

History & Civilization - Global Governance - Tor Vergata

Religion and Politics in the 20th Century

Jacopo Cellini (EUI), 16 April 2023

Religion and politics

- Separation between religion and politics: a long process that was accelerated by the French revolution. For centuries, there was no clear distinction between political and religious power.
- Religions are not only private affairs: they form and sustain communal institutions, as well as prescribing collective rituals and directives for communal behaviors.
- The ‘ambivalence of the sacred’ (R. Scott Appleby): religion can promote political violence and conflict, but also non-violent civic engagement and conflict resolution. By extension, religions can be supporters of the status quo, but also promoters of rebellion against what is perceived as an unjust system.

Religion and politics after the French revolution

- The French revolution played a pivotal role in shaping a new discourse and imaginary concerning the political sphere.
- Replacing religion as source of identity and legitimation of power: the cult of Reason. French revolutionaries created a **political religion**: a system of beliefs and rituals built around a political ideology.
- Long-lasting consequence of the French revolution: birth of a **civic (or civil) religion**. The concept of civic religion concerns the implicit religious values of a nation, as they are expressed through public rituals, symbols and ceremonies.



Temple of Reason, Ivry-la-Bataille (France)

The politicization of religion

- Politicization of religion: religious symbols, institutions and rhetoric are employed in order to mobilize resources for certain policies.
- Examples: public rhetoric of the Iranian regime after the 1979 revolution; recent radicalization of Islamist discourse and practices; but also current debates over the possibility to display religious symbols in public places in Europe.
- The politicization of religion can be employed both by religious and civil authorities.

Roman Catholicism

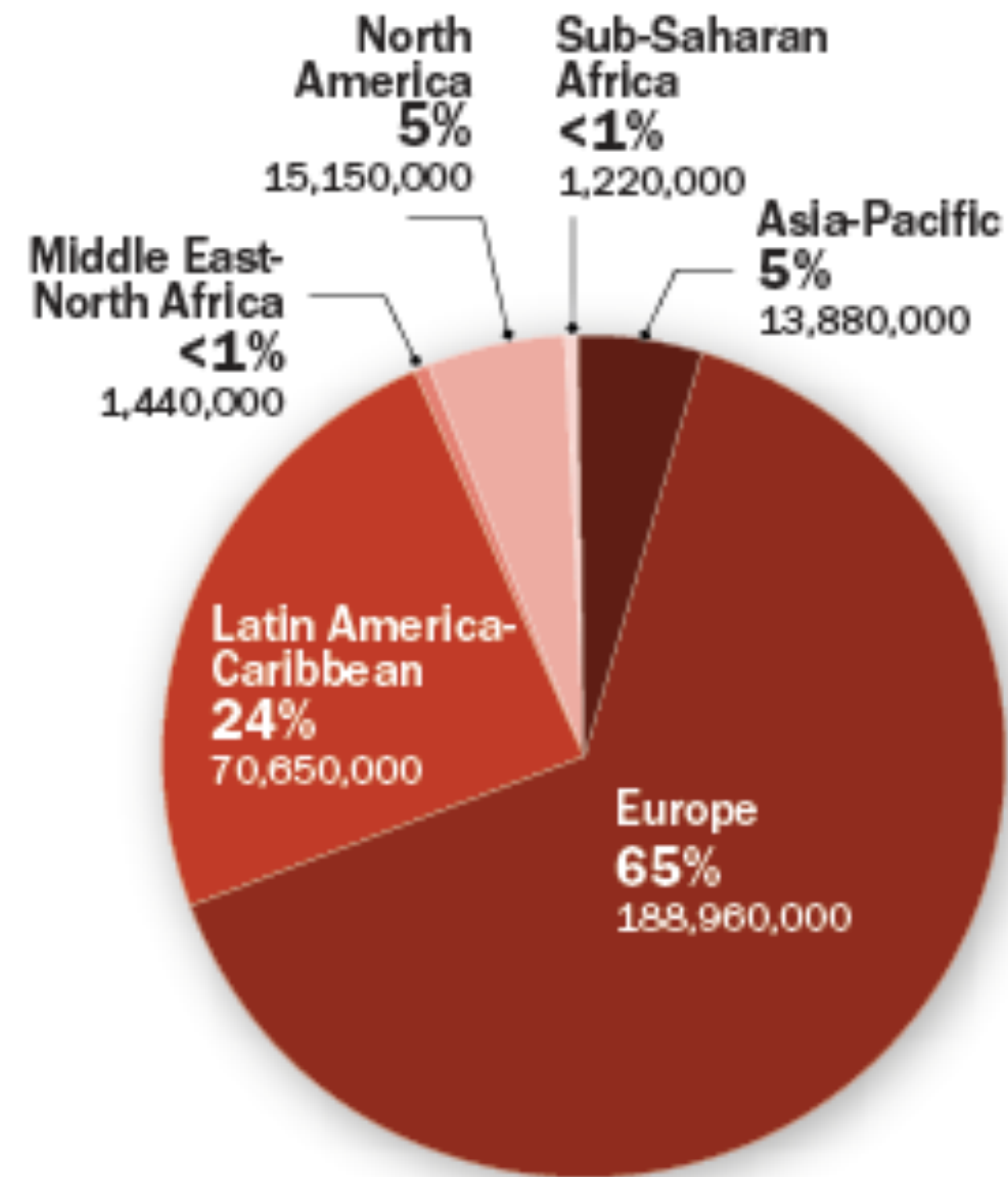
Data on [Christian denominations](#), and [Global Catholic population](#)

- Half of the world Christians are Catholic.
- Number of Christians (both Protestants and Catholics) is growing rapidly in the Global South.
- Change in the world Catholic population over a century (1910-2010): Europe is losing centrality, although it still has cultural and theological influence.
- Latin America: from supporter of authoritarian regimes, to supporter of the rights of the poor.
- Africa and Asia: rights of religious minorities.

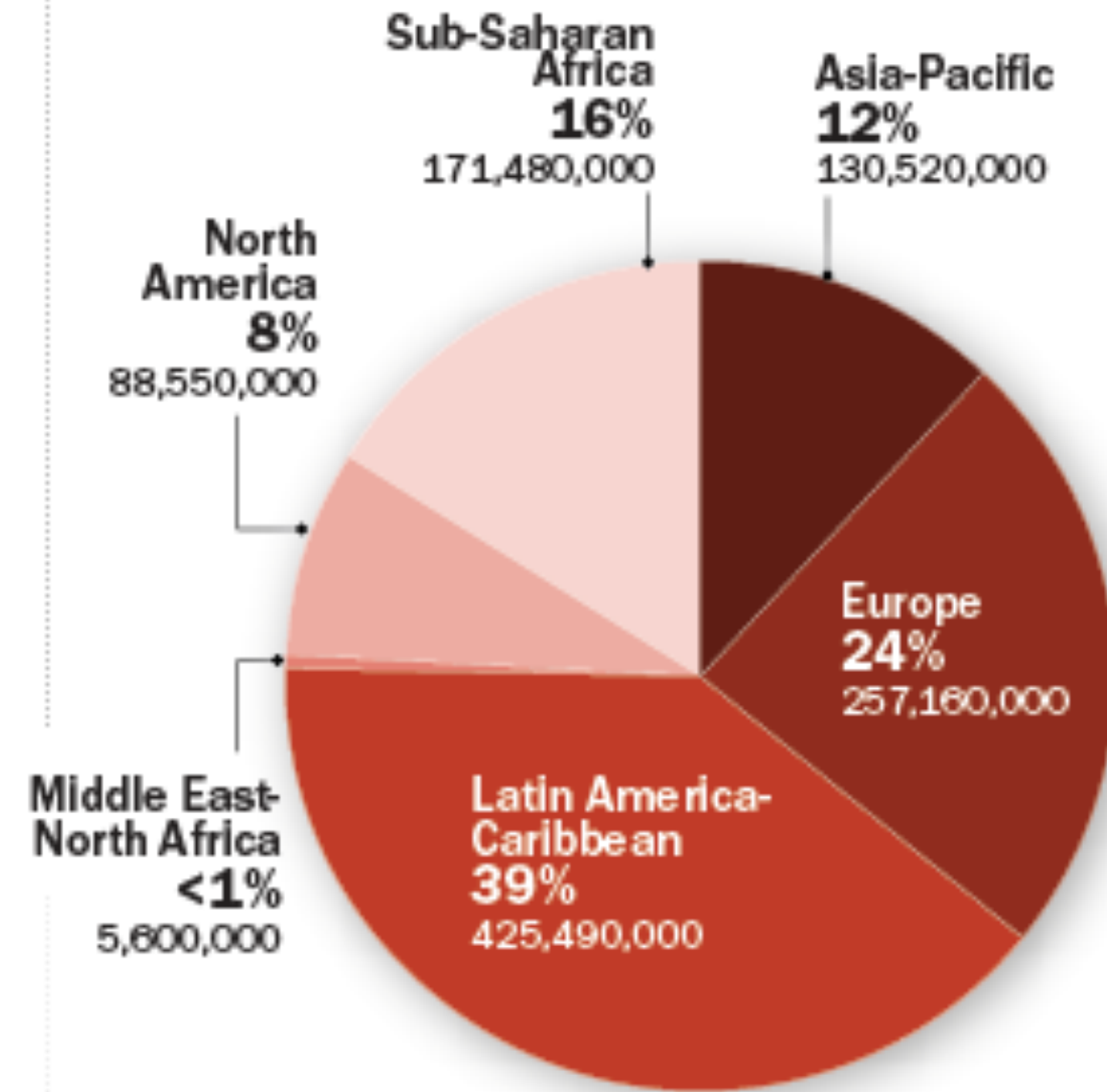
Regional Distribution of Catholics, 1910 and 2010

Percentage of all Catholics that live in each region as of ...

1910



2010



Figures for 1910 are from Pew Research Center analysis of data from the World Christian Database. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Pew Research Center

The Catholic Church

- Role of the Catholic Church: official guardian and interpreter of the Christian message, which is based on the sources of the faith - the Holy Scriptures - and on the Church's Magisterium, i.e. the entire set of teachings issued by the ecclesiastical authority, in the form both of collective documents and of the pronouncements of the pope.
- Uniqueness of the Catholic Church: State sovereignty (Vatican State), diplomatic structure.
- The pope can resort to direct diplomacy: role of John XXIII in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis; Francis' activism on economic and climate issues.

Catholic global activism in international relations

- The Catholic Church includes a wide array of national or regional episcopal conferences, religious orders, relief and development organisations, charities, hospitals and educational associations (huge hub with deep roots in civil society).
- Catholic NGOs in the second half of the twentieth century expanded their core mission from the long-standing charitable, relief and refugee work to incorporate broader goals like human rights advocacy, peace-building and international social justice (Comunità di Sant'Egidio's role in Mozambique peace agreement in 1992).
- Engagement on human rights, and especially on religious freedom; focus on inter-religious dialogue.

Religion and political parties

- The subject of religious parties has recently attracted the attention of the literature, mostly in consequence of the rise of Islamic political parties in the Middle East.
- There are different ways and degrees of intensity in which religion is linked to political parties: from religious parties to secular parties competing for the votes of religious citizens by filling their programs and discourse with religious language (politicization of religion).
- Christian democratic parties played a crucial role in building stable democracies in Western Europe.

Reading Materials

Required

Jeffrey Haynes (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*. Routledge (2nd edition) 2016.

- Chapter 3: Allen D. Hertzke, *The Catholic Church and Catholicism in global politics*

Suggested

Hellemans, Staf (2001) *From 'Catholicism Against Modernity' to the Problematic 'Modernity of Catholicism'*. In: *Ethical Perspectives*, 8/2, 117-127

(all uploaded on DIDA)

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