François Foret, *Religion and Politics in the European Union. The Secular Canopy*  

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François Foret set himself a daunting task of writing a comprehensive monograph on the complex relationship between religion and politics in the context of European integration. Let us bluntly start this review by outright acknowledging that in spite of the breadth of the topic and the huge amount of time needed for this kind of research, Professor Foret was successful in his endeavour. The book *Religion and Politics in the European Union* is a fine statement of his scholarship, a book surprisingly readable even for those who are not entirely familiar with the EU or with the politics of religion. The book’s substantive merits are further increased by the concise structure of the book and the logical division of chapters and subchapters. The reader will also certainly appreciate the introduction at the beginning of each chapter which gives a brief summary of the state of the art.

Foret’s starting point is the fundamental premise that politics and religion are two fellow travellers throughout the history of the West and that the efforts to suppress religion or to create impermeable borders between the two ‘charismatic domains’ are doomed to fail. This is not to say that he is a simple critic of the secularisation thesis. For him, on the one hand, religion is no more capable of providing a unified symbolic system for European societies, but, on the other, it still features prominently in defining the borders of European identity and in reinforcing political loyalties. In his book, Foret convincingly shows why religion is still relevant but, simultaneously, why we should treat the ever more popular notion of post-secularism with much caution, in particular in the European context.

Foret shows his understanding of the broader landscape of both European studies as well as comparative politics of religion. The confirmation of the former is the brief but precise overview of integration theories (where, alas, social constructivism is strangely missing). The chapter leads to the unfortunate, but inescapable conclusion that all of these theories have shamefully neglected religion even though many would have a lot to say about religious influences on the integration process if only they cared.

The testament to the latter are the frequent comparisons with the religious-political nexus in the United States. Against the backdrop of, for instance, the importance of religion in the choice of judges as well as political leaders in the United States, the high irrelevance of religious issues in the EU and the low mobilising power...
of religion in national and EU-wide elections become even more pertinent. Foret’s focus on French authors brings additional added value since the empirical contrast of the European situation against the American one is complemented by the comparison of the Anglo-Saxon and French academic literatures on the topic.

This quasi-Schmittian argument about the intrinsic similarity of religion and politics results in an academically engaging paradox. The European Union can undoubtedly be described as the ultimate champion of secularisation or perhaps even as the pinnacle of the Enlightenment-induced development of European politics away from religious involvement. And yet it is mainly Christian Democratic policy-makers who stood at the roots of the integration process and who saw the unification of Europe as the embodiment of their religious-political ideals. This paradox gives rise to fruitful tensions throughout the book, both on the level of theoretical discussions and on the level of empirical data. For instance, Foret’s survey of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) shows that they are wary as far as the public role of religion in the EU is concerned, but that many of them are also convinced that religion is more important in EU institutions than in domestic politics of their own countries (p. 117).

As interesting as the general argument is, the results of the empirical analysis are often even more illuminating. For instance, the discussion of the limited salience of religion is complemented by the fascinating insight that religion plays a relatively important role in the external relations of the EU, in particular vis-à-vis the countries in the EU’s vicinity. Similarly, the discussion about the ‘culturalisation’ of religion is extremely interesting. Not only is religion re-absorbed by the (pop)cultural mainstream in the European public sphere(s), but religion is even, on a higher level, increasingly subsumed under the heading ‘culture’ in official EU documents and policies. This opens up the space for further research on the strategies of ‘domestication’ of religion: since its suppression and reduction to the private sphere has proved to be unsuccessful, culturalisation may be just another instalment in the series of attempts of modern societies to cope with religion, to appropriate it in a way that is still generally accessible to their publics.

The empirical side of the study is, nevertheless, simultaneously its strength and its weakness. The book mainly relies on the results of the RelEP1 survey, which explored the attitudes of MEPs towards religion. Many findings of the research are quite original and, at times, surprising (see the Annex of the book). However, the strong reliance on the survey also means that in institutional terms, the monograph as a whole is almost exclusively focussed on the European Parliament. The reader will find very little on the role of religion in the other EU institutions, most importantly the European Commission and the Council. Having read the introduction, one might expect that religion will also be discussed in the context of the European Court of Justice, but unfortunately, the analysis of this institution is extremely brief. The focus on the European Parliament is thus a somewhat limiting factor, even though we do acknowledge that the European Parliament is in many ways the most representative of EU institutions, and religion-related questions are discussed much more openly there than in the other institutions whose nature is more technocratic or legalistic. Moreover, the empirical focus of the survey sometimes does not correspond to the question posed. For instance, Chapter 2 asks whether religion matters in the selection

1 RelEP Project on Religion at the European Parliament.
of European rulers. Foret attempts to find the answer by asking the MEPs themselves. Surely, the focus on the electorate would make more sense here and the voters should have been questioned instead of those already holding office. But again, to conduct such an additional survey would be a daunting endeavour and one can only follow with sympathy the author’s efforts to find at least partial answers among the MEPs.

The most serious issue that needs to be raised is the author’s ambitious goal to describe ‘religion’ in the EU, as the book’s title suggests. Frankly speaking, the title of the book is misleading since the entire analysis is obviously centred on Christianity, to a large part on the Catholic Church. Foret is aware of the problem and tries to explain his reasons behind this narrowed focus. Indeed, Christian churches are the longest established religious institutions on the continent and the interactions between the European Communities and Christian churches have had a venerable track record. Methodologically, the analysis of the Catholic Church is also much easier than the research into the multitude of both old and new Protestant denominations as well as Orthodox and other churches. However, the omission of Islam as an autonomous topic is still a major problem. In particular, in Chapters 6 and 7 (focused on religion in the European public sphere and on the role of religion in the EU’s external identity), the systematic analysis of Islam should be paramount and its absence is rather perplexing.

Clearly, Islam does get a mention here and there (as in the very interesting discussion of the Muslim veil as a European “counter-symbol” (p. 11, in more detail pp. 216–219), but the treatment of Islam is in no way as comprehensive as it deserves and in no way as detailed as the analysis of (Catholic) Christianity. This is particularly vexing given the fact that, in the European media, Islam is clearly a much more dominant topic than Christianity, for example in connection with the migration crisis, the candidate status of Turkey, the situation in the Middle East, local Muslim communities or the European jihadists, to name just a few of the most conspicuous topics. In other words, Foret should have been more honest with his readers, using a more precise title of the book – ‘Christianity and Politics in the European Union’ would describe the contents of the book much more accurately.

In spite of the above mentioned limitations, the monograph is undoubtedly an example of distinguished scholarship and one of the best studies on the relations between Christianity and politics in the integration process. Foret, unlike so many in the academia, does not fall into the trap of ignoring religion or of conceiving of it as a problem. For him, religion is also “a reservoir of references and intermediaries for building bridges and securing cooperation” (p. 3). This deep understanding of the complexities of the religion-politics nexus in Europe makes the book a highly recommended read for everyone who is interested in religion in Europe or who wonders about the role of religion in the peculiar modernity of the European integration project.