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Religion and European Politics

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Paper prepared for the 20th IPSA World Congress
(Section SS01.516)
Fukuoka, 9-13 July 2006

The paper has been elaborated in the framework of the Ministry of education, youth and physical education research project „Political Parties and the Interest Representation in the Contemporary European Democracies“ (the code No. MSM0021622407).

Abstract

The contribution is focused on the analysis of changes in the relation between politics and religion in the EU countries, and of the state of the art in political science research on this development. The belief that religious issues will play an increasingly lesser role in the politics of advanced European countries and that the fundamental questions of the politics-religion relationship have already been resolved, have proved to be erroneous. Cases such as headscarf ban in France, discussions related to R. Buttiglione's nomination into the European Commission or the Preamble of the European Constitutional Treaty etc., make it clear issues of religious beliefs, values and even symbols have once again emerged as hot political topics and are shaping positions and actions of political actors, e.g., of European Christian parties. These challenges have to be addressed not only by normative political science, but also by comparative political science research based on empirical analysis so that actions of political actors, as they are taken in the newly shaped area of religion and politics, can be properly analyzed.

The new challenges currently faced by the societies and states of the European Union include the re-emerging complex of problems connected with religion, or religions. It may seem surprising, because nearly for the whole 20th century we had been convincing ourselves (in connection with empirically verifiable secularization tendencies) that the significance of religious issues in political agenda is decreasing and that the relation between religion and politics in Europe can basically be considered solved for good.

Europe in the 20th century was characterised by the fact that the place of religion in the political and partly also in socially cultural sphere was taken by new ideologies with some pseudo-religious elements, which Eric Voegelin fittingly called political religions.¹ The fall of these ideologies and the inclination of many states towards liberal democracy in the 1990s gave rise to the notion that could be expressed by Fukuyama's conception of "the end of history". In this conception, where liberal democracy in Fukuyama's words is "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution", represents "the end of history" and its „ideal cannot be improved on“², the religious issue seems potentially solved because according to Fukuyama, human rights universalism as a significant element of liberal democracy "can be seen as a secular form of Christian universalism".³ Religion in such conception of liberal democracy doesn't present any significant political problem and only fulfils in it certain social but not political functions.⁴ This attitude was shared by many Europeans with great understanding.

This opinion hadn't been much changed neither by the impressive (and the more questioned) Huntington's thesis of the clash of civilisations based among other things on religiously conditioned cleavages⁵, nor by its fulfilment in real violent conflicts (e.g. with the states of interest groups founding their legitimacy on Islam). It still seemed possible to maintain the belief in marginal or at least clearly defined

¹ Cf. Voegelin, E. (1938). Die politische Religionen. Wien 1938. This term was simultaneously used by Raymond Aron (Aron, R. (1939). L'ère des Tyrannies d'Elie Halévy. Revue de Métaphysique de Morale). See Maier, H. (1999). Politická náboženství. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, pp. 15, 95.

² Fukuyama, F. (2002). Konec dějin a poslední člověk. Praha: Rybka Publisher, pp. 11.

³ Fukuyama (2002), pp. 7.

⁴ Cf. Fukuyama (2002), pp. 308.

⁵ Huntington, S. P. (2001). Střet civilizací. Boj kultur a proměna světového řádu. Praha: Rybka Publisher.

function of religion and religion-based activities in European democracies and their civic societies.

In this article I will try to show that the assumption of decreasing political significance of religion for European democracies is unsustainable. These theses were based on excessive generalisation of certain modernizing tendencies within the geographically and culturally defined area of Western and partly Central Europe during the 20th century. They however didn't take into account the possibility of substantial changes of this area and its cultural and social structure; changes that deviate from the modernization paradigm. Let me stress that it is not my intention here to examine and determine to what extent the interaction between religion and politics in Europe *should* take place. I try to show that it is no longer possible to insist that religion in Europe has gradually been losing its political significance, that it is only an illusion, and moreover that this illusion is dangerous. I will try to bring to our attention that we have been witnessing growing significance of religious agenda in political decision-making processes. However, religion – as is often the case with social phenomena – doesn't return to politics where we would expect it but often rather in new and surprising contexts.

1. Modern Paradigm of the Relation between Religion and Politics in Europe

In political science and related disciplines, we have been observing the relation between religion and politics in European countries in the last decades usually in three well-defined spheres that on the one hand allowed us to clearly analyse the interaction between the religious area and the sphere of politics, but on the other hand to a considerable extent predetermined the conception or understanding of this relation.

The first of these spheres represents the relation between the state and churches (falling within the political dimension of *polity*), which includes legal, political and economic aspects of possible arrangement. There are of course considerable differences in the relations between the state and churches in European

countries, which can be used for specifying various types and models of these relations.⁶

The different historical conditions under which the modern form of the state-church relations was formed, and the character of religious systems including the significance of individual churches within national states, allow us to distinguish with certain simplification the following three types of religion-law systems: the first formally interconnects the decision-making powers of the state with the existence of the church (England, Denmark, or Greece), the second represents strict separation of the state and the church (France and the Netherlands), and the third model connects the state-church separation with accepting common activities based on identical interests in some areas (Germany, Italy, Austria).⁷

Disregarding all observable differences between the above-mentioned models (and between the individual states within these types), there have been two well identifiable main tendencies in the state-church relation in Europe in the last decades. It is mainly stabilization of the basic setting of the state-church relation, i.e. that the question of arranging the relation between the state and religious institutions doesn't represent a serious political or legal problem. If there are changes, they are only in certain areas and while respecting the basic scheme (industrial relations, the area of education, etc.). The second observable tendency is the overall weakening of the influence of church on the political sphere in all the above-mentioned models of the religion-law arrangement.

We have witnessed only two deviations within this stable and politically resolved state-church relation (in the sense of the institutional arrangement of the relation) in the European area in recent years. The first one represents the political solution and legal embedding of the relation between the state and the more recent denominations that were in many countries interpreted as potentially dangerous

⁶ It is evident that the current form of the relation of the state and churches is in many ways influenced by historical and cultural determinants that can be currently used as a basis for constructing at least to a certain extent the social scientific typology of church-state relations; the elaboration of the approach by Stein Rokkan seems probably the most beneficial in this area. Cf. Madeley, J. T. S. (2000). *Towards an Inclusive Typology of Church-State Relations in Europe, North, East and West: A Rokkanian Approach*. Paper prepared for Workshop 22: Church and State in Europe: The Chimera of Neutrality. European Consortium for Political Research Point Workshop Sessions, Copenhagen, Denmark, April 2000.

⁷ Robbers, G. (2001). *Stát a cirkve v Evropském společenství*. In Robbers, G. (ed.) (2001). *Stát a církve v zemích EU*. Praha: Academia, pp. 356.

(such as scientologists), or to religions that are traditional but not naturalized to Europe, whose influence has recently been growing, as is the case of Islam.⁸

The second exception to the above-described general tendencies of the state-church relations were the countries of Central and Eastern Europe freeing themselves in the last decades from communist dictatorships. Suppression and often brutal antireligious repression were in some countries paradoxically accompanied by strengthening of political positions of the church, mainly in the eighties. The church was viewed here (e.g. Catholic in Poland and also in Czechoslovakia, Lutheran in East Germany) as an institution standing in opposition to communist dictatorship, and often as the only official institution offering an alternative conception with considerable moral appeal, which gave it a certain degree of political power.⁹ What is more interesting, though, is how the church lost this power again after the fall of the communist regime. This example is important to us with regard to the fact that the power of the church decreased in all these countries with the introduction of liberal democracy and that the church-state relation got to the "European standard", which means that it is possible in the legal and political sense to easily classify the state-church relations in former post-communist countries at the turn of the 21st century according to some models already defined within the EU countries. Even this finding seems to support the thesis of resolving the relation between religion and politics and its marginalization within liberal democracy.

The second sphere of understanding the relation between religion and politics in Europe traditionally concerns the way of mediating religiously defined and religiously motivated interests in politics (the dimension of *politics*). The crucial role in this context is played by religious interest groups and especially Christian political parties that have been functioning in various forms for more than a century as the basic vehicles of religious interests in the sphere of politics. Even in this case can there be no doubt about the tendency of the last decades. After the disintegration of columnar political culture and the erosion of Christian political subculture, the crucial Christian political parties gradually (and sometimes very quietly, but not the less distinctly in the end) transformed into conservative-liberal or conservative-social

⁸ I shall return to this crucial issue later, but in a different presentation, because it isn't "yet" possible to analyse the position of Islam in the traditionally interpreted state-church relation in Europe.

⁹ This was of course power in the sense *Macht*, but not *Herrschaft*.

entities of party politics that either accepted the model of a catch-all party or remained focused on specific social groups or region.

Although for these parties or at least for a part of their membership, religious identification within traditional social structures could remain an essential feature and still fulfilled certain internal integrative functions, the defence of religious interests in any case stopped being their crucial role. In connection with weakening the state-church cleavage, with resolving the legal, cultural and economic coexistence of the church within the state, and in direct connection with weakening the integrative power of traditional religions in the sphere of politics, the ability, willingness and need of historically defined Christian political parties to defend specific religion-based interests decreased or disappeared altogether. These parties gradually gave up a number of ethical issues introduced into public discussion by individual Christian churches, and stopped aggregating these interests (transferring them to the sphere of politics). At the same time, there was slow but well noticeable loosening of relations between Christian political entities and the churches. As a result of this development, the primary causes of which of course lie in the constantly decreasing role of religion and traditional churches in the social and often also personal lives of people in European countries, religious issues of ethical as well as institutional nature have to a large extent disappeared from forefront of political agenda.

The third aspect of the relation between religion and politics is represented by specific religious policy (dimension of *policy*), invoked as the result of the above-described structures and processes in individual European countries. If we can talk about autonomous policy in this case at all (in most countries it is rather a part of cultural, social, financial, and other policies), we can say that as opposed to historically conditioned structural conditions (church-state relation), European countries show the largest degree of correspondence in this area. Disregarding the differences in the system of churches and the relations between them (and even disregarding the potential existence of a state church), we can see not only respect to the individual right of religious freedom, but also a noticeable tendency to give scope to the free existence of all religious societies, including their right of self-determination. Although this direction of politics can be interpreted as realizing the significance of religious aspects, see e.g. Gerhard Robbers, a more precise

interpretation is that the formally or in fact ideologically neutral European states view churches and religious societies more and more as one of the parts of the civic society network, i.e. as a part of the system of interest groups, even though it cannot yet be admitted in some countries with regard to the traditions of political culture.¹⁰

This development in all dimensions of the relation between religion and politics supported the thesis that religious issues have disappeared from the European political area and that religion in liberal democracy has become a private matter whose political dimension is only given by personal involvement of individual people or insignificant groups of people, but that it can hardly be a relevant political topic again.

However, the political resolution of the religious question within European democracies at the end of the 20th century, viewed as the final completion of modernization processes to which the secularization and laicization tendency is closely connected, seems more and more to be an illusion, even though it was generally accepted at least by the crucial elites during building the new Europe. Nevertheless, hardly any illusion of the modern (postmodern) era entails so much danger. For that matter, Tomáš G. Masaryk cautioned already in the 1920s that the statement "that religion has been overcome ... is a mistake and superficiality that is fatal to liberalism everywhere".¹¹

2. Return of Religious Issues to Current European Politics

Some authors were pointing already in the first half of the 90s¹² to the fact that the European case of "solving" the religious issue is specific and that in other cultural contexts we can see quite opposite development (e.g. G. Kepel¹³ or P. L. Berger¹⁴). Religion plays a much more significant social role and receives new political power for instance in the culturally close United States or Israel, where we can often talk about increasing significance of the political dimension of religion.

¹⁰ Robberts (2001), pp. 358.

¹¹ Masaryk, T. G. (1930). Světová revoluce. Praha: Orbis a Čin, pp. 601.

¹² That is coincidentally just shortly after the victory of liberal democracy and the civic conception of the state in a number of European countries.

¹³ Kepel, G. (1996). Boží pomsta. Křesťané, židé a muslimové znovu dobývají svět. Brno: Atlantis.

¹⁴ Berger, P. L. (1997). Vzdálená sláva. Hledání víry ve věku lehkověrnosti. Brno: Barrister & Principal.

Much more serious were however the warnings against the increasing influence of the so-called fundamentalists within Islamic societies. This discussion however didn't much concern internal European matters. What was remarkable about it from the point of view of the topic under consideration was that face to face to these tendencies we remained confident that this development will affect us only as an external fact, but that it can have hardly any influence on the relation between religion and politics within European societies. What's even more remarkable is that many intellectuals and politicians still share this illusion to a great extent, and when confronted with new facts they are still prepared to find various social, economic or cultural causes of the facts, but never their religious conditionality.

One of significant indirect signals of the new political role of religion in expanding Europe was undoubtedly represented by the Balkan armed conflicts of the 90s. The causes of these violent clashes and various forms of the Balkan conflict (Serbia versus Croatia and Slovenia, the Bosnian war, the Kosovo conflict, Macedonian internal fights etc.) cannot of course be reduced to the religious problem, but at the same time we cannot close our eyes to the fact that the Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim identification contributes to the formation of cleavages there, that the religious identity shows considerable integrative ability there, and that religion represents a substantial separative identification feature and is one of the "cultural" sources of tension there. We have to note of course that the political systems of most Balkan countries during the conflict were not functioning democracies with developed liberal features that could deal with social conflicts in a way that is usual in Western and Central Europe. At the same time it is however true the Balkan conflicts brought clashes with a considerable religious accent to the European area. It isn't only history, because the unsolved Balkan problem will gradually be more present in the European Union. The upcoming acceptance of Romania and above all of Croatia and Bulgaria will bring the critical Balkan area closer to the immediate vicinity of the European Union.¹⁵

In this context we also have to point out the future increased role of the Orthodox Church within the EU; in the countries where it is the main religion it is

¹⁵ We could also recall the religious aspects of the Caucasian conflicts that also have certain influence on European politics, even though less direct.

closely interconnected with the state and has (and can have) bigger influence on politics than it is the case in the countries with Catholic or Protestant tradition that have mostly formed the European community so far. The European Union has only had this experience with Greece, but the expected acceptance of Bulgaria and Romania will (can) represent a new quality in this respect, even with regard to the different political and cultural patterns to whose formation the various religious traditions evidently contribute.

A much more serious signal of the politicization of the religious issue inside the European Union was however the growing significance of Islam, namely in its various forms, including its very radical positions. The Balkan conflicts already clearly proved the closeness of this phenomenon in Europe, but the development of the last few years has clearly confirmed what had been difficult to admit only several years ago. The development and strengthening of radical and fundamentalist movements in Islamic countries has – and logically must have had – a considerable influence on radicalizing a number of Muslim communities in Western Europe. In view of this radicalization there are now facts coming to the forefront that we could have analysed many years ago but for which we didn't have enough courage because they didn't fit in with the tendencies toward political correctness and the political climate of the time that unfortunately affect also social sciences. It is mainly the fact that many Islamic communities failed to become integrated into the structured of democratic societies and that this failure of integration efforts has much deeper causes than just socially economic. The inability to integrate the second and third generations of immigrants practicing Islam indicates among other things that religious identification (fulfilling of course social and cultural functions) is essential to a part of Europe's population, namely so much that they aren't ready to respect European religiously indifferent rules of the game. For that matter it is probably no accident that big problem with radical Islamic groups can be seen especially in such countries as France and the Netherlands which are the biggest advocates of religious tolerance and absolute neutrality of the state and the society towards religion. As if this "ideologically" vacant political area provoked to be filled more than in countries

where politics at least formally acknowledges Christian cultural traditions and the connected orientation of values.¹⁶

The social and soon maybe even political emancipation of European Islam is a political problem whose reach cannot be underestimated. It currently concerns at least 15 million inhabitants of the European Union (which corresponds to its medium size state) and this number will probably grow fast. The events up to now allow us to formulate a hypothesis that this partly non-integrated force can occupy the political area with demands that will disturb the current paradigm of the relation between politics and religion and will not be solvable within it. This context also throws a rather different light on the Turkey's joining of the European Union because such decision doesn't require only solving economic issues and adapting the legal system (including full acceptance of human rights, which is an issue much related to religion), but also adequate conception of solving potential religious conflicts inside the Union. Ideological reliance on automatic solutions to the religious issue within liberal democracy, relying on its personal and constantly decreasing character, and belittling this topic are not the best preparation of the common future of European nations.

The political regulation of new religious challenges that has been attempted up to now shows problematic and only emphasises Europe's unpreparedness for politicizing the religious issue. An example of this is the French attempt to confirm the state's religious neutrality and prevent some demonstrations of religious identification by a law that prohibits religious symbols in public schools (the so-called headscarf ban). Disregarding all possible positive and negative consequences of this law (and much has already been written about that), there are several remarkable things about it from the point of view of the topic under consideration. It is especially its false egalitarianism, when the law intended obviously to affect the radical part of Islamic community was adopted in a form that prevents even members of other religions such as Jews and Sikhs from using religious symbols, i.e. prohibits the use

¹⁶ The radicalization of Islam is of course related to the issue of Islamic terrorism affecting in recent years very clearly even the states of the European union, but I put the issue of terrorism aside here as a specific problem, even though it is connected with the question of politicizing the religious issue. For the complexity of the relation between education, the influences of European culture, and own religious-national identification including the readiness to protect it by violent means, cf. e.g. Berger (1997), pp. 29-31.

of any religious symbols (including “large” crosses). And this brings us to the second problem and probably the heart of the matter: a religiously neutral state where religious is a personal matter shouldn’t care about religious symbols at all because from the point of view of religious indifference it is indifferent to them as personal identification symbols (headscarf, kippa-yarmulke, cross, turban). If the state and its repressive powers wasn’t indifferent to identification symbols, it would also have to take action against other types of external identification with groups or movements that could be dangerous to democratic society, such as the five-pointed red star or Che Guevara on T-shirts. And this evidently isn’t happening. The above-mentioned example is of course absurd and it will be considered as such by most people with democratic views. Nevertheless, in a way of thinking free of ideological prejudice it is just as absurd when the state prohibits people from wearing headscarves, kippas, turbans, or crosses. The state wasn’t neutral in this case, it didn’t take action only against pathological social aspects of religious origin, but it took action against religion in general. At the same time, however, it failed to deal with problematic social aspects (such as violence or degradation of women), but only hypocritically pushed them out of the public school door – with reference to the fact that religion doesn’t belong there even in the private level.

Together with these attempts to expel religion (without distinguishing between its positive and negative features, its relation to the democratic order, etc.) from the European public space, as is the case in some countries, we also witness absolute resignation with regard to accepting own religious tradition and crucial formative elements of current European culture. This was fully shown in the discussion about including a reference to Christianity and Judaism in the preamble of the European Constitutional Treaty.¹⁷

This discussion – and this should be stressed – wasn’t about belief or the conceptions of God and the world that can be interpreted variously and the specific formulation of which would be problematic in defining the political order in secularized Europe. The problem was only about accepting the roots that form the basis and foundation of European culture and that are also the source of European

¹⁷ See Toggenburg, G. N. (2004). Der (dritte) Weg zur (v)erfassbaren Religionsidee der EU. Politik und Religion in Europa, Baslerschriften zur europäischen Integraton, Nr. 68, pp. 27-74.

democratic tradition. The inability to acknowledge these roots that still have considerable formative influence and without which the European system of values as the necessary condition of democracy is only a hardly accomplishable term, is bad news and forms a dangerous precedent. It's no accident that one of the most significant theorists of European integration, J. H. H. Weiler, recently wrote that the European constitution's silence about Christianity is an act of Europe's self-negation.¹⁸ And let us add something that is not usually discussed in "political salons". Denying this tradition means symbolic opening to all other religious influences and ideological sources that – from what we have experienced so far – have never lead to the formation of democracy and civic society anywhere, as opposed to the countries with Christian or Jewish religious tradition. Voluntary surrendering of the ideological space and giving up the religious sources of one's own culture is an invitation to the activation of other religious influences; and this occurs at a time when we know that religion is important to many people, when we know that we are unable to integrate members of some religious communities (nor let them coexist multiculturally, as this doesn't work), and that we therefore don't have sufficient tools for protecting our own system of values without which we cannot maintain democracy. It would be worth analysing the attitudes of individual European countries and mainly of various social and political participants to the so-called Danish caricatures, and European reaction to the related wave of violence and aggressiveness in Islamic countries.

Religion however returned to European politics in one more way, in the case of Italy's nominee for European Commission, Rocco Buttiglione. This case seems to be banal: the only thing that happened is that after the hearings before the committees of the European Parliament there was a wave of opposition to this Italian minister because of his views, and he was withdrawn from the nomination in order to allow the acceptance of Barroso's commission. But the Buttiglione case isn't ordinary. This is because Buttiglione only provoked outrage by openly talking about his views based on Catholic belief. As opposed to the inaccurate interpretation in some media (the very way of presenting this case deserves our attention), the publicly available records from hearings show that Buttiglione's views were fully in accordance with

¹⁸ Weiler in this context talks even about "Christophobia". See Toggenburg (2004), pp. 37.

democratic political culture and with democratic rules of the game and also with democratic legal order and the EU law. Buttiglione didn't even suggest that he would consider in his political activity to give preference to his beliefs over legally democratic procedures, and he even explicitly refused such possibility. The Buttiglione case was based on the fact that this commission nominee publicly declared his Catholic faith, albeit in a position of a personal view, and therefore became unacceptable, i.e. his belief *de facto* disqualified him from certain office. And this is at least an indication of a problem that should be taken seriously not only by European Catholics and Christians, but that also deserves attention by those who care about the development of European democracy. This namely means (or rather could mean) that the European Union is not neutral in religious issues, but that it takes an active discriminating stance. Moreover, we have to consider whether this case doesn't indicate the formation and inconspicuous assertion of power by some new ideology that isn't tolerant to the views that are still held by a considerable part of Europe's population, and tries to expel these *views* from political and public space. We should be extremely sensitive to such a possibility after the experience with "political religions", with dangerous ideologies of the 20th century.

Religious issues are thus in various forms entering through the windows of the "European house". We are not well prepared for their surge because we had considered them solved. The more attention we should pay to their examination, without those rose-tinted spectacles of modernism that we had liked to put on in order to believe that the achieved state of the European form of democracy is final and cannot be jeopardized, or can only be jeopardized from the outside. We have to admit that this order can be jeopardized also from within – even by religion in a truly dialectic form: namely both by the aggressive form of some religious movements and by complete denial and ousting of those religious traditions that have formed the current democratic Europe.