

“The reintroduction of religious diversity into European society . . . is also reintroducing religion, and religiously motivated conflicts, to European politics.”

## European Politics Gets Old-Time Religion

TIMOTHY A. BYRNES

**I**n the late 1970s I spent a year as an “occasional student” at a British university. I was asked repeatedly during that year to explain, if not defend, the tense race relations that existed then (and exist now) in the United States. I offered the standard explanations, running from the legacies of slavery to the unfortunately blunt racism of some of my compatriots. But I always detected in the bewilderment of my British friends a sort of “Can we all get along” simplicity. And I also detected a bit of smugness—an assumption that they, and *their* compatriots, were above such prejudice.

### RELIGION AND STATE

*Sixth in a series*

I did not say it aloud very often, but I also knew that a big part of the explanation for racial tensions in my country was the racial diversity that characterized the American social landscape, and the races’ proximity to one another. Part of the reason that the races did not get along very well in my country was that in the United States we had different races to *not* get along with. On the other side of the Atlantic, British homogeneity had bred British complacency in this regard. To be sure, there was more than a little self-deception in that complacency: Britain in the 1970s was already home to large immigrant populations that were undoing that homogeneity and challenging traditional notions of what it meant to be “British.” But it took the Brixton riots, which broke out a few years after I left England, to shatter that complacency—and to demonstrate to me, and most of my British friends, that diversity can breed discord in London just as easily as it can in Los Angeles.

I have been thinking of those long-ago conversations recently as I have confronted another set of

questions, this time concerning religion rather than race, and this time involving the United States and Europe writ large, rather than America and Britain alone. These days Americans are being challenged by their European counterparts—implicitly, at least, and sometimes quite explicitly—to defend, or explain, how a religious zealot like George W. Bush, with such a simplistic worldview, could become president of the United States; or, to take an even more recent example, how a provincial creationist like former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee could have emerged, at least temporarily, as a serious contender for the presidential nomination of the Republican Party.

These challenges indicate a deep divide between Europe and the United States concerning the assumptions people hold about religion and about religion’s proper role in public life. Even Bush’s staunchest opponents in America are not as startled as European observers are by the president’s openly religious rhetoric, or by his evangelical view of the world and of international relations. Americans are more accustomed than are Europeans to hearing people, including politicians, talk this way. President Bush may be particularly clear in the degree to which he defines his own suppositions in religious terms, and in how he portrays the history of his nation as being driven and ordained by God. But many Americans continue to define their lives and their communities in just these terms. And even those who no longer do so are nevertheless more accustomed to being confronted by religious worldviews—and to facing the politically charged conflicts between such worldviews—than most Europeans are.

Yet today this distinction between the United States and Europe is rapidly blurring. This is happening not because the French, the Dutch, or the British are about to adopt American levels of religious belief or religious practice. Rather, it is happening because the reintroduction of reli-

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gious diversity into European society—through the immigration of Muslims and the expansion of the European Union—is also reintroducing religion, and religiously motivated conflicts, to European politics.

Most of these conflicts concern the role of religion per se in a modern polity, and pit religious believers against defenders of a secular status quo. But some conflicts might also in time come to involve political contestation *between* adherents of diverse religious traditions. Large-scale Muslim migration into Europe, for example, may be having the remarkable effect of fanning and reigniting what Peter Katzenstein has called the “glimmering embers” of European Christianity, at least in political terms.

At the very least, close and sustained contact with religious “outsiders,” in what is assumed to be a post-Christian Europe, is reviving old beliefs about European history and political development, beliefs that depend on Christianity for their vocabulary and institutional underpinnings. Indeed, today’s debates over the role of religion in European politics could lead to forms of religiously charged political contestation that would make concerns about Huckabee’s views on evolution seem rather mild in comparison.

## THE MIGRATION EFFECT

Two factors are increasing the religious diversity of Europe and reintroducing religion to European politics. The first is the presence of up to 20 million Muslims within the EU’s member states. While there is no doubt these Muslims are living in Europe, there is a lot of doubt as to whether they are actually *Europeans*. Are they hyphenated, marginalized, permanent visitors of some kind? Or do they constitute an organic element of the European population that—like other parts of the population—gets to assert its own identity within Europe, and gets to participate in the complex, ever-evolving process of defining what it means to be European?

The suburbs of Paris are home to large concentrations of Muslims. Amsterdam, before too much longer, will be a majority Muslim city. German society has been profoundly transformed by generations of Turkish *gastarbeiter* (guest workers) who somehow neglected to ever return “home.”

Europe, and its relationship to secularism, look a bit different when the designation “European” is granted to these residents of the continent.

It is fascinating that the same “Europe” that was defined for so long in explicitly religious terms as “Christendom” is now being defined by many Europeans in equally exclusive terms as a-religious, and perhaps even anti-religious. Europe is secular, the argument goes; so if Muslim populations are going to be accepted into European society and politics, they will have to accommodate themselves to the fundamentally secular worldview at the heart of European self-definition.

Two immediate responses can be made to this argument. The first is to point out just how recent a phenomenon this European devotion to secularism actually is. History did not end in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia any more than it did in 1989 with the fall of European communism. Indeed, religion and religious categorizations remained,

well into the twentieth century, central features of European political organization and crucial points of European political cleavage.

The second necessary response to the argu-

ment that secularism is the nonnegotiable heart of European political identity is to point out that this concept of secularism is a bit more complicated and variable than many Europeans imagine it to be. As José Casanova noted in his indispensable book *Public Religions in the Modern World*, secularism has at least two very separate meanings that are often inappropriately conflated as if they were the same thing, or as if one necessarily led to the other. The basic process of secularization as “the modern autonomous differentiation of the secular and religious spheres,” to quote Casanova, does indeed constitute a central component of modern governance and social organization, certainly in the European context. But the idea that this institutional differentiation of the sacred from the secular will necessarily lead to the decline of religious belief and religious observance (the heart of the so-called modernization theory) was, according to Casanova, little more than a self-fulfilling prophecy promoted by European sociologists.

This latter definition of secularism, he argues, is decidedly not a necessary characteristic of “modern” politics and society outside of Europe. On the contrary, ample evidence suggests that religion

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can endure and even thrive within modernity, and that religion can intersect with, and participate in, political processes in “the modern world.” Seen in this light, religion’s estrangement from the political realm in Europe may not be a historically inevitable destination of modernization, but rather a time-specific phenomenon that will not necessarily be characteristic of Europe for the indefinite future. Again, though, it matters in this regard what counts as Europe, and who counts as European.

## THE ISLAMIC CHALLENGE

To be sure, secularism in the sense of institutional separation is a well-established feature of democratic governance in Europe, and European Muslims can fairly be expected to abandon any theocratic expectations that they may have brought with them to the continent. But part of the challenge that domestic Islam is posing to European secularism is that Islam does not recognize the distinction between the sacred and the profane in the same way that (at least modern) Christianity does. For this reason, Muslims in Europe will, as their numbers increase in both absolute and relative terms, continue to push the boundaries of “acceptable” religious politics on issues as varied as education, foreign policy, and the role of women in European societies.

This does not mean that we have a string of European Khomeinis to look forward to, or that secular Europe will give way to the much-feared “Eurabia.” But it does mean that, short of draconian limitations on political participation by Europe’s Muslims, non-Muslim Europeans can expect renewed public debate concerning the relationship between the secular principle and democratic governance, and concerning the appropriate role of religious belief in defining and articulating political interest.

How this debate will be framed and conducted in the long run is very difficult to predict at the moment. Consumers of a growing literature featuring titles like *While Europe Slept*, *The Last Days of Europe*, and *The Suicide of Reason* can be forgiven for not looking forward to this future with much confidence or enthusiasm. But alongside books like these, more hopeful scenarios have been imagined, some by Muslims such as Abdullahi An-Na’im, who has called for a worldwide “Islamic Reformation,” and, in a different way, Bassam Tibi, who has insisted on the development of what he calls “Euro-Islam.”

What should not be demanded, or at least not expected, is that Muslims abandon their religion

wholesale; or that they accept the idea that religious belief should not inform their approaches to politics and policy. It would probably be a vain hope in any case to expect even those Muslims who acknowledge the differentiation of the sacred from the profane in institutional terms to also adopt the worldview of, say, a lapsed Dutch Catholic or a ceremonial British Anglican. Such a demand, moreover, would run the risk of violating the very liberal principles it would purport to uphold. What is so liberal, after all, about insisting that Muslims—or anyone else for that matter—renounce their religious beliefs in order to be accepted into liberal society?

## NOT SO SECULAR

There is nothing very surprising about the prediction that European politics will, in the future, feature debates over the relationship between political worldviews defined by Islam and the secularist status quo. We are seeing this emerging already in all sorts of ways and places; the dynamic is sure to continue and to deepen. What is perhaps a bit surprising, and maybe even speculative, is my claim that the status quo itself may prove less secular than many of its advocates suppose. One of the results of the Islamic challenge to European secularism has been the revelation that some secularism in fact masks Christian assumptions and practices that are so deeply ingrained in European society as to go unnoticed until outsiders challenge them. Put another way, the “problem” with Europe’s Muslims is not only that they believe something, as against a cultural requirement to believe nothing, but also that they believe particular things that do not fit with reflexive assumptions that persist across the continent.

No, European Christians have not been secretly attending mass in a catacomb somewhere, hidden from the dictates of secularism. But policies such as public funding of sectarian schools in Britain, or public financing of church operations in Germany, were devised quite obviously with Christian communities in mind. These policies as a result, in ways subtle and not so subtle, put Muslims at an institutional disadvantage in terms of gaining access to government funding. Yet, when Muslims call for reform of such policies to create a more level playing field—to pursue their own piece of the public pie—they face significant political opposition.

The problem, moreover, extends well beyond government programs and benefits. Consider a

December 2007 speech by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, in Rome of all places, in which he suggested that “the roots of France are mainly Christian.” France, he declared, is “looking for spirituality, values, and hope,” and “needs convinced Catholics who are not afraid to affirm what they are and what they believe.” The speech included all sorts of caveats and frequent reaffirmations of France’s continued commitment to what Sarkozy called a “*positive laïcité*.” But it was also larded with celebratory quotations from papal works. Indeed, its tone was so religious that it occasioned a cartoon in *Le Monde* depicting Sarkozy as a bishop. Tellingly, the cartoon also featured a chagrined President Bush complaining to the pope that the French president was “stealing my job.”

Perhaps we should not make too much of one speech. Sarkozy is Sarkozy, after all, and part of his intention in Rome was undoubtedly to provoke and incite back in Paris. Still, France is often cited as among the most secular countries in the world, and it has long maintained a taboo against public approbation of religion’s cultural and political role. Yet here was the president making a claim of civilizational identity for his French homeland, and defining that identity, at least in part, in unmistakably religious terms.

Sarkozy’s speech takes on even more significance in light of the political context in which it was delivered. These were the words of a president who has practically reveled in his dismissal of the grievances of mostly Islamic protesters in the outskirts of Paris and other French cities, and who has left no ambiguity in his strenuous opposition to the prospect of Turkish membership in the EU. Sarkozy’s rhetoric may be a long, long way from the traditional and troubling assertion that “to be a Pole is to be a Catholic” (this particular eastern formulation has not migrated west with EU expansion), but his words might not be so distant from the claim, often heard in America, that the United States is in some foundational and irreversible way a “Christian nation.”

These considerations raise the important and interesting question of the degree to which widespread social conflict in contemporary Europe has anything to do with religion or religious identity in the first place. Just as we might easily deny that the troubles in Northern Ireland are about

the primacy of the papacy or the nature of the sacraments, so we might easily dismiss an argument that the social marginalization of so many European Muslims has occurred *because* they are Muslims. Surely, much of this marginalization and the political conflict that arises out of it is attributable to factors such as class and race, and is related to the unfortunate circumstances in which migrants and their families find themselves all over the world.

But just because other explanations are available to account for political conflict associated with a religious minority does not necessarily mean that the conflict has *nothing* to do with the minority’s religion. It will be important to observe carefully in the future the extent to which social dynamics in cities like Paris, Amsterdam, and Berlin are defined in religious terms, even obliquely.

Funda Müjde, a Dutch actress of Turkish descent, has noted a telling change in rhetoric associated with a series of religiously charged political developments in the Netherlands. In *Murder in Amsterdam*, Ian Buruma’s 2006 book about a Muslim radical’s slaying of the filmmaker Theo Van

Gogh, Funda was quoted as saying that, in 2000, “I was called ‘a filthy Turk.’” After 2001, it was “filthy foreigner.” More recently, it was “filthy Muslim.” Perhaps there was more expressed in that anti-Islamic epithet than a commitment to the separation of church and state.

## THE TURKISH QUESTION

The second factor that is reintroducing religious diversity to Europe, and thereby introducing the potential for renewed religious conflict to European politics, is the enlargement of the EU. Just as with Islamic migration, an important ramification of enlargement is the simple fact that it expands the universe of people who get to be counted as Europeans. Even given the emerging religious conflicts in the EU’s western nations, “Europe” itself continues to seem more secular if it is defined as encompassing Paris, Amsterdam, and Berlin but not Warsaw, Belgrade, or certainly Istanbul.

Turkey is the central challenge in this regard, of course. If Turkey joins “Europe” through accession to the EU, then we should not expect the processes of “Europeanization” to move in only one direction. Europe would be changed by swal-

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lowing Turkey, just as Turkey would doubtless be changed by adapting itself to Europe. And this is presumably why so many Europeans, including the French Sarkozy and the German Benedict XVI (at least until he was chastened by controversy over his criticism of Islam), have been so opposed to the idea.

There are, of course, all sorts of reasons to resist taking in a struggling democracy of 70 million souls on Europe's eastern periphery, and many of the reasons have nothing to do with Islam. Still, when former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing says that the Turks cannot "join Europe" because they are not "Europeans," do we have to accept at face value that his continental designation has *nothing* to do with religious categorizations?

The conflicts associated with Turkish membership are multifaceted. On one hand, some political leaders are making a straightforward defense of secularism against a perceived sectarian challenge. They see Turkey—and its ostensibly moderate Islamist government—as a Trojan horse for a much more destabilizing form of religious politics. On the other hand, the challenges accompanying Turkey's application to the EU have led at least some Europeans to a reconsideration of their "Christian heritage" and to a renewed appreciation for the Christian Democratic roots of the European integration project from the very beginning.

The relationship between religion and politics is always a two-way street. Of course religion seeks to influence politics, and that is the pathway that causes so much concern among secularists in Europe and elsewhere. But religion, and the way that religion articulates itself, are also profoundly affected by their interaction with political institutions and political processes. Secularists in the West, for example, fear Turkish Islamism, no matter how "moderate" Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan insists that it is. Yet, from Erdogan's point of view, Turkish membership in the EU, with all of the union's secular assumptions and liberal protections, offers a pathway to a more secure Islamic political engagement inside Turkey. For the current government in Ankara, the relevant threat is not secularism or liberalism in Brussels and Paris. Instead, it is the commitment to secularism in Turkey itself, which might be used to justify the suspension of democracy by Kemalist elements in the Turkish military and political elite.

Similarly, Turkey's accession to the EU could offer Europeans a pathway to the political domes-

tication of European Islam through its association with "liberal" democracy in Ankara, supported by broader democratic (and incidentally secular) political forces across the continent. Stranger things have happened. Consider how Roman Catholics were perceived in the United States not so long ago—how much of a threat they supposedly posed to American democracy—until the combined effects of the Second Vatican Council and the Kennedy presidency allowed a kind of reformed US Catholicism to assimilate itself into the mainstream of American public life.

## CHURCHES AT THE TABLE

Meanwhile, the effects of EU enlargement on the role of religion in Europe go well beyond Turkey. States like Poland, which have already joined the union, bring with them a deep historical connection to a religious tradition and religious identity. Poles, of course, resent the idea that they have "joined Europe," or that they are undergoing something called "Europeanization." Yes, the Polish state has had to adapt its institutions to the dictates of EU conditionality; and, yes, Poland's post-communist governments have had to accede to the thousands of pages of accumulated EU laws. But Poles, in their political culture and historical mythology, continue to see their nation as the heart of Europe, as one of the central places where European identity was originally defined. What is more, Poles throughout their history have defined this special role in constructing Europe in explicitly religious terms. This "bulwark of Christianity," this "Christ of Nations," is now once again a full partner in the community of European nations. And it has taken its seat at the European table with its religion still displayed prominently on its sleeve.

It is possible to argue, of course, that "Europeanization" will work its "modernizing" magic, and that Polish Catholicism will in time go the way of the French or the Dutch versions (insofar as they have actually *gone*). The Polish pope repeatedly voiced precisely this concern, and this is one of the reasons that the Catholic-nationalist movement surrounding Father Tadeusz Rydzyk's Radio Maryja has opposed Poland's EU membership all along. Still, I would caution against facile predictions about the trajectory of secularization in Poland.

Indicators of decreasing religious practice in Poland do not mean that Poles have accepted the equation that modern equals irreligious, any

more than many demonstrably “modern” Americans have. In the 1960s, the Catholic philosopher Michael Novak famously tried to capture the enduring strength of ethnic diversity in the United States by reference to what he called the “unmeltable ethnics.” The Poles may or may not be unmeltablely “Catholic,” especially across generations. But “Europe,” in all its complexity, now includes *Catholic Poland*, the country that has given Europe Pope John Paul II and the twin Polish leaders Jaroslaw and Lech Kaczynski. It was the Poles, not surprisingly, who were among the strongest supporters of the eventually unsuccessful effort to include an “invocation to God” in the doomed European constitution. And we can be fairly confident that the Poles will continue to insist on having their own distinctive say in future debates concerning the scope and meaning of the European project. The Poles are once again, in every sense of the term, Europeans.

The ties between religion and nation may be even stronger in an “Orthodox” place like Serbia than they are in a “Catholic” place like Poland, if that is possible. Were Serbia to join the EU, the Serbs would bring to Brussels yet another religious tradition and yet another deeply ingrained religious identity. The consequences of such a development could be far-reaching: Orthodox churches tend to play a prominent role in the institutional lives of individual states; Greece (and/or “Constantinople”) could become the center of a kind of Orthodox commonwealth within the broader European community; and relations between “Europe” and Russia might well be affected.

But Orthodox religion’s most significant effect on European enlargement might be as a drag on the process of enlargement itself. No, 2008 is not 1054. We are not talking about a renewal of the Great Schism. In Serbia and in other Orthodox settings, however, some politically significant elements are quite hesitant about the prospect of undergoing “Europeanization.” Having just recaptured national sovereignty, and therefore autonomy for their churches, many Orthodox religious leaders, and many political leaders in Orthodox countries, are less than enthusiastic about surrendering hard-earned institutional gains to a political collectivity that was founded,

after all, according to the dictates of the Treaty of Rome.

## TRANSNATIONAL RELIGION

The expansion of the EU, along with the growth in Europe’s domestic Islamic populations, is not only reintroducing religious diversity into the European context as it also reformulates what—and who—gets to count as “European.” The truly epoch-making process of European integration is affecting the role of religion in European life in another important way. It is not just that individual nations are bringing to Brussels deeply seated religious traditions and well-defined religious identities; it is also that the very fact of integration will require religious leaders and religious communities to participate at a new (or actually renewed) level of political contestation. As European integration creates fundamental shifts in the continent’s political

structure, religious actors (like all politically relevant actors) will have to re-adapt, relearn, and retarget their political efforts vis-à-vis not only national but also supranational

institutions and processes. An increasingly transnational Europe will raise the political profile of transnational religion.

It should be noted that this adaptive relationship between political structure and religious politics is a virtually universal phenomenon. The political role of the Catholic Church under the Roman Empire was nothing like the role of the church in the modern territorial state system. Islamic politics under the caliphate was completely distinct from Islamic politics under Western colonialism. And the role of the Orthodox churches was transformed utterly by the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, then by the establishment of Communist Yugoslavia, and then by the creation of the post-Yugoslav states in the Balkans.

I would take this argument one step further and say that meaningful political participation by a religious community in a given set of political structures is at least in part determined by the degree to which that community’s own institutional imperatives match those of the political circumstances at hand. Thus, in an era of continental integration, religious traditions that are themselves transnational in character and structure will find it easier to make their way to Brussels, and to have their

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voices heard in the politics of “Europe,” than those that are not.

The Orthodox churches, for example, have close theological ties with each other and are, in fact, devoted to a particular kind of transnational universality. But the defining concept of autocephaly, and the very close organic ties between church and nation in the Orthodox tradition, render these churches, in a certain way, out of step with the structural trends of contemporary European politics. This does not mean that Orthodoxy will not play a role in European politics. But that role will be primarily as an obstacle to further European integration.

Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, is almost perfectly suited in structural terms for participation in the new European politics. Paradigmatically transnational itself, the Catholic Church is not only comfortable participating at the level of “Europe” (Catholic bishops already have their own Eurocratic secretariat in Brussels) but is also anxious to reclaim its traditional role of defining what Europe is in historical and cultural terms. Listening to the last two popes—one a Pole and the other a German—one could be forgiven for thinking that they have envisioned Europe’s integration as the re-inauguration of a kind of neo-Christendom. This is largely a papal pipe dream, of course. Pope John Paul II’s hope for a new evangelization, running from east to west, was surely a vain one. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church is structurally prepared to participate in European politics in the future, and church leaders will have much to say about how this politics ought to be defined and advanced.

Islam is probably the most interesting of all in this regard. With its clear delineation of the Muslim people as a single *umma* (community), and its historic discomfort with the notion of individual state autonomy, Islam is at least as well situated structurally as Catholicism is for participation in transnational politics. Of course, Islam is a much less hierarchical religious tradition than Catholicism is. And the problem in the European context is that, in comparison with Catholic spokesmen, leaders of the Islamic faith are far less able to offer

an account of European history, or a definition of European identity, that places them at the center of the story. Islam has been “the Other” against which “Europe” has defined itself for centuries, and this is likely to be the role that Islam will play in Europe’s foreseeable future. Even so, the challenge Islam poses to European secularism will continue to put religion back on the agenda of European politics.

## EXCEPTIONAL EUROPE

In the near term, religion in the political arena may continue to be seen as a mostly peripheral force to be resisted by stalwart defenders of the secular status quo. Nevertheless, it seems eminently plausible that the role of religion in European politics could also grow more sectarian—and therefore more volatile—in the foreseeable future. The effort to reject Muslim inroads is leading more Europeans to rediscover their continent’s “Christian heritage” and to reemphasize the dependence of European political life on what Americans have long called, with an exquisite lack of specificity, “Christian values.” A debate is brewing in Europe about the question of “Europe’s” borders, and about who gets to define the meaning of the designation “European.” In the context of such a debate, invocations of religious designations and categorizations are bound to grow louder and more fractious.

For many years, devotees of modernization theory dismissed the United States as a deviant case—an undeniably modern but demonstrably religious polity in a secularizing era. But, as Casanova has reminded us, it was never the United States that was the exception to the rule; it was Europe. The precipitous decline of religious practice and the thoroughgoing relegation of religion to the margins of politics made Europe the aberrant secular case in an otherwise religious world. Now, as migration and integration continue to expand the definitions of what it means to be European, an increasingly diverse “Europe” is likely to see religion increasingly mixing with its politics. Why is this the case? Because that is what religion does. *Religion mixes with politics.* Everywhere. ■