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The EU: Neither God nor Caesar

How does the European Union handle the relationships between confessional faiths and the unified body that it is striving to bring about? Being inherently pluralistic, it is incumbent upon the EU to develop a new form of secularisation.

At a time when the idea of a religious revival, even "the revenge of God" (Gilles Kepel), is being spoken of across the world, Europe, marked as it is by a high degree of secularisation, would like to be seen as an "exception" (Peter Berger,¹ Grace Davie²). This is the view not only of secular observers of religious development but also many sociologists. However, analysts are divided over the scale and significance of this development: religious practice may be on the decline but religious identification is holding firm, a paradox that Grace Davie interprets as "belonging without believing". Western European politicians, however, are reluctant to refer to religion in a political context even though, in contrast to the United States, the relationship between the traditional Churches and the State is often institutionalised and even sometimes guaranteed in the constitution.

European integration is a useful starting point for analysing the changes which are affecting the relationship between religion and politics in western European nations. Brussels is a microcosm where Europe's national, ethnic and religious differences come face to face. A shared political culture is forged through deliberations, transactions and compromises.³ Furthermore, the European Union does not really have a tradition in terms of the relationship between religion and politics and it has therefore been required to invent new forms of interaction.

Does the "European laboratory" foretell the emergence of new forms of the relationship between religion and politics in the postmodern context? What can the relationship between politics and "bearers of meaning" be against a background of both political crisis and a crisis of meaning? In this article we will discuss the connection between European identity and religion, along with forms of governance of religion by the European institutions, thereby providing a broad précis of Europe's second era of secularisation, one characterised by pluralism and interpenetrability. The European Union is neither God nor Caesar; rather, it is the setting for the formation of complex and fertile relationships between those involved in religion and politics.

Not God: a procedural vision of togetherness

In contrast to "Asiatism", which binds together geographical and societal units,

themselves formed from an amalgamation of smaller units, Europe leans sharply towards universality, an attitude related to important geographical and technical discoveries and colonial conquests. In some respects, it is closer to Islam's self-understanding, although it does not define itself by religion, that is to say, Christianity. In contrast to Islamism, which seeks to cement or protect an *ummah* which is actually very diverse against the "evil" West and its obnoxious modernity, Europe is the origin of Western "modernity"; it is the West and, at the same time, not the West at all. The loss of its world leadership to the United States has compelled Europe to define what sets it apart, without relinquishing its dream (or pretension) of universalism, an attitude which has created a complex and unacknowledged relationship between faith(s) and European identity.

The debate over the preamble to the draft European Constitutional Treaty illustrated the difficulty of creating a multi-national unit with a feeling of shared belonging. There are two opposing ideas of Europe: a German model and a French model. One advocates "substantialism" and "culturalism" and is based on recalling shared heritage; the other advocates "contractualism" and "universalism" and views itself in relation to a shared future project. One leads to the return of religion as a sign of civilisation, creating an identity which is restricted to Europe; the other lauds "constitutional patriotism" (Jürgen Habermas) from which a Europe without *a priori* borders stems. On the one hand, those in favour of emphasising Europe's Christian roots argue that doing so would ensure citizens' support for the future constitution, particularly in eastern Europe, and unify and give a sense of identity to the European project. On the other hand, there are those who argue that symbolic choices made in the constitutional treaty define European identity around values broadly delimited by human rights. When heads of government met at the 2004 intergovernmental conference they chose to refer to a plurality of "religious and humanist inheritance", not in itself but as a source of human rights. European identity should:

[...] draw inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law.⁴

Human rights thus provide Europe with a residual holiness without a God. According to Durkheim, when society becomes too diverse and too complex, men can no longer be united by religion or shared ideas but by the "shared belonging to humanity"⁵ alone. Furthermore, the European Union's political vision is one of exchange, freedom of movement and a borderless market; in other words, it incarnates a depoliticised, horizontal political space. The vision of nation-states, on the other hand, appears to be the transfer of religious transcendence into a particular territory, along with the idea of verticality and centrality,⁶ the affirmation of sovereignty, and the primacy of the state and its borders. Turkish membership of the EU is considered precisely on such a "post-national" basis: past ideas of transcendence are discarded and what is envisaged instead is a form of European belonging that goes hand in hand with what might be called "political immanentism".

Nor Caesar: Neutral and pluralistic governance of religion

The European Union appears to be the most complete example of a modest "manager" state and represents, according to Marcel Gauchet, the face of

modern politics.⁷ In Brussels, the bureaucratic concern for "managing" things has the upper hand over the teleological ambition of guiding people. The obsession with detail in certain European directives therefore sometimes borders on parody. George Weigel, an American theologian formerly close to Jean Paul II, illustrated this profound change in politics by comparing a cathedral, whose rich architectural symbolism epitomises European Christianity, with a cube: geometric and abstract, functional but empty at its centre, an image of a contemporary Europe that refuses to recognise its Christian roots because to do so would be to risk the exclusion of some.⁸

At the EU level, removing spirituality from politics in this way results in a symbolic deficit that goes some way towards explaining its democratic deficit: without shared beliefs, how can European citizens rally around a European integration that is the domain of experts and the result of complicated trade-offs between national political leaders? Former European Commission President, Jacques Delors, conceived an idea to resolve this predicament: call upon faith communities to "give Europe a soul". Delors began an informal but structured dialogue with faith groups and secular humanists. The starting point of relations between the European Commission and faith communities can be seen in one of his speeches given to the leaders of Protestant Churches in 1992: "If in the next ten years we haven't managed to give a soul to Europe, to give it spirituality and meaning, the game will be up." After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the revival of the European project seemed to embody a qualitative change in European integration: having been primarily concerned with economic and technical integration, European integration started to be perceived more in terms of political union, where the question of the challenges facing the European Union as regards citizenship, society and ethics would be raised. The appeal to faith groups was justified by the need to give the European project meaning beyond simple technical arrangements.

As important instances in society and opinion leaders via denominational media outlets, faith communities were also asked to develop pro-European feeling in member states and accession states. It should be noted that the appeal made to faith groups coincided with the collapse of the communist utopia, itself a secular religion which offered humanity a vision of secular superiority. Ten years later, the events of 11 September 2001 reinforced the need to overhaul the dialogue between the European Union and faith communities. Through inter-faith meetings, the EU Commission Presidency sought to encourage a dialogue between civilisations so as to avoid Huntington's calamitous prophecy of an irredeemable "clash of civilisations". More religious leaders were and continue to be invited; but is the debate not losing its substance?

Let there be no mistake: appealing to faith communities in this way does not equal de-secularising politics. Relations between faith groups and the European Commission are taking place in a neutral and pluralistic context, albeit, it should be added, without institutional form. The European Commission has introduced a forum for dialogue and informal contacts. However these initiatives depend on the good will of the European institutions and are unstable given high-level personnel changes, as demonstrated by the crisis and subsequent dissolution of the "A Soul for Europe" scheme. Article I-52 of the constitutional treaty would nevertheless give a legal basis to the informal links between faith communities and European institutions. Its phrasing remains vague, however, recommending "an open, transparent and regular dialogue". The management of religion remains first and foremost an area of national competency, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.

Moreover, the European Commission has shown itself to be neutral in its relations with faith communities. It does not choose the faiths included in this informal dialogue and does not fix the contours of a "proper faith". Some very minority groups therefore attend the bi-annual briefing meetings which today include approximately 50 members. The various departments at the Commission Presidency decline to elect an individual interlocutor per faith, thereby recognising the pluralistic nature of each confession. In some respects, the European institutions therefore demonstrate that they are more pluralistic in their relations with faith groups than most member states which, for practical reasons, prefer having a single partner per faith, as demonstrated by the desire of the Belgian and French Governments to encourage a representative body for the Muslim faith.

European institutions do not have a Caesar-like role; their polycentric style of operating, both transnational (the Commission and the European Parliament) and inter-state (the Council) is based on the notion of governance, a term that translates as the replacement of the centralised state and public management with a combination of public, semi-public and private players. In Brussels, lobbyists (the term is very pejorative in France) contribute to forming European policy. They represent a substitute for participatory democracy. The Churches, faith communities and non-confessional philosophical groups⁹ working in Brussels participate in this growing public European space by distributing transnational and multi-lingual information about European integration. Furthermore, they participate in wider interest groups that unite faith and non-confessional organisations on specific subjects; for them, this requires a relatively secular way of acting and speaking, and even affects their objectives.

The French political class struggles to understand this European political culture, which is focused on notions of compromise, subsidiarity and legal pluralism. France actually owes its stability to its assertion of a centralised state, a principle of adjudication by a political culture centred on the notion of conflict and subsumed by the affirmation of the single and indivisible Republic. French secularism, structured around a strict division of the public and private spheres, and relegating faith to the latter, struggles to understand this association of institutions and interest groups, particularly religious ones. Defenders of robust secularism see the new forms of cooperation between faith groups and politics as a sign of a religious resurgence.

Europe in the second age of secularisation

The relationship between European institutions and faith groups demonstrates that the first stage of secularisation, characterised by the privatisation of religion and the deification of politics, has been surpassed. This current relationship unfolds according to a second model of secularisation, whereby the de-sacralisation of politics is equivalent to the public expression of faith in a democratic, pluralistic and neutral setting. Interaction between faith groups and politics increases on the border between public and private.

According to Jean-Paul Willaime, secular politics, in denying that it is an end in itself, reintroduces religion to the public sphere as a medium for a civil, ethical faith that could repair social cohesion, currently in a state of crisis. The power religion used to have over the political class is not being restored; rather, faith groups are being asked, according to their capacity, to adopt the language of human rights as the foundation for a democratic society.¹⁰ In Brussels, the Church's European structures give pluralism their blessing based

on a renewed self-understanding of their ecclesiology and theology. Thus, for Keith Jenkins, Secretary General of the Ecumenical Commission for Churches and Society (EECCS), the oldest Protestant organisation in Brussels, internal diversity in Protestantism and intra-Protestant ecumenism set an example for Europe. At the European Protestant Assembly in Budapest (24 to 30 March 1992), he declared that "we could give the European Community the gift of an ecumenical model of unity within reconciled diversity".

Similarly, in his speech on 19 April 1994 to the European Parliament, the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, made a connection between the European principle of subsidiarity and the orthodox dialectic between autocephaly and synodality, before interpreting the European motto "United in Diversity" in the light of his Trinitarian faith:

That the meaning of Europe is one person feeling his way towards another in a spirit of open-mindedness, respect and responsibility. Diverse unity, one diversity, perhaps in the image of an Absolute who is himself Communion.

It would be too simplistic to paint a picture of the total separation of the functions carried out by faith groups and the political/administrative authorities: the first have ethical preoccupations; the latter concentrate on day-to-day management. Both politics and religion are preoccupied with social cohesion and the general interest. In their contributions, Christian Churches and secular movements with different philosophical backgrounds have emphasised the collective dimension of togetherness, something that is absent from the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

European institutions may be seeking to give meaning to a complex and integrated society, but this will not be achieved by mobilising "the religion in religion". Rather, their aim is to foster a general ability to articulate global ideas that are not specific to any particular faith group. It might be said that those involved in religion are general experts; they introduce new cross-disciplinary concerns in the face of an extremely segmented and sector-oriented European political culture, making a connection between local, national, international and European levels for European institutions that often lack expertise on the ground.

The relationship between faith communities and politics in Europe is the result of a compromise between transcendence and immanence. Faith and humanist groups are being invited into the public sphere to serve as a pool of meaning, a function that the neutral democratic state can no longer fulfil alone. The state seeks to legitimise itself in ways that lend its actions meaning in a profoundly pluralistic and secular context, in which even faith communities themselves are subject to internal secularisation. As Marcel Gauchet¹¹ underlines, a complex new relationship between faith groups and politics then follows: a particular combination of interests leading to the creation of a policy of recognition. The state is both allied with faith communities and neutral towards them. The first stance ensures pluralistic recognition of faiths. It is a way of maintaining a monopoly on social aggregation and relativising the role of faith communities, combined with philosophies and secular morals. Making faith communities privileged interlocutors saves them from being reduced to simple cultures, even if they do lose their hold on society. The policy of recognition is characterised by maintaining a balance between complicity and distance in civil society and the state.

In Brussels, there is an exchange of legitimacy between European institutions, criticised for their democratic deficit, and religious institutions, hurt by secularisation and the deregulation of faith. This exchange is based on a feeling of affinity between politics and religion: the ability to articulate global ideas across sectors while making the connection between the local and global levels. This enables a certain amount of penetrability between religion and politics, based on separating spheres between State and Church, religion and politics, faith and morals. This exchange transforms the way faith is expressed in public; it is no longer a case of a master dominating his society, but of players and stakeholders from civil society with specialist knowledge in relation to the lobby groups which generally act in a narrow sector of European policy making; indeed, is it not the case that religious groups in Brussels prefer the word "advocacy" to lobbying in order to stress their role as lawyers pleading a case rather than a judge recalling norms?

Nevertheless, even if an affinity does exist between religion and the social and cultural environment, as is the case for the Christian Churches in Europe, the insurmountable problem of religious values in a global context remains. Their prophetic nature stems from this and, in the European context, leads them to take on a position which argues neither in favour of or against, but criticises. It is an attitude born of profound support for the European ideals of reconciliation between peoples and critical distance vis-à-vis the means used to achieve this, which are considered too economic and technical. As Paul Valadier puts it, the Churches and the world are "having an argument"; but rather than entering into open conflict, they have taken a route of confrontation mediated by the law and what Jürgen Habermas terms "communicative rationality", in other words, a universe of shared meaning.

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- ¹ Peter Berger, *A Far Glory: the Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity*, (New York, Free Press, 1992)
- ² Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe. A Memory Mutates*, (Oxford University Press, coll. "European Society", 2000); *Europe: the Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*, (Sacrum Theological Lectures, London, Darton Longman & Todd, 2002)
- ³ Marc Abeles and Irène Bellier, "La Commission européenne : du compromis culturel à la culture du compromise", (*Revue française de sciences politiques*, vol. 46 (3), June 1996, 431–456)
- ⁴ The highly controversial preamble of the Charter of Fundamental Rights declared in the singular "Conscious of its spiritual and moral patrimony". The preamble of the constitutional treaty, defined by the members of the Convention, made religious inheritance the source of human rights: "Drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, which, always present in its heritage, has embedded within the life of society its perception of the central role of the human person and his inviolable and inalienable rights, and of respect for law."
- ⁵ Émile Durkheim, "L'éducation, sa nature et son rôle" (1911), in *Éducation et sociologie*, Paris, PUF, 1993, 45.
- ⁶ Patrick Michel, *Politique et religion. La grande mutation*, (Paris, Albin Michel, 1994)
- ⁷ Marcel Gauchet, *le Désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1985)
- ⁸ George Weigel, *le Cube et la cathédrale. L'Europe, l'Amérique et la politique avec ou sans Dieu*, (Paris, Les Éditions de la Table ronde, 2005)
- ⁹ According to the Belgian model of secularism, as opposed to the French one, secular and humanist movements are invited to sit alongside faith communities. In Belgium and the Netherlands, humanist movements are recognised alongside Churches with similar functions (secular chaplaincy and rites of passage, secular moral classes at state schools). In contrast, French secularism defines the framework shared by different faiths and cannot be the prerogative of secular ones alone.
- ¹⁰ Jean-Paul Willaime, "État, éthique et religion", (*Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, vol. LXXXVIII, 1990, 189–213)

¹¹ Marcel Gauchet, *la Religion dans la démocratie, parcours de la laïcité*, (Paris, Gallimard, coll. "Le Débat", 1998)

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