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The Symbolic Legitimation of the European Union: Patterns and Problems

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1.   Introductory Considerations

Although the European Union remains pervasive in economic, bureaucratic, and legal terms, it has never seemed more powerless from a political perspective. This profound contradiction has manifested most recently as deep internal changes and anti-EU movements with large followings, among which Brexit is particularly relevant. Such contradiction is clearly perceived in the public eye, is felt as a danger in all institutional contexts, and occupies a significant space in public debate.

Commentators have attributed a widely perceived malaise to uncertainty, a lack of collective identity, an absence of great leaders, and a dearth of qualified political personnel, but these diagnoses identify only one part – the most visible part – of the problem. The "crisis of politics" is an answer too obvious to be satisfactory, and it is ultimately unacceptable, since it ends up confusing the cause with the effect. Indeed, accepting this answer means obscuring the more general phenomenon that lies at the very foundation of the political action, namely the acquisition of the legitimacy in name of which it is exercised.

Here the reference is not so much to legitimacy on the basic norms of living together – in Europe few would deny that collective life should be regulated by the principles of democracy – but to the "moral cohesion" of EU citizens. It is around such cohesion, understood as a non-contractual bond toward collectivity, that consensus decreases and the need for a strong symbolic reconstruction emerges.

This need is rooted deep in the history of Europe, and the single European states, in their age-old practice of exercising social control through means different from the use of pure coercion, have already dealt with similar problems. Think, for example, of liberal democracy and its fundamental need of consensus produced by the citizens' acceptance of the Constitution and political institutions, without which its exercise of power would be at risk of delegitimization.

Böckenförde reminds us that this need, far from being satisfied spontaneously or by means of a simple decision, is founded on a difficulty that he considers to be insurmountable: the contemporary secular state "is nourished by presuppositions that it cannot itself guarantee" [Böckenförde 1991, 45]. On the one hand, it is the rational and secularized polity system strictly adhering to the principle of its citizens' freedom; on the other hand, it is the "unifying bond" [*Ibidem*, 44] providing the political pact with its integrative effectiveness. The *aporia*, according to Böckenförde, therefore is this: the state can call itself liberal only if "the liberty it allows its citizens regulates itself from within on the basis of the moral substance of the individual and the homogeneity of the society," but the state "cannot attempt to guarantee those inner regulatory forces by its own efforts – that is to say, with the instruments of legal coercion and authoritative command – without abandoning its liberalness and, at a secularized level, lapsing into that pretension to totality out of which it led the way into the denominational civil wars" [*Ibidem*, 45]. To put it another way, the state cannot guarantee the presuppositions lying at the basis of its birth and development because such presuppositions remain entirely external to it. They draw, in fact, on pre-political cohesive forces.

Rusconi [2000, 199 ff.] notes that the Böckenfördian argument on the need of pre-political bonding forces does not contain any civil-political indication: Böckenförde mistrusts any attempt to found the social order on the feelings of identification and belonging with which religious faith provides the citizens (or a part of them). Accordingly, Böckenförde does not advocate restoring any form of the Christian state. At the basis of his position lies the idea that the secularization process is irreversible and that a clear separation of competences persists, in strictly institutional terms, between church and state. Such separation assigns the church the exclusively religious – therefore non-political – task of announcing the "divine message" (although this could produce political consequences), while the state, emancipated from religious authorities and impositions, maintains peace, security and freedom for its citizens in the awareness of being unable to create a

full integration. In short, for Böckenförde the aporetic situation remains inevitably open.[1]

While recognizing the importance of the *Böckenförde dictum*, Rusconi [2007 and 2010] has set himself on a different path. He defines the condition of today's European society as "post-secular" and sees a return of religion in the public sphere. Accordingly, he suggests that a way to escape, if not to solve, the *aporia* should be sought in the concept of "civil religion." The classic "civil religion" is a form of symbolic legitimation of the political society that has religious traits in a Durkheimian sense. It is based on a system of shared collective representations, linked to ritual practices of various kinds addressed to the symbols these representations refer to, which are so strongly shared that they acquire a sacred character. These representations and the corresponding symbols – in which the community casts a *transfigured* image of itself, enlarging, transforming, and idealizing salient aspects of the collective identity [Durkheim 1995, 423] – take part, thanks to the ritual, in a sacred dimension even if they are secular, namely independent from other and more particular religious symbolisms belonging to the faith communities that are present in a given society [cf. Ferrara 1999].

In the United States the concept of "civil religion" has had an extraordinary revival since Bellah [1967] talked explicitly about an "American civil religion." This is to be interpreted, along the lines of Rousseau's model, as an exemplar case of socially shared symbolic form based on a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals that places the nation above individual interests and conveniences. Such a symbolic complex, created and administrated by the state, is not institutionalized in any religious organization, nor is it mixed up with the major religious traditions present in the United States, even if it borrows from them some common factors.[2] We deal, therefore, with a concept considered to be suited for describing the American situation, where historical,

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[1] This is an argument Böckenförde [2010] has returned to and developed in more recent years, but without departing from the lines here indicated.

[2] Bellah has intervened repeatedly on this topic, most notably in Bellah [1978]. A documented analysis of the American civil religion debate between the sixties and seventies is in Bortolini [2012]. Since the middle of the eighties, this concept has become institutionalized in the scientific literature, where an important topic of discussion has been the role civil religion plays in the United States' social and political life. On this, see for example the study by Marvin and Ingle [1996] on American patriotism as civil religion organized around the flag as a "sacred symbol" regenerated periodically by "blood sacrifice," namely every time the U.S. wages wars resulting in the death of American soldiers. Civil religion is also a topic that occasionally makes its appearance in American public debate. It has for example returned to center stage with the election of Donald Trump, whose presidential inauguration was characterized by explicit confessions of Christian faith and explicit statements about God's partisanship toward the United States expressed by various clergy, considered in contrast with the traditional "non-sectarian" rhetoric of "American civil religion" [McDougall 2017]. On the origin of America's messianic exceptionalism, see Stephanson [1995].

political and social conjunctures have allowed the creation of a shared knowledge base providing the United States' collective life, political sphere included, with an extraordinary integrative apparatus.[3]

But, admitting with Durkheim that "man worships society transfigured" [Aron 1967, 348], what happens when the object to transfigure seems to be missing, namely the "force of the collectivity itself" [*Ibidem*]? This question brings us back to the condition of the European Union, devoid of a collective bond of solidarity and therefore poor in integrative force.

2.   A "Secular Canopy" for the EU

A solution to the problem of the European Union's lack of a real identity-drive can be found by moving away from a perspective that interprets religion as an essential integrative factor of individuals in society. A step in this direction has been made by François Foret in his book *Religion and Politics in the European Union*, published in 2015 and partly anticipated in prior essays, according to which secularism can play for the EU the same role that "civil religion" plays for the United States. In other words, EU's secularism is thought to be able to provide a system of shared meanings – which include, for example, human rights, pluralist democracy, non-violent conflict resolution, tolerance, individual freedom – capable of covering the European political system with a "secular canopy" that makes it worthy of respect [see Foret 2015; cf. also Foret 2014; Foret 2009a; Foret 2009b; Schlesinger and Foret 2006].

Foret develops this thesis through an in-depth investigation of the relationship between Europe and religion carried out by analyzing a vast amount of empirical data – mostly primary data deriving from a survey on members of the European parliament, combined with some secondary longitudinal datasets and a series of qualitative case studies – in which Foret introduces at least three dimensions and two working hypotheses.

The first dimension concerns the European Union, considered from a structural point of view, as a mature, although still in the making, polity system that operates according to an endogenous *modus operandi* and, by its own rules, produces effects

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[3] It is perhaps useful to recall that the United States is not the only country in which civil religion has been realized. A "republican" variant has developed in France, where dynamics different from the American ones have led the state to play a central role in the establishment of the nation [cf. Willaime 1993]. Another interesting context for the development of civil religion is Italy. Not modern Italy, which historically missed both the American solution and the French one, but Renaissance Italy with its city-republics, like Venice and Florence, supported by a specific kind of "civil Christianity," developed not only as a concept – an important elaboration of republican religion is in Machiavelli [Viroli 2010] – but also, and above all, as a practice [Viroli 2012].

at various levels of social and individual life. Such autonomy is the result of highly rationalized political practices and bureaucratic mechanisms, which are founded, among other things, on relativism, multilateralism and a process of community creation based more on interest than belonging. These contribute, along with other long-term external factors, to make religious institutions – and religion itself – lose the functions traditionally performed in the context of political action, like legitimizing the political order, influencing decision processes, and serving as a channel of construction and expression for political cultures. This in turn reinforces a series of long-standing transformations taking place in the religious field that go by the name of "secularization." The outcome is what Foret notes to be a deep change in the form of religion:

> [t]he religious reference has lost much of its societal relevance and has increasingly become marked by culture. Religion is not about to disappear from Europe but remains in the form of a strong historical trace, a significant symbolic marker, and a weak normative resource that can be enlisted for all kinds of purposes. It has however ceased to be an authoritative matrix capable on its own of framing political behaviors and issues [Foret 2015, 4].

For the latter point, Foret introduces the first working hypothesis with which he proposes to contextualize the Europe-religion relationship in time and space. This takes into account not abstract and universal entities, but rather concrete social structures within specific historical periods. The focus in particular is on the contemporary European Union – with some digressions on the brief history of its integration – as a space of "intensified political and cultural interactions" [*Ibidem*, 2] in which religious organizations and groups compete with each other, and with other social institutions, in a situation of general reduction of the legitimacy recognized to the religious field – especially to its essential feature of "owning the truth" – on the part of individuals who are increasingly free to choose, among the available options, the alternative that best fits their private aims.

The basic pluralism of the European Union represents the second dimension. Europe does not subscribe to a homogeneous and unitary body of meanings, but to a variety of symbolic systems elaborated by the plurality of the existing agencies, to which are added the symbolic systems introduced and made evident by the presence of immigrants. A corollary of this point is that reference should be made not just to *religion*, but also and especially to *religions* characterized by specific institutional configurations. Foret tends to use the singular (religion), however he appears disposed to accept this observation when he emphasizes the need to "go beyond religion seen as the consensual object of peaceful ecumenical dialogue" [*Ibidem*, 3] in order to identify how and by whom it is used. It is important to note that this vision is based

on a fundamental distinction between "religious faith" and "social uses of religion." Such distinction, even if Foret does not explicitly mention it, seems to be the one indicated by Gauchet [2004], who clearly distinguishes between *religion as faith* and *use of religious resources* made available to groups and organizations, including parties, movements and political associations, with the important specification that the use of religion does not necessarily imply a religious faith.

The third dimension concerns the social actors who come into play in the European political sphere by making use of religious rhetoric, themes, and symbols for strategic purposes. Foret's interest is mainly directed toward political actors, such as parties and party families represented in the European parliament, judges and civil servants with a mandate linked to supranational functions, and leaders of associations active in the civil society. This explains the great attention paid to the role that religion plays in the recruitment, election, and socialization of these "political elites," a role that appears to have significantly weakened – according to Foret – because of the European secularization and the decline of Christian Democracy as a dominant political force. But the primary subjects do not include only political actors in a strict sense. Churches and religious organizations configure themselves as actors within the European political space – a salient example is represented by the Vatican – where, to be heard, they must follow the "rules of the game" fixed in Brussels like all the other participants. These rules force the religious actors to conform, sometimes with reluctance, to the rational and pluralistic discourse valid in the EU deliberative arena, by accepting the linguistic repertories and organizational forms considered appropriate for that context. This implies not only abandoning any claim of truth and universality, but also accepting compromises, constructing alliances, exercising pressure, and adopting lobbying strategies. Here the analysis is founded on a previous hypothesis (Foret's second working hypothesis) concerning the structure of the relationships between the various actors, conceived as collective subjects leaded by autonomous interests with different abilities to impose themselves and therefore affect the results of the emerging negotiations and conflicts.

The analysis goes on by indicating in the European Union a "secularizing context" in which religion is a pole among many others and where moderation and reflexivity tend to prevail in both external and internal politics. What operates in this context, Foret argues, is a "mild secularism," a model of secularism that does not lead to the disappearance of religion from the public sphere, but rather to "its confinement to culture" [Foret 2015, 285]. This secularism is recognized to be a distinctive element and a determining factor for the development of a strong European identity, capable – "without using God" [*Ibidem*] – to bring to unity such a plural and differentiated community.

3. On European Symbols

Foret's proposal is of particular sociological interest since it has the merit of casting light on the possibilities, but also the limits, of a founding narrative for the European Union to be studied in light of the symbols and rituals representing the EU and its integration process.

His analysis of the European symbols can in many respects be placed within this interpretative line. Indeed, Foret describes these symbols as "wholly secular" but frequently "subjected to religious interpretations, although no sacred reference is officially acknowledged by their creators" [*Ibidem*, 203]. The European symbols, too, would thus have a "religious reading," made possible by their polysemous nature. It should be said here that, contrary to what might be expected, the "traces of religiosity" that Foret identifies link the European symbols to Christian imagery, according to an interpretation that the debate on Europe's religious heritage contributed to revive between the end of the nineties and the early years of the twenty-first century.

Among the most relevant European symbols is the flag with the twelve stars on a blue background. According to Foret, although institutional sources maintain that no religious meaning is necessarily present in the flag, this does not prevent Christian observers from interpreting it by drawing on their own symbolic repertoire (i.e. the blue as the color of the Virgin Mary, the twelve stars as the number of the apostles and their circular disposition as a reference to the Apocalypse). On the other hand, though, he specifies that any Christian reference associated to this flag "is just one among many," that it is far from having been officially recognized by the European institutions and that it appears as a "cultural trace," certainly not as a "reference to a sacred authority demanding compliance" [*Ibidem*, 205]. This consideration is important as it shifts the focus of the analysis to another, more urgent problem: the affective response toward the European flag is far lower in comparison with the affective response that the flags of the single EU member states are invested with. An explanation is found in the fact that national flags are based on a wartime past characterized by significant and glorious events for the community. The ritual commemoration of these events contributes to make these flags "sacred objects." This is not the case for the European flag, which consequently configures itself as a "weak symbol." This is clearly reflected in how seldom the twelve stars are "profaned" (unlike the American stars and stripes) during protests and demonstrations all over the world, for example by the action of burning the flag.

The Euro is another symbol that Foret pays attention to. In fact, there have been great expectations that this currency would make the EU more attractive in the eyes of Europeans, but its short history and the absence of a pre-existing political

community made the Euro, instead of a unifying symbol, the expression of an economic system responding to autonomous logics. According to Foret, a way in which despite everything the Euro could symbolize the European collectivity is through the religious themes marked on bills and coins. This operation is nevertheless contrasted by the EU's decision to avoid the exhibition of references considered "too strong" or potentially offensive for the diverse cultures that are part of the Union. An important consequence is that when religious references appear on European coins, they end up being transformed "into cultural references celebrating neither Christianity nor Europe, but national cultural heritages" [*Ibidem*, 212]. To support this conclusion, Foret takes into consideration the depiction of the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral present on the one-, two- and five-cents Spanish coins. He notes that the picture of this cathedral, which for centuries has been a point of convergence for thousands of pilgrims, could be interpreted as a symbol of European identity, but this contrasts with what the Spanish authorities declare, namely that it simply celebrates Spain's Romanesque architecture.

The European flag and the Euro are not the only symbols marked by "religious traces." Foret also addresses the architecture of European buildings, highlighting the similarities between the European parliament's building in Strasbourg and the Tower of Babel, as well as the celebration of the *Europe Day* on May 9, a date that falls in the month of Mary. There are also European symbols that, even if they do not contain any manifest religious reference, are able to "generate a feeling approaching a religious experience," such as the hemicycle of the European parliament in Brussels and the picture of President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl holding hands at Verdun [*Ibidem*, 214-215].

4.   Key Problems

As we have seen, some of the most representative symbols of the European Union are placed within a framework that link them to Christian imagery and culture, which turns out to be marginal for their decoding. It is no less important, however, to understand the specific contribution that European symbols can autonomously make to the legitimation of the EU.

An important sociological question is whether these political symbols are able to establish a second-degree meaning system, known to all although managed only by few. On closer inspection, Foret is aware of this problem, but he solves it only partially by maintaining that "the political emblems and rituals of European integration […] are too weakly codified to achieve sacred status" [*Ibidem*, 203]. This

is true; however, a few exceptions have already been mentioned, like the symbols of the European parliament's hemicycle and French-German relation, while others could be added. Consider, for example, the Schengen space, understood as a living symbol of united Europe, and the official EU anthem from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Regarding the latter, Foret points out that the absence of words in the anthem represents "a tangible obstacle to investing it with a sacred dimension" [*Ibidem*, 214]. Could the opposite be argued, considering the use that the French President Emanuel Macron made of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony on the night of his election victory?

Moreover, I propose to identify an EU counter-symbol in Islamic terrorism. The major terror attacks that have hit important European cities – transformed by the media in "disaster marathons" [Liebes 1998; see also Katz and Liebes 2007] – have actually contributed, despite their disruptive function, to an *ex-post* rituality, built by the media, which strengthened the cohesion among EU citizens. Think for example of how the media represented the public displays of solidarity after the attacks in Paris (and the spirit "Je Suis Charlie"), Nice, Brussels, Berlin, London and Manchester – to mention only the major cases.

These observations lead to a central aspect of the legitimation created by symbols: that of consensus, in which not only symbols but also the institutions that manage them become objects of consent. In this perspective, it seems important to highlight that a strategic role in the production and administration of the symbols mentioned so far is played by the EU, which through its main institutions (European Parliament, European Commission, European Council, et cetera) presides over a specific social sector. The introduction of this point allows us to think of the symbols of the European polity as responding not only to the interests of their producers, but also to the interests of their users, namely the collective and individual social actors to whom these symbols are offered. Such a dynamic implies that these actors generate, through their fruition, a consensus on the symbols that can be transferred on the producers themselves.

This gives a glimpse of some of the problems related to the symbolic exchange between European institutions and citizens. One of these problems can be identified at a general level in the fact that the European symbolic goods tend not to be recognized as "useful products," namely as symbols the recipient social groups consider to be significant for themselves since usable according to their own aims and interpretations – for example, to legitimize an identity, define a desirable future, or be reassured about the implications of important social changes.

The problem of the ineffective, or poor, use-value of European symbols is in this sense linked to the difficulties that the European Union has in fully controlling them.

This is evident for the most visible European symbols, in the administration of which social actors can intervene with (partly or completely) different interests from those of the EU institutions. The flag with the twelve stars is emblematic in this regard: the EU has neither the competencies to define the conditions of the flag's use nor the means to intervene to protect the dignity of the symbol. Foret himself underlines this point by indicating that the legal ownership of the flag, as well as the responsibility to prevent any commercial misuse or use considered to be inappropriate, remains in the hands of the Council of Europe – an organization external to the EU – and in the hands of the member states, which have the authority to make and enforce decisions on their soil about collective action and political communication. Even the Euro, controlled as it is by the European Central Bank, clearly illustrates this difficulty: the absence of an EU finance minister allows the replacement of political actors and interests with the economic ones.

Finally, a further point has to be taken into account. Even if EU symbols lose their relevance or are not officially recognized as references to religious imagery, this does not in principle prevent those symbols from introducing a certain amount of "sacredness" in the European public space. Why this does not happen? Foret answers that the EU is happy to celebrate its "secular exceptionalism," through which it can develop a strong collective identity without appealing to a "sacred" dimension. Another explanation could be, as Gauchet [2004] observed, that the idea of Europe does not assume any "community of belonging," but only the "sharing of a common historical destiny." It is important to note, however, that a "common faith" on which to found the social bond is exactly what the exchange of symbolic goods analyzed here can nourish, if only the symbolic exchange takes place successfully.

Many considerations can be drawn from this point: if the "sacred" is not an *a priori* category of society in general, can it at least be useful to the polity system that established itself in the EU? Is it possible, in other words, to build for the European Union a meaning system that makes reference to a trans-historic and meta-social dimension, thus removing the need of any further investment in the sphere of legitimation? In fact, if it is true that the use of a "sacred" dimension, that positions itself as the most authentic expression of "who we are," can result in an extremely powerful legitimation for a political and social system – as demonstrated in the past by the nation-state – it is also true that nothing is more difficult to create and maintain than this kind of legitimation (especially after Brexit).

5.   The Theism with Public Functions

To answer these questions it is worth recalling the debate, which took place between 2002 and 2004, about the inclusion of an explicit Christian or Judeo-Christian reference into the Preamble of the European Constitutional Treaty. Introducing a specific religious reference into the European Constitution was intended to link the EU project to the Christian religious tradition and its symbolic universe, with the advantage for the European Union of legitimizing itself by using symbols pertaining to religion. The legitimizing effectiveness of these symbols lies in their strength deriving, on the one hand, from being already widely recognized and, on the other, from the consensus that, over time, has accumulated on them and on the overall symbolic religious system.

It is important to emphasize that this particular form of legitimation by symbols – which I refer to here as "theism with public functions" [Guizzardi 1986] – differs from the Rousseauian notion of "civil religion" in a fundamental feature. While the latter consists of a "purely civil profession of faith" [Rousseau 1999, 166], the "theism with public functions" expresses the contribution that an institutionalized religion gives to the moral cohesion of a society by putting its own symbolic patrimony at the service of the political system [cf. Guizzardi 1986, 87]. An important consequence is that, in the latter situation, the actors at play are one more than expected: not only political actors, but also religious actors become relevant in the citizens' socialization into loyalty toward public institutions. By offering their symbolic goods to public powers, the religious actors legitimate (or ask to legitimate) the need of their presence both at a political and cultural level.

Identifying this advantage in favor of the religious field allows for a better understanding of the debate on Europe's Christian roots, in which the interests of different social actors intertwine. These actors included, for example, the single member states, each of them with a position in line with its own historical model of church-state relationship, and the European churches led by a "Catholic-Protestant alliance," in which the Vatican authorities played a prominent role, supported by other confessions and faiths.

A lot was at stake for these religious actors: the inclusion into the Constitutional Treaty of an explicit reference to Europe's Christian heritage would have encouraged both the recognition of the churches as interpreters and guardians of the EU's values and their participation in the European decision process on some key issues, for example, the ethical ones. The discursive strategy adopted by the religious interest groups to obtain this result was based on an univocal claim that Europe's roots were primarily Christian and on the presentation of the churches as repositories of knowl-

edge about human and social relationships considered to be at the origin of EU's relevant principles, like democracy and human rights.[4]

Despite the efforts of the religious actors and after much debate, the reference was not included in the Preamble of the Constitutional Treaty, which instead referred to the "cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe." How to explain such an outcome? In an essay, Foret suggests that an explanation is in the marginalization of other faiths, a marginalization that was visible even within the "Christian alliance" where "the tendency of the Catholic church to arrogate to itself the management of the European religious heritage aroused critical reactions among Protestants" [Schlesinger and Foret 2006, 74]. I would add another phenomenon that can shed light on this outcome: the increasing religious and confessional diversity of the European Union. To understand this point we have to remember Turkey's potential as an EU member state in the early two thousands and, in that same period, the integration into the EU of predominantly Orthodox post-Soviet countries, like Bulgaria and Romania. Has the expectation of a renewed religious pluralism in the European Union affected the decision not to modify the Constitutional Treaty as requested by the Catholic and Protestant actors?

By remaining on this line, a general process that the debate on Europe's Christian roots made evident is the reduction of religion to a cultural element and "raw material" usable by religious and non-religious social actors in search for identity, memory, recognition, or power. Foret calls this process the "culturalization of religion," referring to the transformation of religious symbols into communicative resources [Foret 2015, 197]. When carefully viewed, however, this process seems to involve the religious institutions as well, which actually accept to de-structure and secularize themselves to become guardians of Europe's civil morality. In this sense, it might be argued that the Christian churches' demand to be assigned the task of preserving and symbolizing the values regulating the European public sphere implied not only the culturalization of symbols and dogmas, but also a sort of inversion of the relationship between "divine revelation" and morals. Such inversion makes the morals the aim that legitimizes the existence of the churches and the "revelation" the instrument to realize this aim. This would explain the considerable, albeit minority, opposition internal to the religious institutions (especially the Catholic one) against a drifting considered to be unacceptable within a project centered, first of all, not on values and morals, but on the "truths of faith" and their meaning for the "man's destiny."

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[4] See on this Guizzardi [1986], who identifies an important anticipation of this strategy in the public theism that the Vatican of John Paul II offered to the Italian society.

6.   The Role of Religion

Let us get back to Foret's analysis, which concludes that religion plays a minor role in the European Union's political arena. As we have seen, confirmation is found in the impossibility to reach an agreement on Europe's Christian heritage (culminated in 2005 with the French and Dutch rejection of the Constitutional Treaty), which also shows the limits of the uses made of religion in constructing the supranational community.

The fact that religion is less a part of the EU political discourse and official norms does not mean that it is disappearing from the public scene. Rather, this situation implies just the opposite: the transformation of religion into a "public commodity" [*Ibidem*, 284] that a variety of social actors can use for their purposes. According to Foret, but not only for him, this happens not in contradiction but as a result of the secularization process. The hypothesis is that the deepening of the exit process of religion from the European society places religions in the foreground of the public space, with a role – it is important to note – substantially different from the role they previously had.

Many cases exemplify this new public role of religions. Foret includes the debate on Turkey's EU membership, within which Christianity and Islam provide the intervening political actors with symbolic resources that allow them to support their positions. Religion (specifically Christianity) thus assumes an "identity role" that becomes particularly visible when it is necessary to define the EU's internal and external borders as well as the meaning of "Europeaness." There is then parliamentary politics, where the Christian tradition is no longer able to create big political forces nor to function as a normative universe prescribing how to vote, but "it retains some relevance as a mark of distinction between ideological traditions and personal ambitions" [*Ibidem*, 282], although in restricted political spaces: within a party, between two parties of the same political family, or in the internal workings of an institution.

Religion works as a cultural factor also in European diplomacy, peace-building processes, and intercultural dialogue by becoming more controversial as the definition of the limits and nature of the EU increasingly comes into play. The case of the anti-Islamic cartoons published by the Danish newspaper *Jylland Posten*, on which a fierce debate exploded between 2005 and 2006, is interpreted from this point of view as a crisis, more political than religious, where religion remained a "secondary incentive" while a central role was played by political actors "with their own domestic or international agendas" [*Ibidem*, 259].

7.   A Few Consequences

The "cartoons crisis" is interesting because it illustrates the central role of mass and digital communication, in which issues with a religious connotation are reframed in the light of national concerns and according to specific narrative patterns. A point that may well be crucial in understanding some aspects of the transformation of religion into a cultural element concerns the media, which Foret identifies as an "important battle field" where religions are forced to come to terms with modernity and pluralism.

Of course, this point should be examined far beyond these simple observations. I will limit myself to underline instead only an aspect of the relationship between religions and media linked to the phenomena we are dealing with here. As Foret rightly notes, this relationship implies for religious organizations the need not only to learn and handle communication techniques to spread their own messages effectively, but also to face the fact that their meaning systems are used by other social actors pursuing their aims, responding to mainly economic interests. One could think, for example, of the commercial success of movies, television shows, and books characterized by a rereading (often non-conventional or critical) of the history of Christianity and other religious traditions or to advertisements, movie posters, and periodicals that use a religious imagery to attract the audience's attention.

It is important to note, however, that normally these uses do not create controversies; in fact, explicit conflicts only rarely emerge. This tends to happen when the use of religious references is perceived as a direct attack against the power of control that religions can exercise on their own meanings. From this point of view, it is possible to add a third option to the two alternatives that religions, according to Foret, have to choose from: either to make religious content available at the risk of distorting it ("let it be") or to ensure preservation of the dogmatic harmony by affirming an exclusive right of control ("watch your mouth"). The third option here proposed represents a choice of compromise, which might be called "use but not abuse," based on the idea that a widespread media presence, although not directly controlled by the religious organizations, can have some advantages for them and, at the same time, that aggressive reactions against uses of religious symbols thought to be inappropriate are not always rewarding. There is a high risk, indeed, that the religious field's protests lead to forms of self-censorship on the part of the actors operating in the economic field, which might end up with the preventive exclusion of the most "aggressive" religions from the non-specialist communication channels (as it is happening to Islam in many sectors of commercial communication).

However that may be, the essential point, in general terms, appears to be the shift of religions from a condition of hegemony to a minority condition [cf. on this, in addition to Foret 2015, Casanova 1994, Gauchet 2004 and Habermas 2008]. What would be the new element in such situation, which already Berger [1967] indicated "cognitive minority?" It is my understanding that the minority status is accepted in the first place by the religious institutions themselves, which exploit this situation to enhance their public role by asking to be recognized as influential *pressure groups*, although, or better, just because minority groups.

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The Symbolic Legitimation of the European Union: Patterns and Problems

Abstract: Despite the European Union's economic and institutional importance, its citizens lack a widespread feeling of belonging that binds them together and provides the EU with integrative force. This problem is at the core of Foret's book, *Religion and Politics in the European Union* [2015, New York: Cambridge University Press], which conceptualizes European secularism as capable of covering the EU's polity system with a "secular canopy" that makes it worthy of respect. This paper examines the possibilities and limits of a founding narrative for the European Union in light of symbols and rituals representing the EU and its integration process.

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