

## *Featured Review Essay*

### **Religion and the Making of Post-War Europe: Assessing Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on European Integration**

***Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy.* By François Foret. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015. vii + 323 pp. \$98.00 Cloth**

***The Ecumenical Movement & the Making of the European Community.* By Lucian N. Leustean. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xiii + 285 pp. \$99 Cloth**

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In the Espace Léopold, where the European Parliament (EP) is headquartered while in Brussels, there is a nondescript, unadorned, and rather small room. Casual visitors could be forgiven for not realizing the space is reserved for prayer and meditation, as all ritual paraphernalia must be stored away unless being actively utilized. This arrangement represents an apt metaphor for religion's role in European Union (EU) politics today, where it typically remains out of sight but its symbols are never far from hand.

Over 500 million people reside within the supranational borders of the EU, but as recent controversies over Greece's insolvency, the migrant crisis, and Brexit illustrate, its constituent states have not yet arrived at a consensus regarding what the EU represents. With apologies to Rémi Brague, it still appears to be a container searching for its content. (Brague employed the concept to describe the Roman Empire.) In the absence of this unified vision, shifting constellations of actors and agendas imbue the EU with a multiplicity of frequently contradictory meanings.

Though often subsumed under the wider umbrella of culture, religion sits squarely at the center of arguments over how to understand the diachronic trajectory of European integration and its forward-looking prospects. Reflecting an ongoing existential crisis, two main storylines exist concerning the impetus for integration. The first views integration as the logical culmination of a secular-rationalist project whose roots are anchored firmly in the Enlightenment. The second, meanwhile, regards Europe — for all its considerable internal heterogeneity — to be a continent unified around a meta-paradigm of shared values, normative orientations, and historical legacies, in which a Christian heritage figures prominently. This ideational divide, moreover, has contemporaneous resonances in what European Commission President José Manuel Barroso referred to in a 2007 speech as a materialist-leaning “Europe of results” and an affective “Europe of values.” (While the “Europe of values” is present in survey data, such as a 2012 Standard Eurobarometer where 59% agreed that “compared to other continents, it is much easier to see what Europeans have in common in terms of values,” *religion* as a specific value ranked a distant last in the 2016 Standard Eurobarometer survey.)

Evidence exists in support of both the secular-rationalist and shared values interpretations. Undeniably, committed Catholics such as Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman, and Alcide De Gasperi (whom French President Vincent Auriol once referred to as “three tonsures beneath the same skullcap” [as cited in *De la Chrétienté à l'Europe: Les Catholiques et L'idée Européenne au XXe Siècle*, 105]) played a seminal role in fostering integration. But so too did figures of very different convictions, such as the Italian Communist Altiero Spinelli. Similarly, although Christian Democrats and the transnational networks they built were critical to this effort, their impact was artificially accentuated during the Cold War, when Christian Democracy came to be regarded as the default alternative to Marxism and its various offshoots, European right-wing parties having been discredited by their previous flirtation with fascism (*Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union*, 163–190).

Moreover, while European integration has generally been viewed as a pragmatic project *par excellence*, it also represents a profoundly normative vision. The 1951 Treaty of Paris, which established the European Coal and Steel Community (the precursor to the European Community [EC] and ultimately the EU), focused on these two sectors because they were critical to the industrial base of Western Europe; consequently, their successful cross-border linkage made another intra-European war almost

inconceivable. It is also easy to forget the extent to which the quintessentially Christian themes of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation resonated in the aftermath of World War II (WWII).

Rather than resolving over time, these juxtaposed identities have become ingrained in the EU's institutional DNA, reinforced by the devolution of most religious matters to the national level under the principle of subsidiarity. On the one hand, to invoke Jytte Klausen's expressive phrasing, the continent remains "riddled with Christian privileges" ("The Re-Politicization of Religion in Europe: The Next Ten Years." *Perspectives on Politics* [2005]3:555), established national churches or otherwise favored denominations enjoying an array of exclusive benefits in many states, including having clergy salaries and the upkeep on ecclesial buildings paid for from public funds. On the other hand, it is true that a striking percentage of Europeans are today highly secular (only 51% believing in God and another 26% believing in "some sort of spirit or life force" according to a 2010 Special Eurobarometer survey), with what sense of religious belonging still exists frequently expressing itself in cultural rather than doctrinal terms (though often varying significantly by country). This has led to the proliferation of what sociologist Grace Davie terms "vicarious religion," a situation where large numbers of people are not involved in confessional praxis on a regular basis, but take solace in knowing that religious rites continue to be propitiated by true believers, assuring they will be available should the former ever desire to access them ("Religion in Europe in the 21st Century: The Factors to Take into Account." *European Journal of Sociology* [2006]47: 271–296).

So what does the EU represent? A "Christian club," as exasperated Turkish politicians have taken to calling it given the glacial pace at which accession talks with Ankara have proceeded over the years? Or is it the developed world's standard-bearer for secularism, standing in stark contra-distinction to the "exceptional" religiosity of the United States? (For an elaboration, see: *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations*) Paradoxically, at the moment the answer must be that it is neither of these fully, but both to an extent.

The two ambitious volumes discussed below are assessed against this backdrop. While they focus on distinctly different periods and actors, respectively addressing the role that Christian ecumenism played in promoting European integration following WWII and the degree to which religion's presence has been institutionalized in EU politics post-Maastricht, they complement one another in that, taken together, they provide a useful longitudinal assessment of how interactions between

faith and politics in Europe have developed relative to deepening integration. Not only are the specific contributions of these works worth considering in greater detail, but so too are the larger issues that they raise.

At first glance, Lucian Leustean notes in *The Ecumenical Movement & the Making of the European Community*, “the political history of relations between churches and European institutions is a history of struggle” (7). However, the premise of his book is that there is also an overlooked history of cooperation among them. Surveying the period between the 1950 Schuman Declaration and the first EP elections in 1979, Leustean examines not only the manner in which churches came to engage with one another, but also how they collectively began to engage with European institutions.

Three key points are accentuated throughout this prodigiously researched work. First, European officials and church representatives forged relationships early on in the integration process, though most of these were informal and resulted from the initiative of individual actors. Second, efforts to bring European states closer together proved controversial among Europe’s churches, with skepticism dominating at the national and local levels. Finally, the burgeoning post-war ecumenical movement not only facilitated relations between Christian bodies, but also created interdenominational forums that allowed for the evaluation of broader political matters from a faith-based perspective. Vatican II, in particular, played a formative role in promoting contacts between Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches and, in turn, their mutual involvement with European institutions. (To his credit, Leustean does not shy away from analyzing how the ideological bifurcation ushered in by the Cold War affected the enthusiasm religious communities displayed for greater economic and political integration, nor does he overlook the influence churches behind the Iron Curtain had on this process.)

Focusing on 1950–1954, Chapter 1 examines the Protestant ecumenical movement’s relationship to European reconstruction after WWII. “Despite widespread perception that the Roman Catholic Church was the most active promoter of European cooperation in post-war Europe (and six years before a Catholic office monitoring the work of European institutions was opened in Strasbourg in 1956),” Leustean writes, “the ecumenism of the interwar period and the newly created World Council of Churches led to the establishment of a transnational reflection group composed of leading Protestant politicians and churchmen to offer expertise on European issues for Protestant churches.” Initially known as the Ecumenical Commission on European Cooperation, this body represented

“the first organised Christian response to the Schuman plan,” meeting regularly from 1950–1974 (20).

Chapter 2 assesses the growing impact of Protestant ecumenical networks between 1954–1964, particularly those centered about Paris and Brussels. Discussed in some depth as well is the role of Anglicanism in this process, with Leustean noting that British churchmen were from the very beginning more leery of integration than their continental counterparts.

Meanwhile, Chapter 3 looks at early (1958–1964) Catholic responses to the European project. Special attention is paid to the Catholic Office on Information and European Issues, which was “the first Catholic body to engage in dialogue with European institutions in Strasbourg, and later in Brussels” (93). Also considered are differences in how EC-member states interacted with the Vatican. As Leustean reminds us, a dramatic example of these conflicting attitudes toward the Catholic Church occurred in 1964, when France singlehandedly blocked the accreditation of the Holy See’s diplomatic mission to the EC (the Vatican finally secured representation in 1970, following de Gaulle’s resignation the previous year).

Encompassing 1964–1968, Chapter 4 deals with the uptick in communication evinced between the Catholic Church and other European churches during this time. The role of two notable and interconnected Protestant organizations is also addressed at length. The first of these is the Consultative Commission of Churches of the European Communities, a body that for many years provided a forum through which religious representatives could forge ties with EC officials. The second is the Ecumenical Centre in Brussels, which likewise served as a major point of contact between church leaders and European politicians.

The final chapter concerns itself with the furtherance of ties between European institutions and Catholic, Protestant, and Anglican groups in the fertile period between 1968–1979. Of particular interest is the 1974 Roehampton conference on Christians and the European Community, which fostered an increased awareness among Western churches of their role in the EC and invigorated engagement with relevant policy issues. Yet although Roehampton represented “the height of the ecumenical movement’s reflection on European integration” (165), the author notes its inter-confessional impact was limited by the “virtual absence of members from Orthodox churches,” to say nothing of representatives of other religions (166).

Pondering in the conclusion why certain European officials sought out contact with ecclesial bodies, Leustean makes an interesting normative

claim, namely that they “perceived that churches had a prime role to play in reconciliation and that they could ‘humanise’ the work of the European institutions” (185). This point is taken up again in the epilogue, where he briefly considers the intensification of ties exhibited between communities of faith and the EC after 1979. Conceptually framing this discussion is the November 1990 meeting that took place between Protestant and Anglican leaders and the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors. During this gathering Delors famously lamented the European project’s lack of “a heart and soul” and invited churches to participate actively in deliberating its meaning and future. His words affirmed that religious communities had a recognizable role to play in the work of integration and reinforced the growing trend of faith-based organizations setting up offices in Brussels for the purpose of engaging with European institutions. However, while religious bodies were now officially encouraged to have a voice in the EC, their welcome extended only insofar as they were willing to abide by the rules of a secular, pluralistic political order. As a result, these groups came to be regarded as one epistemic community among many, their influence confined primarily to policy arenas touching on moral and ethical values (as is pointed out, most religious civil society organizations in Brussels focus on specific issues, such as education or humanitarian aid [200]).

This ability of European institutions to shape the political engagement repertoires of religious groups is also addressed by François Foret in *Religion and Politics in the European Union*. However, in contrast to Leustean’s focus on external actors, Foret is interested in how EU officials, especially politicians in the EP, relate to religion, a research question in part predicated on his observation that there exist “yawning gaps between the institutional role of religion in high politics and its shrinking presence in the day-to-day societal life of individuals” (3). (This presumably refers not only to the sort of elite-level contacts Leustean chronicles, but also the subsequent establishment of formal consultative mechanisms, including the Treaty of Lisbon [2009] which pledges that the EU will maintain “regular dialogue” with religious groups and “philosophical and non-confessional organisations”).

Two central themes predominate in this erudite volume. First, the author argues that national identities and interests trump religious beliefs and affiliations, a claim bolstered by survey data such as a 2011 Pew study of Western Europe. What this means in a religiously multi-speed Europe is that a Belgian Catholic member of the EP (MEP) will likely behave differently than his or her Polish counterpart, shared

denominational affiliation notwithstanding. Second, Foret accepts that secularization has won out in contemporary European society, Christianity having lost the ability to compel and regulate collective behavior on the basis of its truth claims. “Religion,” he observes, “is not about to disappear from Europe but remains in the form of a strong historic trace, a significant symbolic marker, and a weak normative resource that can be enlisted for all kinds of purposes. It has, however, ceased to be an authoritative matrix capable on its own of framing political behaviors and issues” (4). Evidence proffered to support these claims includes utilizing the United States as a comparative heuristic for elucidating how religion and elite politics interact in the EU, as well as original data from a survey of MEPs ( $n = 167$ ) concerning their attitudes toward religion that was carried out between 2010–2013.

Chapter 1 examines religion relative to major theories of European integration and the EU as a polity. Foret evaluates the former in terms of neo-functionalism, inter-governmentalism, multi-level governance, and neo-institutionalism(s). Regarding the latter, he assesses the EU through the lenses of consociationalism (which endeavors to moderate political and religious tensions between groups), federalism (which focuses on allocating competencies between different levels of government), and empire (where religion potentially aids in reifying political and civilizational boundaries).

Next, Chapter 2 investigates religion’s function in the recruitment of Europe’s political elite. Three contrasting hypotheses are proposed: (1) that there exists a bias toward secular individuals; (2) that the EU remains dominated by Christian Democratic ideals and favors the like-minded; and (3) the null, namely that religion has no discernible role in the selection of EU officials.

Although Foret’s survey and the comparisons he makes need to be interpreted cautiously given its sample size and other methodological challenges (detailed in an annex), his findings suggest that, on average, MEPs are more secularized than Europe’s population as a whole, with belief in God approximately 17 percentage points lower and atheist identity approximately 10 percentage points higher among the MEPs in relation to the general population (61, Tables 2.1 and 2.2). In general, though, religious expression among MEPs reflects wider European behavioral patterns, where malleable ways of relating to faith are common. Denominational affiliation among them also embodies a strong component of identity; attesting to this, “far fewer MEPs declare that they believe in a personal God than that they are Catholics” (60). Therefore, while in the

United States' House of Representatives religiosity is openly displayed but "qualified in its actual influence," in Brussels Foret finds "secularism is celebrated, but implemented in a very flexible manner" (71–72). Overall, however, religion appears to have a minimal-to-nonexistent role in the recruitment of Europe's parliamentarians, judges, and civil servants.

Chapter 3 continues in this vein, assessing religion's relevance in the European electoral process. The author argues that religion is not a significant mobilizing factor in turning out the vote, but does function to differentiate ideological positions and signal political commitments. Nonetheless, it remains subordinate to, and intertwined with, national politics, with religious matters being raised only infrequently in the EP. Illustrating the point, even the MEP who raised questions related to religion most often (by a factor of two) between 2004–2009 only did so just over 9% of the time (106, Table 3.2).

Recognizing that religion may also function as a social network as well as a belief or identity, Chapter 4 explores the role it occupies in the political socialization of EU elites. While Foret asserts religion is capable of reinforcing pre-existing loyalties or accentuating cleavages, it is more of a placeholder for political divides than the proximate cause of them, with divisions predicated on denominational belonging not in evidence. With respect to its networking capabilities, an effect does exist — MEPs, for example, are more likely to be targeted by groups representing denominations (and nationalities) they themselves identify with (119). At the same time, "[w]hen religion acts as a source of personal inspiration, it is not with high frequency, but rather at critical junctures when a representative has to make difficult choices involving deep value judgments." And even then, what matters "is not religion as a doctrine to be complied with but the moral teaching underlying it" (116). As to the EU's ability to regulate political behavior, he observes that its pluralist norms do temper passions, with national-level politicians more willing to employ divisive religious rhetoric than their EU counterparts.

The effects of this moderating tendency are particularly evident among religious civil society organizations. Elaborating a point raised by Leustean, Foret stresses that such interest groups are today considered "normal" lobbies. This means they are expected to formulate arguments in Rawlsian fashion, translating faith-based motivations into secular language intelligible to all. As a result, while these entities (which account for under 0.7% of the various non-governmental organizations registered in Brussels [134]) "tend to monopolize arguments in terms of values" (141), they concomitantly "lose all legitimacy and all effectiveness as

soon as they set about lecturing public administrations or civil society in an authoritative or normative fashion” (152).

Chapter 5 examines religion as a policy issue at the supranational level, where its influence is mainly felt on the margins, religion acting as “one of the potential ethical sources drawn on in deliberations and definitions of the common good” or “a symbolic resource used to recode policy issues as ethical issues and to impose a political narrative depicting a conflict of values” (159). Foret’s assessment of the “culture war” paradigm relative to the EU is thus especially intriguing. While acknowledging that in the United States political discourse tends to be more prophetic than in the EU, he argues that in both cases religion takes a back seat to material interests when it comes to policy decisions. In absolute terms, however, “[r]eligion probably has less importance in American politics than is commonly thought in Europe, but it has even less importance in European politics than is thought (and deplored) in America” (196).

Chapter 6, in turn, considers religion as a political resource, one that remains capable of arousing strong emotions despite having lost the ability to create cleavages on its own. Foret reminds us of this by recalling the fierce — but utterly symbolic — debates over whether a reference to God or Europe’s Christian heritage belonged in the preamble and/or statement of values of the failed 2004 constitution treaty. (This debate later culminated in the uneasy compromise of the Treaty of Lisbon.) Assessed as well is the contested meaning (and perhaps willful ambiguity) associated with EU symbols such as its flag, which some believe evokes Marian imagery.

What emerges is that while the demands of liberalism do not allow for excluding religion from politics, they simultaneously circumscribe the scope of the claims that can legitimately be made regarding it in European institutional settings. For example, when Spain (a member of the Eurozone) chose to issue coins depicting the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, it justified doing so not on the grounds of being a traditionally Catholic country, but by stressing the edifice’s architectural merits (212). Consequently, with religious tensions greatly curtailed at the institutional level, conflicts over faith now primarily manifest in the public sphere, propagated by the media. In this marketplace of opinions, Foret contends, religion must accept that it may be profaned and misinterpreted, or else demand respect for itself under the rubric of an inclusive pluralism (220). The point is that both responses conform to the precepts of liberalism.

However, the author also suggests that there are limits to the extent to which liberal ideals can function as the bedrock on which the EU is

built. While he over-reaches in terming the debate over Muslim veiling practices “an intra-liberal conflict rather than a conflict pitting religious values against European liberal values” (218–219), this statement nevertheless encapsulates the problematic nature of attempts to define the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in multicultural societies.

Finally, Chapter 7 assesses religion’s impact on how the EU is perceived by the outside world, as well as how it operates beyond its borders. Foret explains that the EU is not usually assigned an overtly Christian identity by external actors, though this does not necessarily hold for its constituent states or the continent as a whole. He also avers that there is a spatial component to how faith and its trappings are dealt with, so although “religion may be handled with pragmatism and flexibility away from home” (241), it becomes more politically salient and sensitive the closer one gets to Europe’s heartland. This is because religious considerations underscore the inherent conflict between culturally based and universalist visions of Europe, which hinge on whether identity and belonging are defined primarily in retrospective or prospective terms (as “shared past” or “sharing values”). These tensions are particularly evident in debates over the membership aspirations of Turkey, a large and socially conservative Muslim country that due to its size and geographic positioning raises civilizational anxieties in ways that Muslim-majority Albania or Kosovo do not.

In conclusion, Foret believes religion has a (muted) role to play in the EU, provided it does not challenge the bounds of secular propriety. Indeed, he suggests “leaving room for religion in the public space while acknowledging its confinement to culture, may be the best way for the EU to reflect the domestic development of European societies and to project an attractive model worldwide” (285).

To recapitulate, these two excellent works contribute meaningfully to the literature on the place of faith-based communities and identities in the evolving supranational project that is the EU (though what can be written on this topic is far from exhausted, either in a historical or contemporary sense). But like almost all broad-ranging accounts, they are not without certain weaknesses. Leustean’s volume, for example, at times buries the reader in a veritable forest of acronyms and minutiae, making it difficult to retain the thread of the argument. Meanwhile, Foret arguably overemphasizes his survey results while devoting insufficient attention to other issues, among them the relevance of the Protestant-Catholic divide in European politics (for recent research on this topic, see: *Religion and the Struggle for European Union: Confessional Culture and the Limits*

*of Integration*). However, the contributions of their research far outweigh these trifling concerns.

The convoluted question of what role religion should occupy in European politics is a foundational one for both authors, at its core reflecting fundamental disagreements over what constitutes the ontological basis for Europe's integration. Taken to the extreme, an EU based on the embrace of progressive liberal values knows no geographic or civilizational boundaries, only ideational ones. Conversely, an EU predicated on common perceptions of historical legacies and cultural traits may have already expanded beyond what was advisable according to this metric. Which interpretation predominates going forward will determine the future significance, or lack thereof, of sacred beliefs and those that hold them in this context.

Religion in Europe is no longer, and has not been for quite some time, pre-political; it is now posterior and peripheral, rather than anterior and intrinsic, to matters of governance. Still, Christianity in all its myriad manifestations remains tightly woven into the European social imaginary, forming a deep symbolic reservoir. We must be mindful, therefore, of succumbing to teleological prejudices concerning the ultimate relevance of faith in the EU, even if today it is accorded only a token role when it comes to agenda-setting around the political table.

As British voters dramatically demonstrated in June 2016, European integration is not incapable of being unmade. Similarly, the continuing diminution of religion's role in European politics is not a foregone conclusion; while no one expects the reemergence of a hegemonic Christianity, there remain many ways in which it may still exert influence. One of these is as a foil to the growing demographic, if not yet political, prominence of Islam. Another is as a constitutive element of the populism and nativism currently sweeping Europe. A third is as a euroskeptical wedge; the countries that joined the EU in the enlargements of 2004, 2007, and 2013 are overall more socially conservative than those of Western Europe, allowing leaders in places like Hungary and Poland to bolster their nationalist credentials by denouncing not only the perceived "democratic deficits" of the EU (frequently depicted as an elitist organization controlled by technocrats insulated from electoral pressures), but also its alleged antipathy to traditional Christian values. However, in the final analysis what emerges from the work of Leustean and Foret is the realization that religion has been, and remains, a significant reference point for European integration efforts, regardless of whether what is being advocated is its presence or absence.