

History & Civilization - Global Governance - Tor Vergata

Religion and Politics in the 20th Century

Jacopo Cellini (EUI), 15 May 2025

John Paul II and the «Christian roots of Europe»/1

- John Paul II had faith in the capacity of the Christian message to play a role in the modern world: religion was not a thing of the past, but had potential and cultural resources to maintain public relevance.
- He believed that modern values like liberty, democracy, dignity of the human being, human rights, social justice, were rooted in the Gospel.
- Christianity was the heart of Europe, and Europe was conceived as a unitary whole, ‘from the Atlantic to the Urals’.

John Paul II and the «Christian roots of Europe»/2

Encyclical *Ecclesia in Europa*, 2003

“The Church's concern for Europe is born of her very nature and mission. Down the centuries the Church has been closely linked to our continent, so that Europe's spiritual face gradually took shape thanks to the efforts of great missionaries, the witness of saints and martyrs, and the tireless efforts of monks and nuns, men and women religious and pastors. From the biblical conception of man Europe drew the best of its humanistic culture, found inspiration for its artistic and intellectual creations, created systems of law and, not least, advanced the dignity of the person as a subject of inalienable rights.(46) The Church, as the bearer of the Gospel, thus helped to spread and consolidate those values which have made European culture universal.

With all this in mind, the Church of today, with a renewed sense of responsibility, is conscious of the urgency of not squandering this precious patrimony and of helping Europe to build herself by revitalizing her original Christian roots.”

The Preamble of the European Constitution (2004)/1

- The European Constitution was drafted by a constitutional assembly in 2003, and signed by EU Member States in 2004. It never entered into force.
- The Preamble listed the founding values of the EU, and there was a heated debate about the possibility to include a reference to Europe's 'Christian heritage'.
- First draft of the text: «Drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, which, nourished by the civilisation of Greece and Rome, characterised by spiritual impulse always present in its heritage and later by the philosophical currents of the Enlightenment, has embedded within the life of society its perception of the central role of the human person and his inviolable and inalienable rights, and of respect for law.»

The Preamble of the European Constitution (2004)/2

- Pressures from the Church, and members of the constitutional convention (not only Christian democrats, but also right-wing conservatives), to include an explicit reference to the «Christian roots of Europe».
- Final text: «Drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, whose values are always present in its heritage, and which has embedded within the life of society its perception of the central role of the human person and his inviolable and inalienable rights, and of respect of law».



Signing of the Constitutional Treaty in Rome, 2004

Christian roots of Europe - the Catholic discourse

Speech of Benedict XVI at the European Parliament, 30 March 2006

As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, the principal focus of her interventions in the public arena is the protection and promotion of the dignity of the person, and she is thereby consciously drawing particular attention to principles which are not negotiable. Among these the following emerge clearly today:

- protection of life in all its stages, from the first moment of conception until natural death;
- recognition and promotion of the natural structure of the family - as a union between a man and a woman based on marriage - and its defence from attempts to make it juridically equivalent to radically different forms of union which in reality harm it and contribute to its destabilization, obscuring its particular character and its irreplaceable social role;
- the protection of the right of parents to educate their children.

These principles are not truths of faith, even though they receive further light and confirmation from faith; they are inscribed in human nature itself and therefore they are common to all humanity. The Church's action in promoting them is therefore not confessional in character, but is addressed to all people, prescindendo from any religious affiliation they may have. On the contrary, such action is all the more necessary the more these principles are denied or misunderstood, because this constitutes an offence against the truth of the human person, a grave wound inflicted onto justice itself.”

Christian roots of Europe - the populist discourse/1

- Since the early 2000s, right-wing and populist parties have referenced Europe's **Christian roots** (or: identity, heritage traditions)
- The primary target of populists is not secularism (they don't have a religious background and don't necessarily agree with the Catholic worldview), but **multiculturalism** and **immigration**.
- Methodological note: there are many kinds of populisms, but they have some common features: criticism of elites, defense of a unified 'people' with a **common identity** (mainly defined **against Islam**).
- In the populist discourse, Christian identity («Christian roots of Europe», the cross, Church towers...) is not a value system, but a **cultural identity marker** that is not associated with religious practice. It serves a political purpose.

Christian roots of Europe - the populist discourse/2

“The true Europe has been marked by Christianity. The universal spiritual empire of the Church brought cultural unity to Europe, but did so without political empire. [...]

As the patrons of the false Europe construct their faux Christendom of universal human rights, we are losing our home... Europe’s multicultural enterprise, which denies the Christian roots of Europe, trades on the Christian ideal of universal charity in an exaggerated and unsustainable form. [...] We are to affirm the very colonization of our homelands.”

The Paris Manifesto, 2017 (<https://thetrueeurope.eu>)

Regardless of future developments in the domestic Italian political scene and of the fact that we belong to different European party groups, we look at you as our ally and our fellow combatant in the fight for the preservation of European Christian heritage and the tackling of migration.

Letter of Hungarian PM Viktor Orban to Italy’s Vice-President of the Council Matteo Salvini, 29 August 2019

In today's world, how would you characterize the relation between religion and politics?

Discuss.

Reading Materials

Chapter 7 (*Identity and Values: Europe and the Other*) of Roy, Olivier (2019) *Is Europe Christian?* C. Hurst & Co.

Chapter 7 (*Christian Europe? The use and abuse of Christian values and the populist debate*) of Berend, Ivan T. (2019) *Against European Integration: The European Union and its Discontents*. Routledge.

(uploaded on DIDA)

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