion services. Through a progressive discursive framing, the EP has adopted policy decisions that criticised the restrictive abortion laws introduced by some national authorities (Berthet 2022).

Despite the salience of abortion, Italian MEPs have rarely politicised this issue. We individuated 11 written questions about abortion through our keyword-based search.²⁶ As shown by Table 6, the largest majority of questions were tabled by S&D MEPs and the

Table 6. Written questions on abortion presented by Italian MEPs.

European People's Party	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	Renew Europe	Greens European Free Alliance	Identity and Democracy	European Conservatives and Reformists	Non-attached Members
-	5	1	1	2	-	4

Source: Authors' elaboration on www.europarl.europa.eu.

M5S MEPs who were not attached to any group. Although the topics of these questions varied, all of them avoided any reference to religious doctrines, values, and the prescriptions of religious authorities. Instead, they urged the Commission to grant safe access to abortion for women in need.²⁷

EPP MEPs did not present any resolution on abortion. This lack of interest – from a party family whose political background bears the imprint of Christian values – can be ascribed to two factors. First, this may be interpreted as a blame avoidance strategy, namely a strategy aimed at preventing likely criticisms for politicising an issue like restrictive abortion policies, which are unpopular among voters and face the opposition of the majority of MEPs. Second, it is a posture in line with the pontificate of Francis, who has urged bishops to leave aside the political battle over abortion while confirming his firm moral condemnation of this practice.²⁸

Despite the League having established close linkages with transnational Christian movements (Bolzonar [forthcoming](#)), religion has not been much politicised by this party either. The two written questions presented by the League MEPs, who were members of the ID group, refrained from using religion to forge a discursive framing against abortion or to advocate the natural law tradition defended by the Catholic Church. While one of them only criticised the decision of the city council of Rome to take down some posters of the Catholic pro-life movement Pro Life & Family (*Pro Vita & Famiglia*), the other blamed European institutions for avoiding taking decisions to boost birth rates instead of ‘encouraging uncontrolled abortion’.²⁹ In this sense, these written questions confirm the conclusions of previous studies that noted how, in secular EU polity, religion ‘has ceased to be an authoritative matrix capable on its own of framing political behaviours and issues’ (Foret 2014, 4). However, those actors that defend religious values on abortion-related issues sustain their religious stances indirectly, by blaming the secular positions of EU authorities and supporting the actions of Christian pro-life movements.

When we shift our attention from the European to the Italian political arena, we note that abortion received more attention at national level. As shown by [Table 7](#), Italian MPs presented 21 documents (19 written questions and two interpellations). Once again, these data confirm how the national polity still remains the privileged policy arena for the politicisation of religion on value-laden issues.

The largest number of written questions and interpellations were tabled by the M5S, FdI, and PD MPs, respectively. Interestingly, none was submitted by the League. In light of that, it seems that the party of Matteo Salvini is not interested, at least at the national level, in introducing reforms to abortion policies that are likely to be unpopular. While the M5S, PD, and the left-wing party Free and Equal (*Liberi e Uguali*,

Table 7. Written questions and interpellations about abortion presented by Italian MPs at the Chamber of Deputies.³⁰

Go Italy (EPP)	Democratic Party (S&D)	Italy Alive (Renew)	Free and Equal (S&D and GUE/NGL)	League (ID)	Brothers of Italy (ECR)	Five Star Movement (Non-attached members)	Mixed Group
1	5	-	3	-	5	8	6

Source: Authors’ elaboration on data from <https://www.camera.it>.

LeU) asked for greater protection of women's reproductive rights, Fdl advocated the introduction of more restrictive measures for abortion services. However, as in the European arena, Fdl has never evoked religious values to sustain conservative positions over abortion. Instead, the written questions tabled by Fdl MPs opposed abortion services through a twofold strategy. First, they criticised the distribution of emergency contraception pills, a safe method of contraception that allows women recourse to abortion without invasive treatments. For example, a written question tabled by Giovanni Donzelli, a senior member of Fdl, asked for the disclosure of the decisional process that authorised the commercialisation of the ellaOne 'morning after' pill that, according to him, did not have 'the slightest proof of effectiveness in terms of reducing both unwanted pregnancies and abortions resulting from its distribution'.³¹ Second, they advocated a value-driven approach that demanded respect for the dignity of life and maternity. For example, a motion tabled by Fdl MPs claimed that the Ministry of Health's decision to abolish the requirement to have a prescription for emergency contraception for underage women is an example of an 'ethical and social drift' that trivialises abortion.³²

Conclusion

This contribution has studied the role played by religion in shaping the beliefs, attitudes, and decisions of Italian MEPs through an analysis of the answers to the ReIEP survey, the qualitative content analysis of written questions tabled by Italian MEPs, and written questions and interpellations presented by Italian deputies at the national parliament. Our study has highlighted the resilience of religious cultural values and some ambivalence about the influence of religion on the political activities of Italian MEPs' politics.

Despite MEPs recognising the cultural salience of religious historical identities, most of those surveyed say they rarely or never take religion into consideration in their parliamentary activities. In this sense, religion is principally conceived of as a cultural element that deserves to be recognised but does not seem able to shape political praxis and policy decisions. When we turn our attention to the politicisation of religion on some policy issues, we note that religious references have a greater impact on the discourses on securitisation, and to a lesser degree on identity questions, than on morality issues.

MEPs politicise the securitisation of religion first by proposing religion as a constitutive feature of a civilisational community, then by using religion to demarcate between 'us' and the 'others' and by pushing the narrative of a 'good religion', Christianity, threatened by a 'bad religion', Islam, mainly through migration and terrorism. In other words, Italian MEPs, notably populist radical right actors, hijack religious tropes to forge anti-Islamic narratives, oppose multiculturalism, and stigmatise Muslim communities. This exploitation of religious references to strengthen discriminatory positions is consistent with the political stances adopted at national level, as if the EU arena is a chamber of resonance for policy proposals advanced in the national polity.

We note some overlap between the politicisation of religion on the discourses about securitisation and those on identity issues in the European arena as in both cases several MEPs frame the religion of the 'others', Islam, through a securitisation lens. Furthermore, the kind of religion that is hijacked is a culturalised type of religion that moulds together religious references within broader arguments dealing with

a supposed transhistorical national and European identity rooted in Christianity. In the domestic political sphere, as in the European sphere, religious identity questions are principally brought to the fore by populist radical right parties. However, in contrast with the European arena, these actors give greater emphasis to 'our' religion, Christianity, notably Christian tropes and symbols. This may allow us to assume that populist radical right MPs can find in the Italian polity a receptive arena for their religiously based identity politics.

As for morality issues, at the European level religion has never been invoked – and even less politicised – on abortion. Even though the limited competencies of EU institutions on value-laden questions can explain this outcome, both the secularism and liberal permissiveness of the European polity seem to be a deterrent for the politicisation of religion on morality issues.

In contrast, abortion has attracted more attention in the domestic political arena. Even though those conservative MPs who oppose abortion avoid relying on religious arguments, they are more assertive than in the European arena. For future research avenues, it would be interesting to consider the possible clashes between the permissive stances of European institutions, which are broadening their remit to value-laden issues, and those conservative governments with strong linkages with anti-gender religious movements that have made a great effort to introduce restrictive policies. Among others, this has happened in Poland in relation to abortion and LGBTQI rights and it is likely to occur in other countries headed by populist radical right governments.

Notes

1. This research was conducted in the framework of the international research project Religion in the European Parliament and in European multilevel governance II (RelEP2), coordinated by the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). The survey was conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, Regulation EU 2016/679). The compliance with rules of ethics and data protection was verified in consultation with the relevant bodies of the ULB, the university managing the survey, in March 2020. The data subject had to consent in an unequivocal manner to the processing of his or her personal data. Respondents were allowed to selectively refuse to answer questions about a specific category of 'sensitive' data. Collected data were subjected to pseudo-anonymisation and treated in an aggregate manner; all information that could allow third parties to identify participants was removed. In the same way, no result or product of this research will allow the identification of the respondents. The aggregated data have to be used exclusively for the purposes of the international RelEP2 project. The project coordinator and data controller is Professor François Foret (francois.foret@ulb.be).
2. <https://www.caritas.it/>.
3. <https://www.comece.eu/>.
4. <https://www.europeanea.org/>.
5. <https://www.eurodiaconia.org/>.
6. Table 2 indicates nine questions because we reported the questions tabled by all party families, including one that was presented jointly by some ID MEPs with two ECR MEPs.
7. Question for written answer E-003644/2019/rev.1; Question for written answer E-005311/2021; Priority question for written answer P-005338/2021.
8. Question for written answer E-006000/2020.
9. Question for written answer E-005985/2020; Question for written answer E-005988/2020.

10. The mixed group is a parliamentary group formed by those MPs who could not establish an autonomous group because their political parties did not reach the minimum number of deputies requested by the rules of the Italian parliament.
11. Interrogazione a risposta scritta 4-04,038.
12. Interrogazione a risposta scritta 4-04,209.
13. Interrogazione a risposta scritta 4-04,209.
14. Schinas, M. 9 December 2020. Press statement on: Security Union: A Counter-Terrorism Agenda and stronger Europol to boost the EU's resilience. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2326.
15. The research focused on the occurrence and/or co-occurrence of the following keywords in Italian and English: securitisation, Muslim, Christian, Christian roots, Islam, terrorism, veil, religion, violence, radicalisation, radicalism, second generation, European identity, European way of life, Islamisation, fundamentalism, Catholicism, Judeo-Christianity, proselytism, national security, immigration, security, border control, multiculturalism, crucifix, freedom of religion.
16. ID and ECR presented a joint written question.
17. Question for written answer E-005884/2020.
18. Priority question for written answer P-005338/2021.
19. Priority question for written answer P-000079/2020/rev.1.
20. Question for written answer E-005315/2021.
21. Priority question for written answer P-005351/2021.
22. Question for written answer, 4-08,724/2021.
23. Question for written answer, 4-03,435/2021.
24. Question for written answer, 4-09,281/2021.
25. Question for written answer, 4-10,200/2021.
26. Table 6 indicates 13 questions because we reported the questions tabled by all party families, including one that was presented by the S&D group with a Renew MEP and another by the S&D with a non-attached MEP.
27. Question for written answer E-005939/2020; Priority question for written answer P-006345/2020; Question for written answer E-001401/2022.
28. On the flight back from a recent pastoral visit, Francis criticised the political attitudes of US bishops against the pro-choice positions sustained by the Biden presidency (Elisabetta, Pérez-Peña, and Graham 2021).
29. Question for written answer E-000918/2022/rev.1; Question for written answer E-006620/2020.
30. The number of written questions and interpellations shown in the table is greater than the number mentioned in the text of the contribution because some parties presented joint questions.
31. Interrogazione a risposta scritta 4-01,290.
32. Interrogazione a risposta scritta 4-07,341.

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