



European
University
Institute

ROBERT
SCHUMAN
CENTRE FOR
ADVANCED
STUDIES

WORKING PAPERS

RSCAS 2014/58
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
RELIGIOWEST

Democratic representation and religion.
Differences and convergences between the European
Parliament and the US House of Representatives

François Foret

European University Institute
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
RELIGIOWEST

**Democratic representation and religion.
Differences and convergences between the European Parliament
and the US House of Representatives**

François Foret

EUI Working Paper **RSCAS** 2014/58

This text may be downloaded only for personal research purposes. Additional reproduction for other purposes, whether in hard copies or electronically, requires the consent of the author(s), editor(s). If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the working paper, or other series, the year and the publisher.

ISSN 1028-3625

© François Foret, 2014

Printed in Italy, May 2014

European University Institute

Badia Fiesolana

I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)

Italy

www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/

www.eui.eu

cadmus.eui.eu

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), created in 1992 and directed by Brigid Laffan since September 2013, aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research and to promote work on the major issues facing the process of integration and European society.

The Centre is home to a large post-doctoral programme and hosts major research programmes and projects, and a range of working groups and *ad hoc* initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration and the expanding membership of the European Union.

Details of the research of the Centre can be found on:

<http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Research/>

Research publications take the form of Working Papers, Policy Papers, Distinguished Lectures and books. Most of these are also available on the RSCAS website:

<http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/>

The EUI and the RSCAS are not responsible for the opinion expressed by the author(s).

ReligioWest

ReligioWest is a four year research project funded by the European Research Council and based at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy. It aims at studying how different western states in Europe and North America are redefining their relationship to religions, under the challenge of an increasing religious activism in the public sphere, associated with new religious movements and with Islam.

Abstract

It is common to oppose a secular Europe to a religious America. As representatives of cultural diversity and popular sovereignty, Parliaments are the best illustrations of mutual arrangements between politics and religion. Little data is available on religion at the EP, in contrast to the rich scholarship on the Congress. Relying on the first survey of its kind on members of the European Parliament (MEPs), the article analyses what they believe and what they do with these beliefs. The purpose is to understand how religion interacts with representation and political socialization of MEPs within and outside the assembly. The American House of Representatives is used as a reference case study. Overall, there are significant differences between European and American legislators, mainly due to their distinct social, cultural, political and institutional environments. However, several common logics may also be seen at work, suggesting that the EU is not as exceptional as is often thought.

Keywords

Religion; European Union; US; parliamentary politics; European Parliament

In the present re-emergence of religion on the political and intellectual agenda, the transatlantic comparison is recurrent. “Godless Europe” is contrasted with American religiosity to emphasize that secularization does not necessarily go hand in hand with modernity. The EU is invited by some observers to enter into a post-secular era, making room for believers in the public space and in the definition of collective preferences.

The US does indeed offer a stimulating “Constitutive Other” for the understanding of the EU, both because of its similarities and its differences. It is multi-level governance, a multi-cultural polity and a mature democracy. The stronger social relevance of religion in the US has the advantage of highlighting the logics at work with more clarity than in Europe. The American example may thus be used as a reference case study, especially since there is a huge literature on religion and politics, contrary to the relative thinness of European scholarship. This is not to say that the EU should be equated with the American State. Restrictions stemming from the nature and limits of the European political community and the range of the EU’s competences as regards the regulation of spiritual affairs are numerous. Still, the transatlantic perspective enables recognition of the EU as a full political system, likely to produce effects in all policy sectors and to reframe identities and allegiances. Our analysis stands close to the emergent hypothesis of a normalization of the EU, which justifies its *rapprochement* with more classic polities. The purpose here is to use parliamentary assemblies as prisms magnifying the relationships between religion and politics. As representative bodies elected by universal suffrage, parliaments reflect social and cultural diversity as well as possible distortions introduced by the recruitment channels which select legislators¹.

Regarding sources and methodology, the American case is mostly dealt with by relying on existing scholarship and interviews with experts, notwithstanding some fieldwork (participatory observation and documentary analysis) in Washington in 2010-2011 and 2014. There is no claim either to produce knowledge on religion in US politics or to offer a full term-by-term comparison with European politics. Studies on the Congress are used as a methodological source of inspiration and as a touchstone to assess the specificity of findings on the EP. For the EU, the core source of data is a survey on religion at the European Parliament (EP). The Religion at the European Parliament project (RelEP), the first endeavor of its kind, aims at remedying the lack of data on the religious profile, beliefs and uses of European political elites. It relied on a questionnaire applied to 167 MEPs² of various national and party belongings.

The focus of this article is neither to understand how and to what extent religion may impact on European politics, decision-making and policy processes nor to compare national differences between member states in the way they relate to religion and the subsequent effects on Europeanization³, two important topics tackled in other publications. Rather, the purpose is to discuss how the place of religion in society drives the way parliamentarians deal with it and its status in the relation of representation. What is at stake is, on the one hand, the influence of the social, cultural, political and institutional contexts in determining the treatment of religion in parliamentary institutions; and on the

¹ The final version of the text will be published in the *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée*. The author would like to thank the Religiowest team for their support and this very stimulating framework.

² A sample of 167 out of 736 MEPs (22.69% of the representatives elected in 2009) may seem relatively narrow. Nevertheless, it is satisfying for three reasons. Firstly, this is the first-ever survey on MEPs and religion and remedies a complete lack of data. Secondly, the response rate is comparable to those of major surveys on the EP. Much American research has also been based on limited samples. For example, the landmark analysis by Benson and Williams, *Religion on Capitol Hill* (1982) relied on a study of 80 members of Congress out of 535, selected through a random sample (about 15%). Thirdly and above all, a careful check was made to verify the possible bias linked with occasional discrepancies between the RelEP sample and the whole EP (in terms of national/denominational/party belonging, etc.). The conclusion is that RelEP offers a pretty good picture of the Parliament and that no major distortion is expected. For more information, see the methodological annex in Foret F., *Religion and politics in the European Union. The Secular Canopy*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2014.

³ Foret F. (ed.), “Religion at the European Parliament”, *Religion, State & Society*, special issue, No.2/3 September 2014.

other hand, the possible role of religion as a vector of socialization within institutions, bridging party and cultural gaps.

As the EU arena where conflicting interests or worldviews are expressed, the European Parliament is a privileged field in which to observe the political effects of religion. In the US, the House of Representatives is the most comparable legislating body, due to its mode of election and its size. Differences, however, should be kept constantly in mind. A Congressman (the name commonly designates a member of the House, even if technically speaking a Senator also belongs to the Congress) represents about 650,000 citizens, but with great discrepancies between for example Alaska and California. He or she bears comparison with an MEP from a big member state who represents more than 875,000 voters, with significant variations between countries⁴. American scholarship on religion in Congress is useful on several questions. A first point is the difficulty of measuring the religious belonging of politicians. Broad religious affiliation (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, etc.) are sometimes criticized as unable to encompass many theological nuances and historical circumstances which are explanatory of various divergent political choices by specific religious groups (Lutherans, Baptists, etc.). Nevertheless, breaking down denominations into smaller categories may bring accuracy but also more difficulty, as precision may always be taken further and may depend only problematically on theological distinctions. Hence, broad denominations are still widely considered to be useful proxies⁵. This is all the more true in Europe, where religious diversity is less important.

Besides, the analysis of religion at the House of Representatives highlights several variables which may be tested at the European Parliament. Religion indeed matters in American parliamentary politics, admittedly with less strength than partisanship and ideology, but still in a significant way. It gives purposes and incentives to political actors. Religiously-loaded issues create cleavages, but these cleavages evolve across time and events. The way to relate to Islam became an identity marker after September 11. Homosexuality or abortion have structured different patterns and intensities of alliances and loyalty following evolutions in jurisprudence and political strategies of presidential administrations and religious civil society. This indirectness and fluidity of the influence of religion must be kept in mind by looking at what happens in the EP.

In order to assess similarities and divergences between American and European configurations, the influence of social, political and institutional contexts has to be clarified. The *social and cultural context* is the general background against which to understand representativeness, how a politician represents his or her electors, and the role that religion can play in this symbolic relationship. The social and cultural context refers to the individual religiosity of political actors in its relation to the religious beliefs of the electorate; to the implications of belonging to a specific denomination according to the place of this group in society; to the way politics may encompass diversity, by promoting it or restraining it; and to the role of religion in the political socialization of a decision-maker, within the legislative institution, in the capital, in the constituency and in the global political space.

Political and institutional contexts are constituted by opportunities and constraints offered by the general political system and the institution within which a parliamentarian operates. Rules, processes and practices determine whether traditional and normative discourses such as religion are more or less legitimate and audible. Religion may be business as usual for Parliaments or create specific settings, divides and strategies. This can be assessed through the way the assembly accommodates individual and collective manifestations of faith in its rituals or working patterns. A last question investigates whether or not the assembly is able to frame what representatives believe and do with their beliefs on the one hand, and religious issues on the other hand. The framing of individual preferences can be

⁴ Costa O., Saint Martin F., *Le Parlement européen*, Paris, La Documentation Française, 2009.

⁵ Oldmixon E., "Religion and Legislative Politics" in Smidt Corwin E., Kellstedt Lynn A., Guth James L., *Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Politics*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2010, p. 499-500.

assessed by observing the effect of the longevity of legislators in the assembly on how they handle religion. Regarding religious issues, the socializing effect of the institution can be measured by the emergence (or not) of a *modus vivendi* to regulate conflicts on controversial topics that have long been on the agenda.

This article proceeds in three parts. The first part outlines the American model of articulating political representation and religion in the Congress. It shows that religion is a reference that representatives are obliged to display in order to comply with social expectations, but that they are well advised to use with moderation and in a consensual way. Pluralism is also reflected by the composition of the assembly, where many denominational minorities are represented and can achieve high office. But pluralism finds its limits with its difficulties in integrating a lack of religion, or identities in tension with religion, such as homosexuality. Finally, religion is a vector of socialization for legislators in various settings: in interfaith forums; as part of the institutional ritual of the Congress; as networks in the capital; as social capital in the constituencies, and through religious lobbying. The second part of the article applies the analytical frame forged around the Congress to the European Parliament. Most MEPs comply with the moderate secularism which is dominant in European societies. Expressions of religiosity are secondary to and commanded by national political cultures. Pluralism is more limited than in the US, due to a lesser religious diversity and a weaker religiosity. Hence, opportunities of socialization through religious channels are significantly more limited. Still more than in the US, entrepreneurship based on a strong religious message is reserved for minority forces, frequently on the extremes, and is unlikely to pave the way to power. A final part compares the potential socializing action of the parliamentary institution in the US and in the EU. This is measured through the effects on the religious preferences of representatives on the one hand, and on the framing of religious issues on the other hand. Neither the Congress nor the EP seems to have an in-depth transformative impact, even if parliamentary politics may provide incentives for compromise and rhetorical moderation on religious topics.

Religion and Representation

The American model

To believe, whatever the content, but not too much

Like American Presidents, Representatives are expected to display their religious credentials, but without exaggeration. Presenting oneself as a religious person is a matter of patriotism and public decency, the content and the extent of faith being of less importance. However, excessive ardor may be unwise, as it may endanger the religious freedom of fellow citizens whose faith is less intense or who belong to another denomination. Therefore, a Congressman will comply with the obligations linked to his or her role and exhibit the religiosity required by public virtue, but to go beyond these minimal requirements may be counter-productive: it may hurt the feelings of fellow representatives, lobbies or electors. The best strategy is thus to display religious feelings at appropriate moments and to remain silent otherwise. This is confirmed by an expert on Congressional life: “You do not see religion mentioned that much in the debates that take place in the House. You do not see members of the House appealing directly to specific verses of the Bible to support their argument. They speak in more general terms about the moral stature of the country, where we are going. There are too many different denominations to be efficient when appealing to a specific tradition to gain the argument. (...)”⁶

⁶ Interview with D. Wolfensberger, Director, of The Congress Project, Wilson Center, Washington, 29/11/2010.

In interviews, legislators and staff insist on the importance of *personal values* – explicitly and prominently religious values – in decision-making. The singularity of the incentive and the political risk involved is reduced by the fact that there is a supposed correspondence between the legislator’s attitudes and modal preferences of his constituency. The legislator’s values are thought to reflect those of the electors. Thus, the political danger of any discrepancy is low.

This general safety rule may leave room for provisos and exceptions. Constituency preferences evolve, either by demographic change (although this is unlikely in a single term) or above all because the context changes and alter the relevance of moral issues. The congruence between the personal religious preferences of the decision-maker and those whom he or she represents thus needs to be constantly reassessed⁷. The political context may have changed since the election and altered the views of the electorate if not those of the legislator.

It is a general rule that legislators declare that their personal beliefs are of more importance than any pressure from their constituencies. It cannot be reasonably expected from a politician that he or she present himself or herself as a servile follower of opinion permanently begging for re-election. Nevertheless, some representatives justify voting against their conscience on the grounds that they feel they have to comply with the mandate given to them. In some even more complex cases, they can vote in opposition to their personal preferences and the moral orientations of their constituents because they consider that religion should not interact with politics or that policy matters require them to do so.

More generally, as most Americans favor a moderate line, holding an extreme position and accepting the risk of making compromise impossible and of blocking the work of the legislature is a huge responsibility⁸. A refusal in the name of absolute values to cooperate in order to reach a solution acceptable to all is a behavior which is probably negative in any cost/benefit calculus for the majority of legislators. Exceptions may be extreme fighters for God who are entrenched in very homogeneously conservative constituencies, meaning that the phenomenon will be quantitatively limited given the heterogeneity of the US electoral map.

The comparison of the religiosity of electors and representatives is a key question which has not been so extensively studied in American scholarship. In a pioneering work published in 1982, representatives were described as no less religious than citizens; political liberals were no less religious than conservatives. Overall, believers displayed a certain compliance with the orthodoxy dictated by churches and scripture, revealing a low level of individualization of faith. Denominational belonging did not ensure conformity of voting with fellow believers of the same group and could not predict the choices made by a representative. However, it constituted a major influence on his other political behaviors, an influence intertwined with party affiliation and constituency pressures⁹. In the 1980s and 1990s, the literature focused on public opinion and the influences of religious extremes on the centre, offering conflicting evidence about the real political weight of religion. A core question is the reality and extent of polarization, understood as the radicalization of conflicts over social and moral issues between irreconcilable visions of “the good society” rooted in religion. A moderate proposal¹⁰ is that there is no sign that public opinion has polarized, but rather the contrary. However, religion has polarized as a party identifier. More and more, religiously-loaded issues like abortion draw the boundaries between people who identify themselves as Republicans or Democrats. A survey on roll call votes between 1977 and 2010¹¹ shows a general polarization since the eighties on all issues

⁷ Oldmixon E., *Uncompromising Positions. God, Sex and the US House of Representatives*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005, p. 187.

⁸ Oldmixon (*Ibid.*), p. 188.

⁹ Benson P. and Williams D., *Religion on Capitol Hill. Myths and realities*, New York: Harper and Row, 1982.

¹⁰ D'Antonio W. V., Tuch . A., Baker J. R., *Religion, Politics and Polarization. How Religiopolitical Conflict is Changing Congress and American Democracy*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2013, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, chapter 4, p. 43-62.

in the Congress, and especially on welfare and moral issues, with an apex centered on abortion. These issues related to morality politics have become more and more important in the ideological definition of party identity. Politicians are expected to express their conformity with their party's orthodoxy in such debates if they wish to emerge from the processes of selection of candidates. This leads to a growing polarization between parties disguised along religious lines. This does not mean that representatives are more religious or vocal on their beliefs than before, but that they take up more distinctive profiles on normative issues. Meanwhile, the opinions of citizens on such issues have somewhat converged. Consequently, religiously-based divides are more apparent at elite level than at mass level.

This is an invitation to question the hypothesis of polarization at the societal scale. Most Americans are moderate, ambivalent or hesitant in their views. Moral issues do not constitute "hot-buttons" which dictate voters' political choice in preference to other issues. It may be useful to distinguish between a polarization of people's choices (among the options that are offered by candidates) and a polarization of their positions (what surveys show about their opinions on moral issues). Elections are frequently close, but this does not mean that two opposing blocks are colliding. A majority of voters see themselves as positioned between two relatively extreme parties, and they make their choices from the existing electoral offer¹². Depictions of polarizations fuel narratives in terms of culture wars opposing religious minorities victimized by a secularist majority and system well beyond the walls of the Congress. This narrative is an efficient resource with which to mobilize followers. It is also a business ploy: political and media entrepreneurs build careers on fighting fight against diabolized opponents and they are not likely to relinquish this rewarding position¹³. This is why even if social and political realities evolve, such symbolic struggles are not likely to fade away, as neither side is powerful enough to defeat the other and powerful interests on both sides find it useful to prolong the strife.

Representation as a slightly distorted reproduction of American social realities

Representatives who want to make a point on religious issues for personal reasons or who have to do so in order to satisfy their constituencies will find plenty of opportunities for this. It is not necessary to build a profile in courage by taking a stand on risky issues with a controversial religious dimension. Skilled politicians will take positions on symbolic but petty bills, especially those which enjoy a wide consensus (for example to secure family values, a sound-bite of American politics, rather than to oppose abortion), in order to show their religious zeal back home without breaking either with party discipline or mainstream moderation. But even if representatives are not obliged to take up such symbolic postures, they would prefer to avoid openly distancing themselves from religion. On Capitol Hill as well as in most US constituencies, it is better not to declare oneself a non-religious person unless one wants to make a statement and one is ready to pay the political price. In 2007, the Californian Democrat Pete Stark, affiliated as a Unitarian and an incumbent since 1973, became the first member of Congress to declare that he does not believe in a Supreme Being, a somewhat tardy piece of audacity after more than thirty years of compliance. Others prefer not to be specific about their beliefs but do not express an absence of beliefs. About one in five U.S. adults describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular". But in 2012, only one member of the new Congress, a Democrat from Arizona, dared to publicly describe her religion as "none", while ten other members of the 113th Congress (about 2%) did not specify a religious affiliation¹⁴. Such a posture is already difficult for a Democrat to take up, and almost impossible for a Republican.

¹² Fiorina M. P., Abrams S. J. and Pope J. C., *Culture War? The Myth of a polarized America*, Boston, Longman, 2011 (1st ed 2005), p. 9.

¹³ Hulsether M., *Religion, Culture and Politics in the Twentieth-Century United States*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 230-231.

¹⁴ <http://www.pewforum.org/Government/Faith-on-the-Hill--The-Religious-Composition-of-the-113th-Congress.aspx>, November 16, 2012, accessed 5/7/2013. For another very similar breakdown as a nominal list (one Representative self-defining as "none", one as "unaffiliated", five as "unspecified"), see Hunter Schwarz, "U.S. House Of Representatives

This combination of mandatory if symbolic religious exhibition and strategic moderation may explain why American legislators declare a higher level of religiosity than average Americans. As representatives, they have to embody American political culture and showing at least a minimal religiosity is part of this function. This qualifies the hypothesis of a socio-cultural gap between secularized elites in Washington and religious masses in the backwoods. The religious composition of the Congress reflects the denominational diversity of the US population, even if statistical balances are not reproduced exactly. The Pew Forum regularly provides data on Congress that is still not available for the European Parliament. Taking as an example the 113th Congress, the assembly remains majority Protestant (56%), but is far less so today than half a century ago, when nearly three-quarters of the members belonged to Protestant denominations. Diversity is not to be understood as the continuing emergence of new religious groups. On the contrary, between 1959 and 2010, the number of denominations represented at the Senate has decreased from 18 to 15¹⁵. But small movements occur between and within existing religious groups and parties, possibly with big effects. For example, there has been a movement of Conservative Protestants from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party in the Congress. This reinforces both the conservative tropism of Republicans and the progressive mainstream of Democrats and contributes to the polarization of Congress. Besides this, there has been a decline in the presence of liberal and moderate Protestants in both parties, people who could bridge party boundaries and build compromises leading to bipartisan legislation. This is another factor contributing to bipolarization¹⁶. This illustrates the huge complexity of the intertwinement of religious and political cleavages in legislative arenas, and both the interactions and the possible discrepancies between the religious maps of the American population and of American representatives.

Religious diversification has for long been the pattern and this continues. Variations between denominations reflect societal trends at work in the US more than political circumstances. The electoral victories of Republicans or Democrats cause adjustments but no major shifts from one term to another. This was even true in 1994, when the Republicans won their first majority in the House of Representatives since 1954, and remained so during their control of the House which lasted until 2006¹⁷. Influence is not always measured strictly by numbers. The geographical distribution and historical and socio-economic backgrounds of each community are also crucial parameters, as well as the organizational efficiency of each religious community both as regards party apparatus and at grassroots level. Catholics are often considered as a model for mobilization and lobbying. Jews are a very secularized and discrete group but are well represented. Mormons enjoy strong positions due to their territorial concentration. Muslims¹⁸, Buddhists and Hindus do not have the same resources and are rather under-represented.

Indeed, the distribution of power between denominations is not only about arithmetic and geography. Some scholars insist on the way religious stratification in the US has acted to maintain lasting inequalities since colonial times and the birth of the modern nation¹⁹. The privileges of historically-dominant religious affiliations are said to have been maintained over time through formal and informal mechanisms. These religious affiliations are still largely an ascribed and permanent status and have important effects on access to resources. Legal patterns have evolved to prohibit discrimination, but dominant groups have developed other ways of maintaining their positions. They have nominated political candidates from their religious groups, voted for and appointed similar

(Contd.) _____

Members' Religion", <http://www.buzzfeed.com/hunterswarz/us-house-of-representatives-members-religion>, 19/8/2013, accessed 3/3/2014.

¹⁵ D'Antonio, Tuch and Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.

¹⁷ Oldmixon (2005), *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁸ The first Muslim, Keith Ellison, was elected in 2007. He caused minor uproar by taking his oath of office on the Koran rather than the Bible, but the Congress institutional ritual was perfectly able to accommodate this innovation.

¹⁹ Davidson J. D., Pyle R. E., *Ranking Faiths. Religious Stratification in America*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2011, p. viii-ix.

people, and created their own lobbying groups. At the ideological level, liberal Protestant values have remained the societal norm. Individualism, rationality, tolerance, and democracy are still the cultural standards against which all other religious traditions are judged and with which they are invited to comply. Davidson and Pyle conclude that Anglo-Protestant ideology has been impacted by multiculturalism but has not been supplanted or replaced by it. Religious stratification has continued to operate as an underlying force behind American politics. Religious groups maintain their positions or move slightly from one stratum to another²⁰. Parliamentary assemblies are one arena among many where these movements may be observed. The success of some individuals from minority denominations does not necessarily challenge the idea of a resilient inequality of resources between religious groups on a societal scale. This is an acknowledgment of the structural resistance of religion in the allocation of power in the US.

Another way to assess the place of religious minorities in parliamentary politics is to look at their access to top positions. Protestants still keep a firm hand on posts of authority. Nevertheless, Catholics can rely on their organizational skills and their relative number to secure positions such as Speaker of the House (with the Democrat Nancy Pelosi), or minority leader (with the Republican John Boehner), during the recent past. Jews may be said to be more present in the higher ranks of presidential administrations than in parliamentary hierarchies, but some fare very well (for example House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, the only Jewish Republican in Congress). The occasional Mormon is able to achieve high office, such as Harry Reid as majority leader in the Senate, but this remains relatively rare. So access to the top is difficult but not impossible for politicians from small religious denominations. The combined logics of party politics, personal skills and representativeness based on pure demography combine to produce unexpected results. The Congress appears as more conservative as regards minority religious affiliations than other institutions such as the Supreme Court, which is made up entirely of Catholics and Jews for the first time in its history. The selection of Justices relies mostly on legal processes and presidential decisions, factors which can evolve more quickly and boldly than mass politics and electoral choices²¹.

Religious identity may also have an influence on other social identities claimed by legislators. Being openly gay is infrequent but not unheard of. The announcement of his homosexuality by the first member of the House of Representatives dates back to 1982. A few others followed this example and this did not prevent them from being re-elected. Nevertheless, the first candidate to be elected for the first time as a gay person achieved this only in 1998. Some Representatives preferred to keep silent even if they were known as homosexuals in their districts. Others encountered problems when their sexual preferences were disclosed. It is worth noticing that it is only since 2012 that there has been the first openly gay member in the Senate, the Democrat verify Tammy Baldwin from Wisconsin. This delay has to do with the smaller size of the upper house, and probably also with its mode of election which may be more challenging for sexual minorities as constituencies encompass a greater variety of population, including possibly more conservative parts.

Religion in social circles

Representatives are likely to keep a low profile about religion. Whatever their private beliefs, they will frequently speak of religion in ad-hoc fashion with like-minded people and limit their expressions on this subject in the public arena. "There is no constitutional stricture about not talking about religion but members realize that religious references are not going to win any votes by appealing to particular religious beliefs. You have to make a larger argument. Politics is about additions. You try to build coalitions and to make it bigger"²². References to religion are mostly part of the ritual of civil religion

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172; 175.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

²² Interview with Dan Wolfensberger, Director, The Congress Project, Wilson Center, Washington, 29/11/2010.

which is a dramatization of national identity borrowing religious vocabulary. The reality of religious observance is to be kept for appropriate circles. “People are not afraid to discuss their religion with people they want to talk about it, but they are not wearing it on their sleeves, they may be wearing the American flag but mostly not the Christian Cross. They mostly manifest their faith in the way they talk and relate to people”²³.

Being a religious activist is not rewarding in the American context. Truly enough, an increasing “God Gap” has been evoked by the media in the last thirty years to state that religion is increasingly becoming a party identifier. Efforts by president Obama to reach out towards religious populations have met with only limited success. In his first term, Obama managed to a small extent to win over groups that are usually not Democrat. But his second term is likely to confirm the resilience of the usual alliance between Democrats, minority denominations and secularists²⁴ as controversies about homosexuality and abortion are bound to reactivate polarization.

This does not mean that the “God Gap” frames global attitudes towards politics, but rather that it works as an inspiration whose associations are used to flag up issues in the competition between parties. Republicans and Democrats pay tribute to their party identity on symbolic issues such as sex and family (especially abortion and gay marriage)²⁵ while frequently leaving decisions on these matters to the judges and compromising on other questions. Political actors who chose to invest on religion as their key cause may gain visibility but are likely to be marginalized and condemned to have little impact on mainstream politics. This is exemplified by the “Christian right” which, under different forms and labels, has established itself as an important faction of the Republican party but has not really succeeded in pushing its agenda on moral issues. The dilemma is to opt for moderation in Washington at the price of cutting links with grassroots networks able to raise funds and activism; to show intransigence and subsequently to fail building a majority coalition within the Conservative party; or to venture into dissidence, an example being political entrepreneurs choosing to run under the colors of the Tea Party²⁶. In other words, professionalization for a very pious and outspoken representative in DC involves compliance with the rules of moderation which go with the parliamentary territory, and learning to live with the subsequent constant risk of losing one’s soul and the loyalty of one’s followers as well with the recurrent temptation to withdraw from politics in order to return to civil society.

The future of the Christian right is ambivalent. Some scholars argue that conservative values are on the rise in the whole of American society (a far from consensual view), but that there is no consensus about the precise role that religion should play²⁷. So this faction could lose its ideological ownership of some key topics and see its distinctive identity blurred without reaching concrete achievements in return. The crucial battle will take place in the media and in other public spaces as much as in political arenas. The Christian right has shown its strong resilience as a social movement and has gained significant electoral influence, but has had less success in the public policy domain. It failed on the crucial issue of obtaining a constitutional amendment in order to prohibit abortion. The present strategy seems more oriented towards State politics, to reduce abortion by creating multiple restrictions in practice. This suggests that the context of the House of Representatives and, more broadly speaking, of federal politics imposes a restraint that the Christian right tries to skirt around at

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Guth J., “Obama, Religious Politics and the Culture Wars” in Schier S. (ed.) *Transforming America: Barack Obama in the White House*, Lanham MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2011, p.77-100.

²⁵ Putnam R., Campbell D., *American Grace. How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, New York, Simon&Schuster, 2010, p. 380-386

²⁶ Wilcox C., Larson C., *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics*, (3rd ed.), Boulder, Westview Press, 2006, p. 169-172.

²⁷ Ryan M., Switzer L., *God in the Corridors of Power. Christian Conservatives, the Media and Politics in America*, Santa Barbara, Cal, Praeger, 2009

other levels. Changes in the social constituency of the Christian right also matter. Evangelical churches are developing, but while younger generations of Evangelicals are more pro-life, they are more moderate on gay rights than their parents. They are more concerned by world hunger, AIDS and global warming, and more eager to engage with the world. “The Christian Right has built its organizations by proclaiming a culture war, but many younger evangelicals see the country not as a battlefield, but as a mission field”²⁸.

As an inverted reflection of the Christian right, it is also worth noticing how secularist forces are structured. This trend can be observed at all levels: through their strengthening within the Democratic Party; through their mobilization as lobbies with new allies, such as gay NGOs, medical professions or scientists stung into action by various Bush administration policies; through the media, an usual playing field for secularists. New technologies are also a precious tool for the young and well-educated, two groups who are among the most secular in American society. What is new is that secularism appears now as a potential source of social capital²⁹. This change is very important, as conservative forces have enjoyed an historical advantage due to their ability to mobilize strong networks and churchgoers. They are likely to retain their organizational advantage over secularists, but the gap is reducing.

Religion may matter as a social universe offering opportunities for networking and gathering support, information, money or notoriety at five levels: in interfaith framework within Congress; in the small world of Washington; in constituencies; in denominational communities; and through religious lobbying.

Firstly, religion works as a socializing network through prayer meetings at the House. Small spiritual gatherings enable meetings with other legislators, staffers and officials. Such events may provide bipartisan contacts, inspiration and even collective initiatives. There are also meetings between denominations testifying to a mutual curiosity, especially between Catholics and Evangelicals. Interfaith sociability is very important in the assembly as well as in American society. Two-third of Americans have at least one extended family member of another religion and mobility between denominations is very high, according to social or territorial mobility³⁰. Hence, interactions between religious groups are seen as socially legitimate, morally sound and instrumental to understanding others in order to prepare alliances or even conversions.

Religion is also part of the official institutional drama of the House. The opening prayer of each plenary session is performed by the Chaplain of the House, a Catholic priest³¹, belonging to the biggest organized denomination in the country, but far from representative of a nation composed of a majority of Protestants distributed in multiple affiliations. The ecumenical character of the act is thus strikingly underlined. Not all persons present in the room show concern and respect for the prayer which is very quickly executed. In contrast, the pledge to the flag which follows commands general attention and almost everybody participates, including staffers and visitors in the galleries³². Again, religion is clearly subordinated to civil religion for the greater national glory.

²⁸ Wilcox C., “Premillennialists in the New Millenium: The Christian Right in the United States”, in Hamilton M. A., Rozell M. J. (eds), *Fundamentalism, Politics and the Law*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 13-28.

²⁹ Hansen S. B., *Religion and Reaction. The Secular Political Challenge to the Religious Right*, Lanham, Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2011.

³⁰ Putnam and Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 523.

³¹ This chaplain was nominated by the Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who is Roman Catholic. The preceding Speaker Dennis Hastert was listed as Protestant. Before him, speaker Newt Gingrich was Baptist but converted recently to Roman Catholicism, the religion of his wife.

³² Observation at the House of Representatives, Washington, 18/11/2010.

Secondly, attendance at ceremonies in local Washington churches is a way for the politician who spends a few days per week in the capital to find a home away from home, local networks and soul-mates.

Thirdly and most importantly, participation in religious events held in the constituency is a political imperative for all members of the House, including events held by traditions other than their own affiliation. Congregations play a major role in the way religion is lived and in social life. Congregations represent a very Protestant model of religious organization, but it has been adopted by other denominations as well. For example, Islamic mosques in the US often offer Sunday Schools and imams are called upon to serve as counselors³³. That is the reason why representatives have to attend religious assemblies at least a few times a year. This signals that he is concerned by local problems and an opportunity to receive feedback from electors. American parties do not have the same regular structures as their European counterparts to coordinate activists and to reach sympathizers or indifferent masses. Hence, the assistance provided by religious structures is all the more important. This is the very practical reason why, according to an expert observer of American political elites “many representatives call themselves religious, but do not really care. The religiosity of American politicians and the influence of religious lobbies are often overestimated, especially in Europe”.³⁴

A fourth form of socialization through religion is through belonging to a specific denomination. This is transversal as it can produce effects at the local level, in the House with fellow believers, on a national scale or trans-nationally by identification with spiritual authorities (such as the Vatican or Catholics) or minorities worldwide (such as Christians in China). The effects of socialization may vary according to the denomination. For example, when a Representative is identified as a Catholic, as well as when the constituency has a strong Catholic presence, he or she is more likely to show a high level of support for religious traditionalism. This effect is stronger for Catholicism than for other denominations³⁵. One hypothesis is that the hierarchical organization of the Catholic Church and the efficiency of its lobbying ensure more disciplined respect for its teaching. However, the views of Catholic representatives and of the American episcopate frequently differ. Catholic American Congressmen are notably conservative on abortion or gay rights, but not on prayer at school³⁶. In social policy, they are far more conservative than the progressive teachings of the Catholic Church and the American episcopacy³⁷.

Religious lobbying is a fifth channel of political socialization within a denomination or between denominations. There are more than two hundred religious interest groups identified on Capitol Hill (a quarter being multiple faith structures), employing at least one thousand people and spending at least \$350 million a year. This religious lobbying in DC has a long history and a high level of professionalization, involving more than three hundred different issues³⁸. The Congress

³³ Putnam and Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

³⁴ Interview with C. Wilcox, Georgetown University, 2/12/2010.

³⁵ Oldmixon (2005), *op. cit.*, p. 187.

³⁶ This stronger social conservatism of political actors compared with the religious hierarchy is a frequently observed phenomenon. George Weigel, a well-known Catholic political thinker active in a think tank in Washington, keeps at arms' length the discourse of the episcopate. “The bishops are not the only voice of American Catholicism. Their views are only one interpretation of the social teaching of the Church. This is an attempt to turn the Catholic doctrine into a kind of German Christian democracy, it is not persuasive, it can lead in that direction but there are other directions also.” (Interview with G. Weigel, Washington, 21/1/2011). The stronger conservatism of political and civil society compared to organizational hierarchies – rather the inverse picture of what happens in Europe – illustrates the width of American pluralism.

³⁷ Oldmixon E., Hudson W., “Catholic Republicans and Conflicting Impulses in the 109th Congress”, *Politics and Religion* 1(1), 2008, p. 113-116

³⁸ Data on American religious groups are taken from Pew Forum, “Lobbying for the Faithful. Religious Advocacy Groups in Washington, D.C”, 21/11/2011, <http://www.pewforum.org/Government/Lobbying-for-the-faithful--exec.aspx>, accessed 24/9/2012.

“accommodates yet checks”³⁹ various religious factions and works as a process where the “other” becomes less an enemy and more another participant in the lobbying competition. This reduces conflict in a way that the adversarial logic of the courts cannot match. It involves a mutual acceptance of religious interest groups who may have different and conflicting agendas but who have to play by the same rules.

Religious lobbyists are also interesting in that they can be compared to politicians with a religious agenda to isolate the effect of the “religion” variable in American politics. Religious lobbyists are “in Washington but not of it”: they are part of the day-to-day game of power but maintain an irreducible specificity due to their prophetic message. They are insiders because they are immersed in Washington’s mechanisms. However, they define themselves as outsiders as they do not measure their impact solely and primarily in terms of wins and losses in the policy process. They challenge the whole political system by calling for global moral reforms⁴⁰. They contest mainstream elite views which are alien to religion. Religious lobbyists rely mostly on grass roots mobilizations to put pressure on decision-making from the outside. They intend not only to influence one point on the agenda but to change of agenda in the name of a superior truth. In so doing, they do not derive their legitimacy from democratic consent, but meanwhile they may help to widen the debate, to include new audiences and to mobilize previously-quiescent citizens⁴¹. This self-cultivated marginality while remaining at the heart of politics is very similar to the positioning of politicians defining their action in religious terms. Religious lobbyists enjoy more freedom, as they do not depend on popular suffrage to keep their job. They do not pass through selecting processes likely to water down their message, as candidates to political offices do. But they do have to comply with the rules of moderation and aggregation which come with the parliamentary territory.

The European model

To disbelieve, but not too much

Whereas complying with civil religion by displaying a moderate level of faith is the required norm for American legislators, a peaceful absence of religion appears the norm for an MEP. Levels of religiosity, observance, feeling of belonging and the importance given to religion all converge to underline that religion matters far more in the US than in Europe. To give a factual illustration of the differences in the social expectations towards rulers that frame American and European society, it is possible to use an indicator regularly used by international values surveys and which has also been applied in the research on MEPs. To the statement “politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office”, 32.1% of American citizens agree or agree strongly, compared with 11.1% of Germans, 9.3% of French and only 3.3% in our sample of MEPs.⁴² This means that both in society and in European political circles, the espousal of religious beliefs is far from coterminous with the job of European representative. This does not prevent 62.2 % of our respondents in the ReIEP survey from defining themselves as religious persons (a proportion which is probably overestimated as those politicians with the greatest proximity to religion were more willing to take the questionnaire), exactly the same proportion than the average Europeans in thirteen countries representing roughly the composition by nationality of the ReIEP sample.

³⁹ Hertzke A. D., *Representing God in Washington. The Role of Religious Lobbies in the American Polity*, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1988, p. 201.

⁴⁰ Hofrenning D. J. B., *In Washington But Not Of It. The Prophetic Politics of Religious Lobbyists*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1995, p. 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183

⁴² Data dates from 2005 for the US and Germany, from 1999 for France, from 2013 for MEPs. See <http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/index.asp>, accessed 21/7/2011.

Being an MEP does not mean being hostile towards religion but is an invitation to be relatively discreet on the topic. The Parliament of course includes a proportion of frequent churchgoers who are very outspoken, but they are largely outnumbered by colleagues indifferent to religion. Looking at the broader picture and risking a typology, the standard profile of an MEP would be a non-believer acknowledging a religious heritage as a “cultural Christian” without attaching too much direct political relevance to this heritage, but leaving the door open for its indirect influence. The dominant view is best expressed in the words of a British Liberal: “[The EU] should have a policy respecting all, discriminating against none and insisting on separation between religion and politics”. This is congruent with the global mission of the EU. The EU respects national systems which all demarcate politics and religion under diverse institutional forms (even in systems with a formal State church), while acting for the protection and progression of fundamental individual rights. Subsequently, this idealized typical MEP – even as a firm supporter of secularism – may be open to arrangements with public norms in order to accommodate the religious preferences of individuals. For example, a majority of MEPs (significantly more than European citizens) agree that if a nurse were asked to help perform a legal abortion, she should be allowed to refuse on religious grounds. Here strict secularism is corrected by the prevalence of individual rights to religious freedom. It is evidence that European representatives are not “religiophobic”.

In short, American legislators use religion as a consensual, permissive and self-restricted repertoire to discuss the public good and national identity. MEPs use an open and tolerant secularism instead of religion to do the same thing. This offers rhetoric material less suited to celebrating a vibrant European identity than to emphasizing a common set of principles rooted in human rights. The same mechanism of representation as an exacerbation of social realities may be at work at the House of Representatives and at the European Parliament: in Washington, religiosity is accentuated by the lip service of politicians, though qualified in its actual influence; in Brussels, secularism is celebrated, though implemented in a very flexible manner.

The EP mirrors European societies

Considering this general background, any homology between the religious preferences of MEPs with those of their constituents has very little relevance. Here, several broad structural factors combine their effects. European societies are highly secularized. MEPs are almost invisible political elites. Citizens most frequently do not know their European representatives and care even less about their personal characteristics. This means that the religiosity of MEPs is a non-question for the electorate. Besides, the mode of election by party lists and the way the Parliament works blur any possible scheme of accountability. Recent moves towards a territorialization of European elections through the design of regional constituencies seem unlikely to change anything.

Largely emancipated from electoral pressures, religious MEPs may indulge themselves by following their conscience, especially on issues involving moral judgments. Some of them actually say they do so, even if religion intervenes for most MEPs more as a social and political reality to be tackled willy-nilly than as a personal inspiration. The range of competences of the EP does not provide for the exercise of everyday moral choices. However, a few political entrepreneurs may use their relative freedom to develop a “niche strategy” by standing on firm religious or anti-religious grounds. Inside the Parliament, this is a way of attracting like-minded colleagues and lobbies. Comparing the American and European cases, the interpretation is twofold. In the US, the general salience of religion tends to push religiously-minded political actors towards the centre by moderating their discourse in order to integrate religious arguments within advocacy coalitions, while secular representatives pay lip service to the required public reference to religion. In Europe, the general indifference towards religion can encourage religiously-minded actors without much hope of recognition to develop extreme views and controversial tactics in order to gain public attention. Meanwhile, moderately religious MEPs comply with the dominant secularism as they do in national politics and inscribe their

discourses under the auspices of pluralism and relativism. This hypothesis ought to be tested further, including in national Parliaments.

Compared with the US where the religious imperative may influence the public display of other social identities such as sexual orientation, religiosity is a far less salient issue for MEPs who are under less scrutiny. Again, the low religiosity of European societies coupled with public indifference towards MEPs leave their private preferences largely unquestioned.

A total lack of data on the religious affiliations of MEPs prevents assessment of the impact of social change in the population on the denominational composition of the legislative body. The ReLEP project made an initial contribution towards filling the gap by casting light on the religious preferences of the roughly one hundred and fifty MEPs who agreed to answer, but does not offer a complete view of the assembly. What makes the EU specific is that the frontiers of the polity are constantly enlarging to include new populations, thus modifying the demographic balance between denominations. MEPs of new post-2004 member states are perceived by their Western counterparts to be more religious and outspoken about their beliefs. However, this distinction merits re-examination. National, political and religious affiliations are intertwined. MEPs from new member states are further to the right of the political spectrum than their Western counterparts, and thus more likely to have a greater proximity to religion and a greater conservatism on issues related to religion. This does not mean that Eastern MEPs feel less European – rather the contrary – or are less supportive of European integration.⁴³ Thus, it is very difficult to isolate the effect of denominational affiliations.

Overall, 66.7% of MEPs agree that religion does not create differences between MEPs who are Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or from other denominations (33.3% have the opposite opinion), but they almost unanimously (82.8%) state that religion has variable importance depending on the nationality of the politician. The EP has to deal with less denominational diversity than the House of Representatives, but a deeper cultural and political diversity. National affiliation prevails totally over religious affiliation and, furthermore, drives it. Depending on their experience of a specific configuration of relationships between Church and State and their positioning within a domestic political context, representatives experience their denominational identity in diverse ways. A German Catholic keeping an eye on the fiscal status of German Churches is more interested in economic issues related to religion, while an Italian Catholic concerned by the controversy on religious signs in classrooms is more active in debates about the regulation of religious pluralism in the public space.

Religious affiliation is no longer in itself an autonomous variable in the allocation of top positions in the EP. The Presidency has frequently been held by leaders known to be pious and observant Catholics, but in the main this reflects the domination of Christian democrats and demographic balances more than a denominational coalition. What matters is more a compliance with the moderate secularism understood as the common ground for all Europeans than the content of the personal faith. A good illustration was offered by the contest between Jerzy Buzek and Mario Mauro as candidates for the Presidency of the Parliament in 2009⁴⁴. Far from being a confrontation between Protestants supporting Buzek and Catholics supporting Mauro, the debate inside the EP was polarized by the opposition of some nationalities (especially French and Belgians, but also Italians) who considered that Mauro was unacceptable due to his proximity to the Holy See and its conservatism. There were also concerns were also that his appointment would be perceived all across the legislative body as a provocation and could endanger the agreement with the PSE about the EPP/PSE rotation in the Presidency. In the end, Mauro was asked to withdraw. All these cases must be understood against the background of the founding controversy related to religion in the selection of European rulers, the Buttiglione affair in 2004. What was mainly an inter-institutional arm-wrestling bout between the

⁴³ Hix S., Scully R. and Farrell D. 'National or European Parliamentarians? Evidence from a New Survey of the Members of the European Parliament', 2011, p. 12, <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/government/research/resgroups/EPRG/MEPsurveyData.aspx>, accessed on the 25th of June, 2011

⁴⁴ Taylor S., 'Mauro withdraws candidacy for Parliament president', *The European Voice*, 6/7/2009

Parliament and the Council with the Commission as an unfortunate casualty was narrated as the story of the martyrdom of an inexperienced Catholic (which Buttiglione by no means was) by the soulless politics played out in Brussels⁴⁵. In the Buttiglione affair as in other events, political sensitivities framed by national cultures, together with institutional pressure for compromise and requirement to comply with pluralism and moderation prevailed over denominational affiliation or religious/secular opposition.

Religion and socialization in Brussels and beyond

Given the far lesser salience of religion in Europe than in the US, it is no surprise that it offers fewer opportunities for socialization. Inside the Parliament, religion is not integrated within institutional rituals as is the case in the House of Representatives with the opening prayer. Actually, signs of religious presence are the subject of ongoing controversies, from rooms dedicated to spiritual or philosophical meditation to meetings of the President of the EP with religious leaders. The presence of religion in the parliamentary space reveals something about the EP's rationale for dealing with it. Meditation rooms are offered to MEPs in Brussels and Strasbourg to use as they see fit. According to a regulation by the quaestors⁴⁶, rooms are reserved for spiritual reflection to the exclusion of other events. No permanent feature referring to a specific religion may be displayed in this space, which has to remain neutral in order to be available and welcoming for all. All religious items must be stored in a closet in the relaxation room to avoid any confusion.

Activities gathering like-minded MEPs, staff and activists, have multiplied in recent years. On the one hand, the EPP has launched several initiatives to activate networks and events, revitalizing to a certain extent its Christian-Democratic roots. On the other hand, secular forces have tried to counterbalance what they perceive as a religious reawakening by organizing platforms and conferences⁴⁷.

Different non-official structures test the potentiality of political socialization on a religious basis beyond party and national boundaries. Inter-groups must be distinguished from working groups. Inter-groups allow members of different commissions to meet on topics of common interest and to develop cross-sectional views, as well as to consult with relevant NGOs and lobbies. As they have no resources provided by the Parliament, they frequently have to rely on resources offered by a lobby in order to function.⁴⁸ Inter-groups are not purely deliberative as they may produce coordinated legislative action, although their actual influence is almost impossible to assess. The creation of inter-groups is regulated by an internal EP regulation stipulating that they require the support of MEPs from three different political groups.⁴⁹ This means that inter-groups are not likely to emerge around topics which are the province of a single political family or too divisive to allow bridges to be built between different ideological traditions. This is why the more militant initiatives are bound to be taken in the context of working groups, structures without precise requirements which provide an opportunity to create freely-communicating platforms and to give the illusion of a coalition broader than its actual support. Given the low salience of religion in European politics, the recruitment and impact of working groups may be difficult. The main purpose of such initiatives seems frequently to achieve visibility for the promoters or to raise awareness among MEPs rather than searching actual policy effects. Two examples are offered here, to be analyzed against the background of what was said about the

⁴⁵ Foret F., "Une question d'ordres? Discours religieux et intégration européenne à la lumière de l'affaire Buttiglione", *Les Cahiers du CEVIPOL*, n°3, 2007, <http://dev.ulb.ac.be/cevipol>.

⁴⁶ European Parliament, Communication (04/2010) CM\802863FR.doc PE431.351v01-00/Quaest, 26/1/2010, accessed 29/4/11.

⁴⁷ See the The European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics, <http://politicsreligion.eu/>, accessed 24/7/2011)

⁴⁸ Costa, Saint Martin (*op. cit.*), p. 41.

⁴⁹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/fr/00c9d93c87/Intergroupes%C2%A0.html>, accessed 9/11/2012.

American case: the Ecumenical intergroup, which aims at building up a Christian alliance with a relatively broad scope; and the Working Group on Human Dignity, promoting a more muscular and conservative agenda.

At first sight, Ecumenism is in total congruence with the pluralist and dialogic ideals of European integration, notwithstanding the fact that it is circumscribed to Christianity. It does not refer to a specific social constituency and functions more as an abstract principle than a watchword. The Ecumenical intergroup was launched in September 2009 by *László Tőkés, a former bishop of the Reformed Church of Romania, as well as former activist during the 1989 Revolution, member of the Hungarian minority and party traveller from the Greens to the EPP. This group claims, according to its original manifesto*⁵⁰, “to join efforts to strengthen Europe’s Christian roots”. The Christian heritage is stressed as a vital element building a strong and harmonious Europe. Regular meetings are planned during plenary sessions in Strasbourg, in order to share ideas and individual experiences and integrate Christian values in European policy making. The doctrine of the Ecumenical intergroup is ambiguous as it promotes interreligious dialog but in order to reinforce Christianity, and Ecumenism is intra-Christian⁵¹. The entrepreneurship of *Tőkés* has been successful in personal terms as he became a – controversial – vice-president of the European Parliament in May 2010, with special responsibility for dialogue with religious and philosophical communities. The overall impact of the Ecumenical intergroup is more doubtful as it received little political and media attention following its well-publicized launch in 2009.

Shifting now to more muscular endeavors, the Working Group on Human Dignity offers an example of embattled Christians banding together in European politics. This Group, inaugurated on 25 March 2009, aimed at strengthening the public profile of the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM), a political association of Christian Democrat parties and organizations which are active at all levels of Europe governance. The movement played a significant role in the debate on the Christian heritage of Europe at the beginning of the 2000s. The official goal of the working group is not to evangelize, but a clear hierarchy between religions is put forward to suggest that democracy is historically a Christian development⁵². An interesting feature is the territorial scope of the structure. According to its founding charter, the ambition is “to enable the European Parliament to influence policy making all over the world”. The ECPM, the matrix of the group, recruits a large part of its members outside the EU (in Eastern Europe, Russia, and the USA)⁵³. This global strategy may be a way to counter-balance the weakness of forces in Europe. Repertoires of action are multiple, as the founders of the working group are also the promoters of an NGO, the *Dignitatis Humanae* Institute. Defined as a “grassroots-led organization to promote human dignity in the political and cultural spheres internationally”, the *Dignitatis Humanae* Institute intends to coordinate working groups in national and European Parliaments⁵⁴ in order to fight back against Christianophobia.

The whole structure seems rather lightweight, relying on volunteering and symbolic political patrons (such as Rocco Buttiglione). The parliamentary working group does not seem to be the strong point of the conglomerate, suggesting that the main battle takes place within the public and media spheres. It exemplifies the strategy of religious groups declining to search for a catch-all message and a coalition-building approach, and prioritizing instead an expressive function in order to mobilize the already convinced and attract attention.

⁵⁰ http://surjan.fideszeu.hu/news_display/ecumenical_intergroup_at_the_european_parliament/, accessed 21/8/2012.

⁵¹ <http://www.neurope.eu/blog/ecumenical-intergroup-european-parliament,15/11/2009>, accessed 21/8/2012.

⁵² ‘The Working Group on Human Dignity established by EU Parliament’, <http://www.christiantelegraph.com/issue4303.html>, accessed 21/8/2012

⁵³ <http://www.ecpm.info/en/members>, accessed 21/8/2012.

⁵⁴ <http://www.dignitashumanae.com/index.php/parliamentary-working-groups/>, accessed 21/8/2012.

In Brussels understood as a social universe, the quest for religious sociability is limited to MEPs who have a high level of religious observance and who spend long periods in the European capital, two important restrictive factors. Besides this, mobility between Brussels and Strasbourg is a further obstacle for the constitution of dense religious networks. The growing strength of religious lobbying is nonetheless rapid and may contribute towards increasing the salience of religious topics in the Brussels “microcosm”. Overall, most of our interviewees said they have contact with religious lobbies a few times over a year or a term (57.3%), one-fifth more frequently (21% at least once a month) and 15.8% never. Religious lobbying follows predominantly denominational and national patterns, is dependent on the already existing religiosity of the MEPs and does not seem to have a transformative influence on political choices.

The role of religion in the relationship between an MEP and his or her constituency is similarly constrained by the fact that few people care very much about either religion or Europe in most member states. Religion is not likely to be a very important element in the weak scheme of accountability to which a European representative is subjected. However, religious networks may surface in the public relations strategy an MEP will develop to nurture his or her links with organized civil society. Several MEPs said they were struck by the number of priests in cassocks or nuns in cowls or cornets in the corridors of the EP at the invitation of their counterparts from new member states. These contacts, which oscillate between political communication with the general public and political dialog with private interests, should be considered a non-formal form of feedback for MEPs. Similarly, grassroots initiatives are developing, such as the “prayers for the European Union”⁵⁵ in several religious communities in Brussels and all over Europe. This may be a kind of “Europeanization from below”, initiated generally by private individuals but which contributes towards defining the social background within which religious MEPs move.

Finally, denominational solidarity is not very perceptible in the life of the institution and in European politics. 66.7% of MEPs interviewed in our survey consider that religion does not create any differences between MEPs who are Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or from other religions. Protestants and Orthodox may simply find sometimes that, in identity politics, the reference to the “Christian heritage of Europe” is too much associated with “Catholic heritage”. The overwhelming demographic domination of Christianity in the Parliament does not really allow the smallest denominations (Muslims, Jews) to emerge as proper forces. Cultural differences between denominations probably exist, but they are so mixed with and overpowered by national differences that they are impossible to observe. A Polish Catholic is still seen as more Polish than Catholic. However as a Polish he is supposed to be Catholic. This assignation of identity provokes the dismay of some victims of national stereotypes, a Polish secularist MEP being considered as surprising and almost “abnormal” by some of his colleagues. Ultimately, the most significant gap is said to be between religious and non-religious MEPs rather than between denominations.

Having examined the general socio-political background in which to situate the place of religion and the extent and channels taken by its influence on legislators in the US and in Europe, the challenge is to reverse the analysis and to ask what can be the influence of the parliamentary institution on religion.

⁵⁵ For an example, see <http://liege2010.wordpress.com/2011/04/01/journee-de-priere-pour-leurope/>, accessed 24/7/2011.

The effects of parliamentary institutions on religion

The effects of the longevity in office on politicians

In US legislative politics, the individual experience of a Representative is important for the way he or she deals with religion. A freshman in the Capitol does not handle his or her religious penchants in the same way as a veteran. Seasoned legislators are considered more likely to compromise on moral issues than newcomers. This does not mean that a Congressman who has several terms under his or her belt is more secularized. In fact, the House of Representatives does not seem to have the capacity to alter personal religious preferences. But the more deals you have cut, the more likely you are to cut some more by going beyond cultural conflicts. One socializing effect of the institution can be acknowledged in the legislator's concern to make the institutional machine work, and his or her increasing knowledge of how to do so. And this knowledge involves the awareness that coalitions are not built by quoting the Bible.

The experience of the legislator may have other influences. The more mature a politician is, the more likely he or she is to have strong enough positions and resources to secure re-election. This means that on moral issues, the legislator will vote more according to his or her personal preferences and less according to the preferences of his or her constituency or party. Conversely, the electoral longevity of a representative is positively correlated with his or her propensity to work with denominational lobbies. Indeed, as illustrated in American State assemblies, religious interest groups tend to have fewer resources and different methods from economic lobbies. They do not "wine and dine" legislators, but rather establish personal contacts based on common moral views through long-term exchanges. Any significant turn-over among legislators is bad news for public interest organizations like religious lobbies⁵⁶.

This importance of stability in political personnel does not augur well for the ability of religious interest groups to socialize with MEPs considering the very significant level of turnover after each European election. Roughly half of MEPs (49.6%) are "first timers" and less than one quarter has three terms or more under their belt⁵⁷. Representatives of peripheral forces may build themselves a niche as advocates for religion or secularism and search for re-election if they are able to secure constant electoral support, however small. But for candidates running in major parties, to be the spokesperson of a denominational faction in Brussels is not much of an insurance (and maybe more of a handicap) against the risk of being bypassed by national party leaders when it is time to constitute party lists.

Still less than the House of Representatives, the EP does not alter the personal preferences of MEPs regarding religion. Almost half of our respondents (45.4%) consider that the place of religion in the European Parliament is different from their experiences in national politics, but 84.7% declare that notwithstanding this, their experience in Brussels and Strasbourg failed to change their views on the relationships between religion and politics. The 15.3% whose views have changed tend more to be struck by what they perceived as excessively strong religious lobbying, they tend more to be non-religious and atheists, and their evolution is rather towards a greater vigilance about or promotion of secularism or simply a new concern about how to tackle the religious issue. Following an inverse logic, some – pretty rare – MEPs testify that their confrontation with European post-national materialism and with the moral relativism of counterparts of other nationalities has given them fresh energy to renew their fight for their beliefs. Finally, in the same way again as in the US, committed believers may learn how to disagree according to Brussels rules: they take up symbolic postures (for

⁵⁶ Den Dulk K.R., Hertzke A. D., "Conclusion: Themes in Religious Advocacy" in Cleary E. L., Hertzke A. D., *Representing God at the Statehouse. Religion and Politics in the American States*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006, p. 229.

⁵⁷ Corbett R., Jacobs F. and Shackleton M., *The European Parliament*, Londres, John Harper Publishing, 2011, p. 51.

example about the reference to the Christian heritage of Europe) while playing the game of compromise to make Parliament work.

Scholarship is ambivalent about the propensity of MEPs to “go native” after several years in Brussels and Strasbourg. Famous examples exist of well-known MEPs who are not at all professionalized. Still, European representatives play their roles in diverse ways depending on their level of commitment, their political loyalty and so on⁵⁸. An MEP protesting against the way the EU works has more chance of mobilizing religion as a protest resource and more incentive to do so. An MEP who sees himself as a policy wonk bringing his intellectual contribution to the conceptualization of European policies also has opportunities to find potential inspiration in religion. An MEP who claims to be a specialist who knows everything worth knowing about the institutional cogs of decision-making has few opportunities to draw upon spiritual inspirations and agendas. The same applies to a representative whose main purpose is to act as go-between between his electors, organized interests and European institutions, unless religious motivations frame the agenda of his or her constituency.

Effects of the longevity of religiously-loaded issues on the political agenda

Apart from the electoral longevity of politicians, the longevity of issues also needs to be taken into account. A fresh battle involving moral choices and possibly affronting religious beliefs will provoke more turmoil than a recurrent controversy where the arguments, stakes and actors are already known, and maybe eroded by time. At the House of Representatives, debates on abortion are frequently bypassed in order to avoid open confrontations and turned into technical discussions on funding mechanisms. This means that legislators do not discuss the legality of and justification for abortion or the balance between the good and bad effects of the contraceptive pill, trusting the experts to establish the ends of reproductive policy. They limit themselves to celebrations of consensual family values, with lyrical variations, and to negotiating ways and means. This makes it easier to take political responsibility for an abstention which does not as appear as a moral betrayal. Besides, the duration of the controversy suggests that there is probably a robust correspondence between the attitudes of legislators and constituencies, as opinions have become stabilized. Traditionalists may be frustrated at not being able to reopen the case, but they have to be content with the *status quo* as a lesser evil. This practice of routinization is however only possible when the *status quo* does exist and/or when a decision is reached by another authority, generally the Supreme Court. More recent problems on the agenda such as progressive sexuality have been less routinized⁵⁹. Codification routines are developing in Washington in order to prevent fierce parliamentary guerrilla actions, but isolated acts of bravado cannot be excluded. The gradual cooling of the *Don't Ask Don't Tell* controversy about how to deal with homosexuality in the army may be an example of how the legislature is coming to term with the issue.

The emergence of ethical and religious questions on the EP's agenda is relatively recent and its new salience following the 2004 and 2007 enlargements and polarization on the subject of the Turkish candidature still newer. Routinization may not have had the time to develop. Already, the dealings with issues such as research on stem cells show evidence of a learning curve. In its history, the European Parliament (like the European political system as a whole) has shown a considerable capacity to adapt and to accommodate cultural and ideological diversity while preserving its delicate mechanisms of compromise-building. One bet would be that the EP will manage to find a way to regulate disagreements on ethical issues to the reduced extent that it is obliged, given the competences of the EU. Conversely, the resilient differences between nationalities in levels of cultural liberalism

⁵⁸ Navarro J., *Les députés européens et leur rôle. Sociologie des pratiques parlementaires*, Bruxelles, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2009

⁵⁹ Oldmixon (2005), p. 28.

and above all in the ways in which debates are framed do not suggest that trans-European cleavages are likely to emerge to structure party re-alignments within a unified European political field. In other words, controversies on abortion or homosexuality do not offer immediate structures providing opportunities to Europeanize political and public spaces.

Conclusion

American and European realities mirror each other, with an inversion of the reflection. In the US, the standard is to believe but not too much; in Europe, to disbelieve but not too much. Both configurations confirm the imperative of “displaying the required credentials” for all politicians. There is the same propensity to follow a “catch-all” strategy and to comply with the prevailing cultural codes in society in order to avoid antagonizing parts of the electorate. This does not mean that representatives are hypocritical or economical with the truth: they are simply doing their job of synthesizing divergent visions and building coalitions for decision-making. This being said, differences in American and European socio-cultural configurations create distinct incentives. Greater cultural diversity in the US may offer more “niche markets” to political entrepreneurs appealing to specific denominations or religious groups, the religious factor being intertwined with territorial and class belongings. The weak personalization of European elections which blurs the profile of individual candidates and secularization mean that religion is not really efficient in winning over electors. Nevertheless, in the US as in Europe, a strong religious message may be a way to gain political and media exposure for peripheral forces, mostly on the extremes, but this comes with a cost. Intransigence on religious topics prevents representatives from compromising and building larger coalitions within and between parties, meaning that it is a renunciation of high office.

A provocative hypothesis to be tested more in depth is that the EP, due to its secondary status to national politics, could be more welcoming than the Congress for Christian conservatives willing to promote a strong religious agenda. These “soldiers of God” (Wilcox) know that they have little to lose as they are not able to influence European decision-making. Their only chance to be re-elected is to rely on a political message which is quite distinctive from mainstream parties. In such a strategy of subversion, religion may be instrumental to stir a controversy by frontally opposing pluralism and moderation. In short, the EP would keep religion at bay when the Congress domesticates it more in day-to-day politics, but would provide more structures of opportunity in the margins.

To speak now of representation as the reflection of society, the American Congress seems more hospitable to religious minorities, in congruence with a political culture promoting diversity. The comparison with the EP on this point is difficult for two reasons: religious identities are far less significant in Europe and consequently less likely to be turned into a basis for representation; there is little data to check the religious composition of the EP. Our survey suggests that majority religions at the national levels are over-represented in echo to the *cujus regio, ejus religio* principle ruling throughout European history, and that other groups (Jews, Muslims) are absent or at least invisible. In the EU, there is also less religious pressure likely to prevent the free expression of other potentially conflictual identities. Being openly gay is far less of a problem for an MEP than for a member of the House of Representatives, all the more so as the MEP is probably not well-known enough to be subject to public scrutiny. Conversely, there is less incentive on the European side to search for religious sociability. For a Congressman, religion may bridge the gap between parties through interfaith structures, bring political resources through interaction with lobbies and provide networks at home in constituencies and away from home in Washington. For an MEP, this socializing function is far more modest.

Finally, in the US as in the EU, the Parliament as an institution is not able to alter the beliefs of representatives but may act on the way these beliefs are formulated. The longer a politician has sat in an assembly, the more likely he or she is to internalize the requirement of compromise and to adopt a

low profile as regards the affirmation of religious values. Similarly, the longer an issue has been on the political agenda, the more likely it is that a way of agreeing how to disagree has emerged.

Overall, significant differences between American and European political systems are illustrated, mostly due to divergences in the intensity and social meaning of religion and secularism. But once these differences have been acknowledged, the logics at work frequently appear to be commensurable. There is no distinction in nature between the two cases. This suggests that the EU, like other polities, meets the fundamental challenge to articulate politics and religion and to accommodate it in a specific but not exceptional way.

Author contacts:

François Foret

Université Libre de Bruxelles

Avenue FD Roosevelt 39

CP 172

1050 Bruxelles

Belgium

Email: fforet@ulb.ac.be