The Relation of Religion and Politics in the European Union.¹

Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War there has been a revival of interest among scholar community in ideational factors and their role in International Relations. In that context culture in general and religion in particular became the objects of thorough analysis by political scientists. This paper begins with a general reference to the latest developments in International Relations and the role of cultural factors in shaping the dynamics of interactions that take place between numerous actors in international politics. Secondly, a recount of the debate on separation of politics and religion among scholars, commentators and practitioners of politics in European Union is offered. Secular and religious strands in the history of European Integration are identified. Thirdly, it is claimed that religious pluralism is equally important as the processes of secularization to understand the crisis of identity among Europeans especially when contrasted with institutionalised Islam present in Europe. In conclusion it is asserted that European “exceptionalism” will most probably diminish as an inevitable process due to numerous reasons: reaction to the rise of the role cultures/religions in IR, EU migrant communities, further enlargements and most importantly European embedded liberalism and pluralism.

¹ (This paper was presented during the conference: "Europe, Migration and Islam", 18-19 April 2012. Co-organized by Department of Government and International Studies. It is a working version that has never been published).
Introduction

The relation of Religion and politics in the European Union has been commonly seen through the lens of Secularism - the idea that religion and politics, church and state should be kept apart. Though not an institution that belongs with EU architecture, The European Court of Human Rights has on numerous occasions endorsed this principle. In often quoted case of Refah Partisi (the Welfare Party) and Others v. Turkey, the court has reiterated that it “has frequently emphasised the State’s role as the neutral and impartial organiser of the exercise of various religions, faiths and beliefs, and stated that this role is conducive to public order, religious harmony and tolerance in a democratic society. It also considers that the State’s duty of neutrality and impartiality is incompatible with any power on the State’s part to assess the legitimacy of religious beliefs and that it requires the State to ensure mutual tolerance between opposing groups”.

As smooth as it sounds practice seems to divert from declaratory statements of such kind. Recent developments in many European societies put this stance under pressure. Not surprisingly Europe has a particularly difficult time dealing with this fact. On the one hand old European Christian churches have re-mobilized. On the other, the introduction of Islam through immigration has caught many Europeans off-guard, which has given rise to a number of tensions, ranging from the so-called ‘veil affair’ in France, through the discussion of the role of Christianity in writing up a draft for the new European constitution, to the Danish Muhammad cartoon controversy.

International Relations and culture: the confusion of convergence

As Aristotle noted almost two and half thousand years ago ‘a man is a political animal’. In other words people are creatures that tend to live in groups (communities) and as such are exposed to interaction. As a general rule this interaction produces set of beliefs, practises and norms referring to what is acceptable behaviour within the community and how the “bad apples” should be punished. Consequently culture as an awareness based on common language, ethnicity, history, religion and landscape is born which forms the backbones of every society.

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The end of the cold war saw a revival of culture significance. Fuelled by the processes of globalization and technological development Western culture appeared to be internationally overwhelming. Phenomenon so well observed by Francis Fukuyama in his “The End of History and the Last Man” that emphasised the universalization of Western liberal democracy (Westernization/Americanization). Yet, the new geopolitical landscape, released the ‘dark forces’ of uncontrollable passions, which gave its notorious fruits in the Balkans. Ethnic, religious and linguistic differences re-emerged with unseen strength.

As a counterforce to the spread of popular culture some societies turned back to their cultural roots. Fundamentalism (reaching out to the very fundamentals of particular cultures) appeared to be a viable response of many societies particularly in the Middle East to western style modernization.3

The significance of culture in international relations following the Cold War is reflected by the recognition of Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the clash of civilizations. Huntington, as we remember, claims that “the next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations”.4 He gives six basic causes for such developments among which religion plays an essential role. It is religion as one of the underlying characteristics of civilizational divergence that is not only real but basic, likely to withstand and least susceptible to any changes. It is religion that often moves to fill up the vacuum created by economic modernization on its path to weakening local and nation-state identities. It is finally religion that discriminates sharply and exclusively among people.

Although contested by many, the thesis of the clash of civilizations, does point to undeniable link between the new globalization processes and cultural revivalism.5 In this respect a revival of religions has been one of the most important manifestations of cultural and social

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3 As Peter Demant notices the term “fundamentalism” in case of Islam is somewhat imprecise to say the least. As such it derives from American Protestants active around a century ago. In popular parlance another term “Islamic Fundamentalism” is often used, against the formal logics. A range of other descriptors of the phenomenon at hand is also offered in the literature: “political Islam”, “Islamic revivalism”, “radical Islam”, “militant Islam” or simply “Islamism”. See more: Peter R. Demant, Islam vs. Islamism. The Dilemma of the Muslim World (Westport: Praeger, 2006), p. 89-90.


5 There are many critiques of Huntington and his ideas especially among Arabic world influenced scholars. Most of the criticism in such cases revolves especially around Huntington’s lack of objectivism and turning the blind eye to European involvement in the Middle-East in the 11th-13th centuries. For this and other objections refer to: Ali A. Mazuri, Islam. Between Globalization and Counterterrorism (Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc.), p. 69-79.
insecurity, whereby Muslim religious fundamentalism/Islamism appears to be the most significant form of resistance that culminated in attacks on World Trade Centre in New York and Pentagon back in 2001. Why Islamism we might ask then? Why is the case that there seems to be merit in Huntington thesis? Consequently, what relevance does it have to our topic?

Rich literatures on Islam and its susceptibility to fundamentalization seems to be well rounded up by Peter Demant, who gives three simple reasons, or clusters of reasons in an attempt to define the roots of the phenomenon of Islamism. Firstly, Anti-Westernism that derives from the Islam’s history of conflict with the Christian West. In this respect, anti-westernism appears to be a vehicle driving the spread of Islamism, otherwise too specific to appeal to more than just a minority of Muslims. Moreover, theological proximity of Islam with Christianity and Judaism produces fiercer competition, especially with Christianity since Islam came into being near Christian centres and had throughout the history more hostile encounters with it than with any other religion. Secondly, militancy of the Islamic Utopia, which itself is based on conception of ideal justice, stability, and security on earth, and paradise after the day of Judgement (needless to say far from reality). Consequently earthly deprivations give justified rise to purifying actions (religious revolutions) against the rulers, who, it is important to note, are only mere administrators of otherwise heavenly order. Political leaders are therefore legitimised only as far as they are perceived to be fulfilling the tasks given by God and making their decisions according to his law. At the same time the shrinking of the world together with technological advancements have put Western culture as obviously easy target for fair game and enabled the plausible eradication of Islam ‘impurities’ at least in the eyes of Islamists. Thirdly, Islam’s universalism, that rests on different foundations from traditional common identifiers such as national, cultural, local or ethnic. For Islamists, as Demant observes, Islam appears to be a profoundly obligating message. “…a global call that radically negates and condemns to disappearance all competing ideologies, including the nation-state and the international system ‘made in the West’”. What this amounts to is more probable violent expression of Islam and in consequence

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7 Peter R. Demant, Islam vs. Islamism… op. cit., p. 198.
emergence of Islamism. Its preconditions in this sense are understood to be: a) a religion with strong political and social message, with background of resistance to outsiders, b) a prolonged demographic, social, and cultural crisis, c) successive defeats of rival emancipation projects, and d) alienated social groups who find in the polarization of their religion new dispensation.8

**European Union as a Secular Concept**

Are you a Christian? Yes! Do you believe in Jesus Christ? No! Do you practice religion? No! Are you religious? Yes! These seemingly self-contradictory answers make perfect sense for many EU citizens. On the one hand EU is a secular institution based on secular foundations.9 With certain exceptions EU law does not refer to religion.10 Secularization has long been considered a trademark of European integration processes. The Eurobarometer Poll of 2005 reveals the scale of the phenomena. According to the Poll 52 per cent of EU citizens believe there is God (25 EU members). 27 per cent believe there is some sort of spirit or life force. As many as 18 per cent don’t believe there is any sort of spirit, God or life force.11 These averages mask profound differences within EU. In case of Malta the numbers are strikingly different with 95 per cent believing in God. On the other hand in case of Estonia only 16 per cent believe there is God and as many as 54 per cent believe that there is some sort of spirit or life force.12

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10 Ibidem.


12 Because of the profoundly secular character of European integration process there is a considerable lack of quantifiable data on religious identity in EU. The above mentioned special Eurobarometer 225 in fact only briefly covered religious aspects. It was designed to survey European citizens on ethical issues in science. Hence the title of the survey: “Social Values, Science and Technology”.

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Further discussion revolves around two major questions: what is secularization in case of EU? What are the arguments for secularization in general? The first question naturally bids for the definition of the term. Secularization is commonly understood as a process by which religious institutions, beliefs, and practices are systematically challenged and consequently substituted for by those of reason and science.\textsuperscript{13} Let us remember that the beginnings of European Integration were supervised by technocrats such as Jean Monnet or Robert Schuman who envisaged a gradual process of integration characterized by functional approach.\textsuperscript{14}

According to José Casanova in context of Europe as well as more universally there are three distinct components of the processes of secularization.\textsuperscript{15} First, there is the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies. As such it is most often applied by academics. Often understood as a consequence of modernization and in fact questioned with the example of USA. Questioned since modernization processes in the USA have not rendered religion less relevant in American politics. In fact as examples form the recent history show religion plays an increasingly important part in American politics. One representative poll carried out by Rasmussen Reports back in 2005 revealed that as many as 63 per cent of Americans believe the Bible is literally true and the Word of God.\textsuperscript{16} When broken down into different demographics, the poll showed 77 per cent of Republicans believe in the literal truth of the Bible as do 59 per cent of Democrats. Another poll carried out three years later in 2008 showed that 44 per cent of America’s adults attend Christian church services at least twice a month, and 92 per cent of these regular churchgoers believe the God of the Bible is the one true God.\textsuperscript{17}

EU is strikingly different in that respect. Loek Halman, Inge Sieben and Marga van Zundert in their Atlas of European Values of 2011 have observed that the percentage of people who

\textsuperscript{13} Britannica Academic Edition: \url{http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/387301/modernization/12026/Secularization-and-rationalization}

\textsuperscript{14} The first truly European Integration theoretical approach termed neo-functionalism associated with Ernst Bernard Haas, posited the role of non-state actors and the importance of ‘spill-over’ phenomena. See more at: Ben Rosamond, \textit{Theories of European Integration} (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000), p. 50-73.


visit religious services regularly is quite low. Those who attend church services at least once a month constitute only 22 per cent in terms of EU population.\(^\text{18}\) In fact it is actually quite difficult to collect reliable data on church attendance in EU, which by itself might serve as a kind of “litmus test”. Most renown think tanks and some universities such as Georgetown University’s Center for the Study of Global Christianity or The Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan carry out their surveys not exclusively on religion but rather on wide spectrum of values whereby religion plays only one part.\(^\text{19}\) The general picture that emerges from these and some other surveys is that there is a steady and declining trend in church attendance all over EU. According to Catholicism@suite101 it is the consequence of the World War II that gave Europeans the opportunity to challenge traditional philosophical and religious beliefs. Accordingly, European politics are devoid of religion. Liberalism in social and political life together with economic advancement of many European societies have rendered the Pope and the Church “out of touch” with the masses.\(^\text{20}\) Steve Bruce in his book under a very telling title “God is Dead” elaborates extensively on the paradigm of secularization.\(^\text{21}\) He convincingly analyses three distinctive yet interrelated pathways that brought western societies to accept the state of secularism. First, he revisits the connection between monotheism, rationality, science and technological consciousness, claiming (after Max Weber and Peter Berger) that from the outset monotheism encourages rationality. Second path takes him from the protestant reformation through protestant ethic (Max Weber), industrial capitalism and economic growth down to social differentiation and structural differentiation. The former (social differentiation) breeds diversity and consequently relativism. The latter brings egalitarianism and compartmentalization and privatization of societies. Finally, The third path that originates with the protestant reformation is supposed to


\(^{19}\) One of the most focused in that respect is The Pew Forum on Religion and Public life yet it has to be notices that although it does cover the whole world it mainly targets US public life. See more at: http://www.pewforum.org/Pew-Forum/About-the-Pew-Forum.aspx. Also World Values Survey at: http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/.


\(^{21}\) God is Dead. Secularization in the West (Malden: Black well Publishing, 2002), p. 5-44.
create fertile ground for individualism, propensity to schism and literacy and voluntary association.

That brings us to the second point made by Casanova: that one can clearly observe privatization of religion. This privatization is framed as a precondition for modern liberal democratic politics. To say that “religion is a private affair” is not only to refer to the general distinction between public and private spheres of citizens lives. It is essentially to refer to the freedom of conscience understood as the first of all freedoms. In this sense, it is chronologically prior to all other freedoms that lie at the foundation of every liberal modern state and therefore precondition it.22 Since modern liberalism is based on individualism it logically follows that there can be no modernity without institutionalized private sphere, free from governmental and ecclesiastical encroachments, that culminates in the very essence of “the right to privacy” paradigm. Following this line of argumentation, one might be prompted to ask: after all what good is the Enlightenment-based, revolutionary achieved “the right to privacy” if it does not embrace the most inner and intimate sphere of human life – the realm of thoughts and emotions?

Casanova’s third understanding of secularization is depicted as the differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy or science) in which case we can observe ‘emancipation’ from religious institutions and norms. In that respect religion was progressively forced to withdraw from both the modern secular state and modern capitalist economy.23 Accordingly, this phenomenon forms the very core of modern theories of secularization. A phenomenon by which, modern science, capitalist markets and modern state bureaucracies continue to function “as if” God would not exist.

Interestingly, Casanova himself observes that it is difficult to find a compelling reason, on either democratic or liberal grounds, to banish in principle religion from the public democratic sphere. Consequently “Curtailing the “free exercise of religion” per se must lead to curtailing the free exercise of the civil and political rights of religious citizens and will ultimately infringe on the vitality of a democratic civil society”.24


23 Ibidem, p. 40.

Conversely, Michael Walzer offers an account of possible reasons behind separation between politics and religion. First, he notes separation requires a sharp institutional divide. That is to say the state must poses an absolute monopoly on coercive power. Since religions are exclusive in their character and messianic in their approach to others such divide seems to be a guarantee of social stability and the rule of law (civil law). This also requires neutrality of the state in its relations with other religious as well as non-religious groups. Consequently no favouring of any church is admissible or discrimination against it. As a matter of fact, EU as a whole might be understood as secular in this respect but member states are in most cases far from that.

Second, separation requires that the public ceremonies and celebrations of the state are distinct from those of any religious group. They have to be consequently open for political interpretation. Political communities and institutions therefore should not be an object of divine worship. Since they are constructed by men and are supposed to serve the needs of its citizens they should be open to questioning, criticism and reconstruction, a point impossible under any religion. Here again, the official communication from UE is always neutral and full of political and religious correctness, sometimes to the extreme of being “inhuman” as much as it is devoid of any human emotions – “bureaucratic Euro-jargon”. EU member states on the other hand present a different picture with especially right-wing parties in Austria, Netherlands, France or Italy. In reality domestic political discourses in many EU countries are full of religious sentiments often with reference to immigration policies. There is, at least in certain circles, a prevailing feeling of “Brussels disease” that spreads through the deepening of integration and erodes national and regional identities. In that sense religious pluralism combined with multiculturalism that characterize EU integration project, at least at its latest stages, are seen as a curse rather than a blessing.

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26 Out of 27 member states, five have official state religion (Denmark, Greece, Malta, Cyprus and England).

Third, separation means an acceptance of an open, pragmatic, inconclusive and tolerant character of arguments, positions and alliances on the political scene. The language of religion as well as its approach is absolutist and exclusive in which case it offers no room for compromise or acceptance of loss. In other words the worlds of politics and religion are contradictory. In that sense secularization, to be guaranteed, would have to be established within/by law and enforced by it. Given the arguments presented above such case is inconceivable as again that would undermine the most rudimentary of all freedoms – the freedom of expression. Here not only EU as a gathering of states but the states themselves are based on liberal foundations and as a rule are not in a position to even try to curb fundamental freedoms on any grounds, especially in times of peace.

As for EU one should acknowledge in this context that European Parliament houses a cross-party European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics (EPPSP). Its main objectives include promoting and defending of: a) the secular nature and the neutrality of the EU institutions, b) the strict separation of church and state, and c) equal treatment of all citizens, whether of religious or secular life stance. In practice as, members of European Humanist Federation ascertain “the voices of the religious (or equally of the non-religious) have no privileged status and; that arguments based simply on religious doctrine – rather than on considerations comprehensible by the whole community – carry no weight”.  

**Another side of the same coin – religious pluralism**

But Secularism/secularization is not the only major phenomenon that features on the European social agenda. In this respect attention must be turned to religious pluralism and its relationship with “European public life”. One might actually say that pluralism is the other side of the same coin. To clarify this concept let us read another excerpt of the European Court of Human Rights ruling. “It reiterates that, as protected by Article 9, freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the foundations of a “democratic society” within

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the meaning of the Convention […] Moreover, in democratic societies, in which several religions coexist within one and the same population, it may be necessary to place restrictions on this freedom in order to reconcile the interests of the various groups and ensure that everyone’s beliefs are respected”.  

What this means in practice is that not only public life is supposed to be free of religious elements but also that states, under some circumstances, might be right to ‘suspend’ religious freedoms of their citizens for the sake of “social harmony”. To stretch this analogy it is to be noticed that the other side of the coin seems to be much heavier. It does not only derogate religion from individual official/public lives. It actually does attempt to denigrate it to some extent form their private lives, in a seemingly benign manner. As much as it does not have to be a major issue for many Christians, especially those born and raised in Europe, it pertains to be one of the most serious challenges for many Muslims that live in EU. For obvious reasons Islam differs in its scope from Christianity. To cite after Abdelmajid Charfî (a renowned Islamic thinker and author) unlike Christianity “Islam does not recognize the distinction between the sacred and the profane, between the spiritual and the temporal. It is both din (religion) and dawla (state) without distinction”.

Put similarly by Yadh Ben Achor (Tunisian lawyer and an expert on public law and Islamic political theory) “Islam is a religion of the two cities. It determines a constitutionality in which there is no rift between the political and the religious. It unifies norms and institutions. The law is embodiment of the faith. The state directs prayers and protects religion, as well as administrating secular society”.

The lack of idea of separation between state and religion is further reflected even in the language. As Bernard Lewis (British-American historian, scholar in Oriental studies) observes “The distinction between church and state, so deeply rooted in Christianity, did not exist in Islam, and in classical Arabic and other languages drawing their intellectual and political vocabulary from classical Arabic, there are no pairs of words reflecting the


distinction between the spiritual and the temporal, the lay and the ecclesiastic, the religious and the secular”.  

This prompt us to address the fundamental conundrum of EU – religion nexus. On the one hand secularization and religious pluralism lead to ideational crisis for many Europeans. On the other hand, the increasing numbers of immigrants, many of them of Muslims, bring completely different attitude towards religion-state relationship challenging not only European secular foundations but also further confuse European identities. The latter deserves further elaboration here. The crisis of European identity can be seen through Polish psychologist Zygmunt Baumann paradigm of “liquid modernity”.  

In Baumann’s understanding, it is an existential dilemma that stems from the rise of liquid capital and consequently liquid labour as furnished by the quest for production and profits. This in turn erodes stability and causes alienation for individuals.  

Mentioned earlier in this volume and perfectly relevant to the problem at hand is the concept of “risk societies” by Ulrich Beck, a German sociologist. European societies in general do not have stable ideational structures. Structures that would allow an individual to build a “lasting identity”.  

When The Convention on the Future of Europe was preparing the draft constitution for the European Union, this problem was best epitomized by the discussion around the lack of reference to God and Christian heritage of Europeans in its text.  

To cut the long story short, the distinction between sacrum and profanum and consequent processes of secularization and religious pluralism have brought profound crisis to European identity. As Zachary Calo argues “European secularization might thus be understood as the negation of inherited

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cultural and moral identity. Secular Europe denies its history, particularly its religious history and has thus become a civilization ‘that does not understand itself’.

Previous part started with questions: about Christianity and religiosity among Europeans. In light of what has been just said let us imagine that we substitute those questions with “Europeannes” in the context of European integration. It is a “ventured guess” of the author that the possible answers might look something like that: Are you European citizen? Yes! Do you believe in European Union? No! Do you believe that being European entails a set of special qualities that distinguish Europeans among other cultures/civilizations? No! Do you feel strongly about European values? Yes!

Being Muslim in Europe does not have to automatically bring any major problems. Whether immigrants or born in France, UK or Germany, Muslims are essentially accepted by Europeans (that is to say non-Muslims) as long as they are seen as individuals who distance themselves from their institutionalized religion. The major problem therefore lies with the narrative that frames the discourse about “Europeaness”- Islamic nexus in terms of zero-sum-game of cultural exclusiveness. A social construct that creates a certain alienated group out of Muslim population and ascribe them features that are supposedly not compatible with European secular values.

Much of this “disillusionment” with the project of multiculturalism is also cased by peculiarly difficult economic situation in EU. It is an established regularity that every time great projects meet some difficulties and inevitably stumble, scapegoats are looked for and have to pay the price. Let us be honest about the economic predicament in most European states. Their challenging economic situation (financial crisis, ageing problem, crisis of governability) leave not much choice but to inject European societies with much “fresher” non-European blood, be it of Middle East or African origin. At the same time European

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41 Point further elaborated by other authors of this volume.
Integration project is increasingly seen in London, Berlin or Madrid with profound suspicion that leads many citizens that happen to find themselves on the receiving end as questioning the very foundations and future of EU.

The stage is therefore prepared for a major turn around. Is religion and in particular Christianity a viable cure? Let us remember that European integration project is based on essentially Christian values and the involvement of religious lobbies is increasingly more than just noticeable.

**European Union as a Religious Concept**

As early or late as in 1914 there emerged an idea of peaceful Europe based on unity during the pontificate of Benedict XV. The interwar period saw active Papal diplomacy towards European order of peace founded on the primacy of law and moral values. It was Pope Pius XII who put forward the concept of Europe’s ‘Christian vocation’ that way adopting European federalist programme. Such ideas became foundations for new Christian Democratic parties. During the Cold War Vatican strongly supported the idea of European Integration as means of combating communism in Europe, creating space for religious freedom, seeking an alternative way to the logic of the Cold War and nuclearization of politics, finally laying grounds for political pluralism and affirmation of human rights.

The founding fathers of European Integration such as Alcide De Gasperi, Konrad Adenauer or Robert Shuman were not only Catholics themselves but leaders of respective national political parties commonly termed as Christian Democratic. As Linda Rosso asserts, European Christian Democratic parties supported the integration of Western Europe as a means of rebuilding the economies of their countries in the aftermath of the second World War. As such their objectives ranged from ensuring more stable political systems and

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overcoming nationalism. Similarly to Vatican European Christian democrats envisaged the role of European integration as kind of panacea against communism as well as the perils of modern lifestyles. Their influence in European politics at the beginning of the 50s was indeed outstanding. By that time the absolute majority of the MPs of the six founding members of the EEC were Christian Democrats. They were also the largest single group in the assembly of the ECSC.\(^{46}\) In sum Christian European Europeanism, being grounded on interwar idealism supported a view that Western Europe essentially shared common Christian values, which had to be protected and emphasised.

During Jacques Delores tenure as the head of Commission (January 1985-December 1994) first tangible efforts were made to establish regular links between European Commission and religious and humanist groups. This process culminated with the formal establishment of the ‘Sole for Europe’ initiative in 1994 providing funds for ecumenical or inter-religious seminars for the elaboration on the meaning of European Integration.\(^{47}\) Since then religious groups have reaffirmed their position in Brussels and are able to actively lobby EU institutions regarding matters of their concern. That is to say, repeating after Carolyn Warner, “the Catholic Church is, in addition to being a religion, an interest group”.\(^{48}\)

With the Lisbon Treaty in effect the dialogue with the churches and non-confessional bodies is no longer discretionary but Treaty-bound. Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty provides for an open, transparent and regular dialogue between the Union and churches and religious associations or communities.\(^{49}\) In effect religious organizations enjoy a privileged access to European Commission through regular meetings and consultations that allow them considerable possibilities to influence agenda setting phase of the decision making process in EU, whereby European Commission is one of the key players.\(^{50}\) The latest meeting of this kind took place with High Religious Leaders on 30 May 2011 in Brussels\(^{51}\) and was devoted

\(^{46}\) Ibidem, p. 94.


\(^{49}\) Article 17, Lisbon Treaty, par. 3.

\(^{50}\) See more at: http://ec.europa.eu/bepa/activities/outreach-team/dialogue/index_en.htm
to "A partnership for democracy and shared prosperity: a common willingness to promote
democratic rights and liberties". Commenting on that European Parliament President Jerzy
Buzek stated:

“Religions represent the soul of our societies and are of paramount importance for the social
fabric. Communities in the EU have strong links of fellowship with their brothers and sisters
on the other side of the Mediterranean. All of these bonds can be used to cooperate for the
same goals. EU neighbourhood policy must include cooperation on the ground with religious
groups on issues ranging from education and health to rebuilding post-conflict societies
through peace and reconciliation”.

Another example sees Churches – EU Commission Dialog seminar on Freedom of Religion:
A Fundamental Right in a Rapidly Changing World held on 30 March this year (2012). This
full-day Seminar dedicated to on Freedom of Religion was subdivided into three sections:
Session 1: Freedom of Religion in the context established by the Treaty of Lisbon; Session 2:
Current Challenges for Freedom of Religion in the EU; and Session 3: Religious Minorities
outside the EU: The struggle to safeguard Common Rights and Common Citizenship.

Exit of European Exceptionalism?

Following the arguments of rational choice theorists one might agree that growing
religious pluralism, partly being caused also by secular trends that tend to equalise religious
views stemming from different denominations, allows religious needs of increasingly diverse

51 As of 16 March 2012. It was organized by BEPA – Bureau of European Policy Advisers (within European
Commission). It is an institution that connects Commission Policy makers with those who can contribute to the
development of policies: think tanks, academia, civil society, churches and communities of conviction. See

52 See more at:
=EN&guiLanguage=en accessed 16 March, 2012. It was co-organized by Commission of the Bishops
Conferences of the European Community that has its permanent secretariat in Brussels. See more at:

53 Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/bepa/pdf/conferences/buzek_speech-hlrm_30may11.pdf accessed 16 March
2012.

accessed 12 April 2012.
populations of Europe to be more adequately met. Consequently greater religious vitality tends to be encouraged rather than discouraged.  

On the other hand as José Casanova asserts on empirical grounds there are good reasons why we should expect religion and morality to remain and even to become ever more contentious public issues in democratic politics. Given such trends as increasing globalization, transnational migrations, increasing multiculturalism, the biogenetic revolution, and the persistence of blatant gender discrimination, the number of contentious public religious issues is likely to grow rather than diminish.

Finally, growing numbers of Muslim population in Europe, recent inclusion of deeply, at least by European Standards, religious countries such as Poland or Romania and Cyprus, prospective enlargements of EU to the south and the role of international political terrorism, often based on religious fundamentalism, are likely to elevate the role of religion in the life of European societies, consequently its role in European Politics. As Timothy Byrnes and Peter Katzenstein claim “European Enlargement will feed rather than undermine the importance of religion in the EU’ as transnational religious communities in the European periphery are reintroducing religion into the centre of Europe”.

On the other hand, as Peter Berger pointed out eastward expansion of EU in particular is more likely to have a secularizing impact on Europe’s east than desecularizing impact on its west. This does hold to some extent in case for example of the author’s own country. European exceptionalism, that is characterised by high level of modernity and secularism at the same time will therefore most likely diminish and so Believing Without Belonging -

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59 According to Catholic Church in Poland statistics around 90% of population are Catholics, yet only around half of them attend church services on a regular basis. Allegedly large numbers of priests live in stable relationships with women. Parents can chose Ethics instead of Religious Education at schools. The rate of divorces is on the rise and continuous discussions are held nationwide about abortion and euthanasia.
Belonging Without Believing as coined by Grace Davie to describe faith related phenomena in Britain after 1945, will no longer be feasible to the extent practised before in EU.  

Instead of conclusion

Religion seems to be re-entering European Political discourse and play an increasingly important role in the lives of European societies. The exceptional character of EU politics is therefore likely to mutate and adapt to new realities where religion is present more than ever before in the history of EU, yet the fundamental principle of equidistance of UE institutions to all religious denominations is maintained with EU citizens possibly being more aware of the role of the religion in their lives. It is the contention of the author of this paper that religion is likely to become more present in a negative sense as platform of differentiation, symbolic identity to be protected from outside influence, rather than present in positive sense as grounds for fostering true religious and spiritual life of Europeans.

As for Muslims, their population is on the rise in many European states. Accordingly suspicions of Muslim populations have also risen. Right-wing political parties have been stirring up already hot debates about faith schools or religious presence in schools and workplaces. European governments have been trying to accommodate these trends by encouraging the development of national forms of Islam. The question however emerges, given what was said about European identity crisis caused by the processes of secularization and religious pluralism as well as the characteristics of Islam and its propensity towards Islamism, can European Union remain secular in its character without the risk of being relegated to the “dustbin of history”? What viable tools might Western Europeans (once referred to as Christians) have in their confrontation/relationship(?) with institutionalised Islam when operating from the premises of secular stance when their Muslim interlocutors essentially do live according to religious guidance covering most if not all aspects of their private as well as public lives?

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