

Catholicism and European Politics: Introducing Contemporary Dynamics

Michael Daniel Driessen

Department of Political Science and International Affairs, John Cabot University, 00165 Rome, Italy; mdriessen@johncabot.edu



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1. Introduction

Recent research on political Catholicism in Europe has sought to theorize the ways in which Catholic politics, including Catholic political parties, political ideals, and political entrepreneurs, have survived and navigated in a post-secular political environment. Many of these studies have articulated the complex ways in which Catholicism has adjusted and transformed in late modernity, as both an institution and a living tradition, in ways which have opened up unexpected avenues for its continuing influence on political practices and ideas, rather than disappearing from the political landscape altogether, as much previous research on religion and modernization had expected. Among other things, this new line of research has re-evaluated the original and persistent influence of Catholicism on the European Union, contemporary European politics and European Human Rights discourses. At the same time, new political and religious dynamics have emerged over the last five years in Europe that have further challenged this developing understanding of contemporary Catholicism's relationship to politics in Europe. This includes the papal election of Pope Francis, the immigration "crisis", and, especially, the rise of populism and new European nationalists, such as Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński and Matteo Salvini, who have publicly claimed the mantles of Christian Democracy and Catholic nationalism while simultaneously refashioning those cloaks for new ends. These trends raise difficult new research questions about the relationship of Catholicism, in its broad sense, to the very idea of Europe and its future institutional and spiritual form. Finally, all of these dynamics are intertwined with the continuing transformation of European religiosity, in often contradictory fashion, and the long-term shift in religious influence from Europe to the global south.

The present volume seeks to take stock of these trends and to theorize the contemporary dynamics of Catholicism and European Politics from a multi-disciplinary perspective. In doing so, the volume develops and builds on the growing attention within contemporary political science scholarship to the Catholic contribution to twentieth century European politics and its aftermath. A spate of recent and forthcoming books and edited volumes,¹ in fact, as well as the first English translations of important postwar Catholic political figures such as Wolfgang Böckenförde and Augusto del Noce,² have created something of a Catholic moment in the study of European politics. In part, this scholarship offers a corrective to the enduring perception that mainstream political science, particularly in

¹ This includes recent books like Olivier Roy's (2020) *Is Europe Christian?*, James Chappel's (2018) *Catholic Modern*, Xabier Itçaina's (2018) *Catholic Mediations in Southern Europe*, Leonard Taylor's (2020) *Catholic Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*, Samuel Moyn's (2015) *Christian Human Rights*, Ozzano and Giorgi's (2016) *European Culture Wars and the Italian Case*, Michael Driessen's (2014) *Religion and Democratization*, Carlo Invernizzi Accetti's (2019) *What is Christian Democracy?*, Forlenza and Thomassen (forthcoming) *Italy's Christian Democracy*, Jan-Werner Müller (forthcoming) *Christian Democracy: A New Intellectual History*, Giuliana Chamedes (2019) *A Twentieth Century Crusade*, François Foret's (2015) *Religion and Politics in the European Union*, in addition to edited volumes on Catholic politics in Europe, like Bailey and Driessen's (2016) *Mapping Contemporary Catholic Politics in Italy*.

² For Augusto Del Noce, see *The Age of Secularization*, (Del Noce 2017) and for Wolfgang Böckenförde, see *Selected Writings* vol. 1, (Böckenförde 2017) and vol. 2, (Böckenförde 2020, ed. Mirjam Künkler and Tine Stein).

the United States, had short shrifted the study of postwar political Catholicism in Europe, devoting far more intellectual and scholarly attention to the study of socialist political parties and ideas (who mostly lost postwar elections throughout Western Europe) than Christian Democratic ones (who mostly won them). Rather than view Christian Democracy and mid-century Catholic political thought as a compromise position which served as a prelude and transition to a broader secularization of society and politics, these works have re-evaluated the distinct and determinative project of Catholic political modernity on its own terms, as a generative set of ideas and policies, imbued with both religious and political dynamism, that deeply marked the reconstruction of European political institutions and nation-states and which oriented societal preferences in powerful ways.

One of the themes of many of these works, thus, consists in a re-appraisal of the religious inspirations of the edifice of postwar political construction in Europe. A number of the founding fathers of Europe, who were also leading postwar state-builders in their own countries, constructed political institutions which explicitly drew on a Christian democratic conception of politics. This approach was not exclusive, and made explicit appeals to the multiple political traditions inspiring postwar European politics, including socialist, liberal and other enlightenment-inspired traditions. But the institutions these statesmen built included clearly marked Christian democratic ideals, including its skepticism of the modern nation-state; its promotion of transnational political organization; its insistence on the transcendent origins of human dignity and human rights; its religious and communitarian conception of individual freedom; its promotion of family-welfare politics; and its embrace of subsidiarity as an orienting device for cooperation between state and civil society.

This edifice represents a synthesis, what [Chappel \(2018\)](#) terms the “Catholic modern”, that was by no means assured or obvious at the beginning of the century and which resulted from a series of ideational and strategic triumphs and failures by Catholic actors of political and religious authority in the first part of the 20th century. As both Diotallevi and Taylor highlight in this volume, a “liberal” (Diotallevi) or “cosmopolitan” (Taylor) vision of Catholic modernity narrowly emerged triumphant from a period of fierce debates with more authoritarian and conservative forces over the political engagement of the Catholic Church in liberal democratic Europe. That victory, as formally embodied in the Second Vatican Council and the papacy of Pope Paul VI, was impressive in its political fecundity, generating democratic Catholic political mobilization across Europe and the globe ([Philpott 2004](#); [Huntington 1991](#)). And yet, as the contributors of this volume also highlight, that victory carried with it unresolved religious–political dilemmas which have once again resurfaced with political force in Europe.

Like many re-appraisals, therefore, this current scholarly revisitation also represents a reckoning, both over the promise and achievements which flowed from the mid-century Catholic synthesis of modernity, and over the meaning of its loss for contemporary Europe as that synthesis has gradually come apart. In various ways, the contributions of this volume outline the features of Catholic politics which have formed in Europe *after* the synthesis of Catholic modernity. In doing so, several of the essays have also returned with a critical eye to the origins of that synthesis to better understand the basic elements which forged it and which appear to be breaking apart and recomposing in novel ways today.

Drawing on the research presented in this volume, this introductory essay maps out a number of the salient features defining the relationship between Catholicism, including its institutions, leaders and people, and contemporary European politics. Particular attention is given to the positions staked out on Europe by the last two popes (Francis and Benedict XVI) and the way in which those positions reflect wider trends in Catholic political mobilization across the continent. These features provide a measure of the lengths to which the mid-century Catholic synthesis of modernity has unraveled, as well as the new paths that have been cleared as a result for a variety of expressions of Catholic-inspired politics in Europe, including new forms of both Christian Nationalism and Christian Humanism. The second half of the essay then introduces the contributions of the volume and the ways in which they offer a guide to the evolving relationship between Catholicism and European

politics. Thus, several authors register the contemporary diversity of Catholic political dynamics, which include new forms of Catholic Nationalism in Poland (Resende and Hennig), new European Catholic discourses on women and gender (Giorgi and Palmisano) as well as Pope Francis' politics from the periphery (Barbato). Other authors re-evaluate the political and social origins of these new forms of politics, revisiting the evolution of Catholic debates on human rights discourses (Taylor) in addition to the distinct Catholic political traditions animating social, theological and political changes in the late 1960s (Diotallevi).

2. The Evolution of Catholic Modernity and European Politics after John Paul II

2.1. Pope Benedict XVI, Catholicism and Europe

The year 2005 represents a convenient date of sorts for marking a critical transition phase in the ongoing evolution of Catholic modernity, its relationship with European politics and its tumble into disarray. In April of that year, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI, following the death of Pope John Paul II.

While Ratzinger, who served under John Paul II as the powerful head of the Holy See's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was understood by many to guarantee a continuity with the pontificate of John Paul II, his papacy marked important changes as well. In geopolitical terms, Benedict XVI could be considered the first truly post-Cold War Pope. As such, his papacy began at the endpoint of the long political arc of postwar, Catholic-inspired democracy-building, first in Western Europe, and then around the globe, as communist and authoritarian regimes fell in Catholic countries across Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and East Asia. The end of the Cold War might have meant the triumph of a "Catholic wave" of democracy (Philpott 2004), but it also loosened the geopolitical pressures structuring the alliance between Catholic forces and liberal secular forces which had, in no small part, guided their cooperation against the authoritarian, communist and atheist Soviet empire.

As a result, the early years of the new millennium represented a crucial phase for the evolution of Catholic modernity, one which offered multiple possibilities for Catholic politics in Europe. Thus, on the one hand, the early 2000s revealed newfound interest in the contributions of religion to the public sphere, in both the functioning of domestic European politics and the European Union as a whole. The high-level dialogues in 2004 between Joseph Ratzinger and non-religious public intellectuals such as Jürgen Habermas (see Habermas and Ratzinger 2007) and Marcello Pera (see Ratzinger and Pera 2007), for example, revealed a common pre-occupation with the crisis of an overly technocratic and individualist-oriented liberalism on the continent which many felt was losing its capacity to inspire meaningful political solidarity among its citizens. Concerns over this crisis of solidarity generated interest in what Habermas termed the "post-secular" contributions of religious forces to European politics. By theorizing the post-secular, Habermas recognized both the surprising dynamism retained by religious forces in late modernity and their potential, in both normative and sociological terms, to help regenerate democratic motivations and legitimacy.

At the same time, and in contradictory ways, the early 2000s also confirmed the further distancing of the European Union's political institutions from the religious logic of mid-century Catholic thought and organizations. In 2006, the European Court of Human Rights made its first, widely felt ruling in the *Lautsi* case against the display of crucifixes in Italian public schools. In addition, both the proposed EU constitution of 2004 and the subsequent 2007 Treaty of Lisbon saw the rejection of any mention of Christianity or invocation of God or the divine in the preamble to their texts. The perplexity with which many European MPs responded to Catholic resistance to these omissions seemed to confirm not so much the overt hostility of European forces to religion but the widespread internalization by public and political elites of a wholly secular model of European politics (Foret 2015).

In a pair of key speeches in April 2005, in the days immediately before and after the death of Pope John Paul II, Ratzinger strongly condemned these decisions. Drawing on his

dialogues with Habermas and Pera, he lamented them as historically inaccurate omissions which aggressively cut Europe off from vital roots. In particular, he saw the decisions as institutionalizing a fully positivistic understanding of rights and values which had falsely emancipated itself from any reference to divine transcendence. In doing so, he argued, the omission facilitated a “dictatorship of relativism”³ incapable of protecting the dignity of its citizens against the inconstant desires of individuals or the state. Ratzinger proposed, instead, that the rationalist achievements of the European Enlightenment, as embodied in the European Union, required a recuperation of religious thought and truth to limit, orient and renew them. Roy (2020), Barbato (in this volume) and others have characterized this project as one focused on religion’s capacity to build and sustain shared forms of European culture and public morality.

Thus, in a keynote address he gave when receiving the prize of Saint Benedict in Subiaco on 1 April 2005, entitled “Europe in the Crisis of Cultures,” Ratzinger (2005a) argued,

“Thus, even the rejection of the reference to God is not the expression of a tolerance that desires to protect the non-theistic religions and the dignity of atheists and agnostics, but rather the expression of a conscience that would like to see God cancelled definitively from the public life of humanity, and relegated to the subjective realm of residual cultures of the past. Relativism, which is the starting point of all this, thus becomes a dogmatism which believes itself to be in possession of the definitive scope of reason, and with the right to regard all the rest only as a stage of humanity, in the end surmounted, and that can be appropriately relativized. In reality, this means that we have need of roots to survive, and that we must not lose sight of God, if we do not want human dignity to disappear.”

For some scholars, this distancing and loss of Catholic relevance for European politics also seemed to reflect the new forms of religiosity which accompanied the decline of Catholic mobilization in clear political formations like Christian democracy. Thus, while a number of sociologists highlighted the unexpected persistence and adaptation of European religiosity to late modernity, many of them also argued that it had come at the cost of political and cultural relevance (Turner 2011; Diotallevi 2016; Turner and Forlenza 2016; Roy 2020). Roy (2014, 2020) has described this process as the triumph of religiosity over religion in Europe, and the reformatting or adaptation of the Catholic Church and its faithful to more individualistic, self-help and expressive forms of religiosity. He and others (Turner 2011; Diotallevi 2016; Turner and Forlenza 2016) have argued that the consolidation of these new forms of religiosity has eaten away at the capacity of religious authorities in Europe to call forth social mobilization of any kind, in favor of human rights, democratic solidarity or conservative social values. Instead, 21st century religiosity in Europe, they argue, has facilitated forms of religious fragmentation which might maintain a Catholic social presence but which is organizationally and culturally ill-equipped to mount nationally relevant political ideas, movements, associations and parties. Other scholars (Bailey and Driessen 2017) have also observed, however, that the religious dynamism which continues to exist within European societies, often in the form of new religious movements, charismatic communities, or service-oriented organizations, can provide resources for politically relevant, post-secular, religious–political activity. In this volume, Giorgi and Palmisano’s analysis of new Catholic women’s discourses in Europe offers one example of the manifold developments of Catholic religiosity within European modernity and its impact both on contemporary Church thinking and its relationship to European politics.

³ From his homily *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice* (Ratzinger 2005b), on 18 April 2005: “We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires. We, however, have a different goal: the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure of true humanism. An “adult” faith is not a faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty; a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to all that is good and gives us a criterion by which to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth.”

In either case, the development of 21st century Catholic religiosity also appears to be linked to the larger dynamics driving the decline in mass-based political parties and associational life in various spheres of society across Europe (Biondi 2016). In particular, contemporary European religiosity has been strongly influenced by the growth of a wider, post-materialist European culture (Norris and Inglehart 2011), one in which political choices and life decisions are made beyond parties and ideologies, and which are more directly the result of individually arrived at reflections and preferences. Romano Prodi, who many viewed as a paragon of the new Catholic politician, embodied the Catholic version of this dynamic in his 2005 response to protests from Italian Bishops against voting for a referendum on assisted fertilization, in which he famously quipped, “I am an adult Catholic and I will cast my vote.” The idea of “adult Catholics”, capable of reasoning from their faith to their political choices without mediation from religious authorities or religiously cued political parties (and who were no less Catholic for doing so), epitomized in various ways a new, and more fragmented, relationship between religious faith, collective mobilization and European politics.

Scandals, both financial and sexual, also marked this period, including in Ireland, Belgium, and Spain, further impacting the political credibility and influence of the Catholic Church in European politics. As much as sociologists observed persistent religiosity across Europe, various studies also noted multiple signs of decline in religious attendance and religious literacy, particularly among new youth cohorts (Voas 2009; Garelli 2013; Inglehart 2021).

Finally, the early years of the new millennium also witnessed the acceleration of civilizational discourses by a number of political actors and movements across Europe, especially in the wake of the events of 9/11 (Ozzano 2016; Bolzonar 2016). In doing so, these parties and politicians typically made rhetorical reference to preserving or protecting Europe’s Christian identity and roots but in ways that retrieved nationalist and confessional sentiments from a different era. These movements often belonged to far-right and populist movements, such as the Front National in France and the Lega Nord in Italy who, at the time, lived on the margins of both political and religious power. Their politicians were not particularly religious people themselves, did not especially defend traditional religious values (especially with respect to sexual ethics), nor seek friends with the Vatican establishment or elaborate a coherent, faith-driven vision of politics. While a number of Catholics voted for these parties throughout this period, they were typically dismissed and chastised by the institutional Church in Rome (Guolo 2011; Bolzonar 2016).

2.2. Pope Francis and the Acceleration of New Trends

This “long 2005”, thus, proved to be a paradox of sorts. The beginning of Europe’s “turn to religion” in that period, manifest in the call for post-secular politics, was made at one of the highest peaks of secular political modernity in European history, marked by a widespread rejection of religious influence in European politics and a concomitant reification of religious privatization as a defining feature of modernization. Both of these dynamics, in turn, made it less likely that Catholic politics (post-secular, post-Christian or otherwise) could function again in some public way in Europe.

The beginning of the next decade marked a subsequent shift, with the appearance of a series of relatively unexpected exogenous events which would redirect the flow of a number of the dissonant religious–political dynamics of the early 2000s. These events included the European debt crisis, the concentrated influx of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan which followed it, the sharp rise in popularity of populist parties which accompanied both of these events, and the election of Pope Francis who responded to all of them. Together, these events have accelerated but also significantly altered the growth of a number of the forces described above, as the contributions to this volume detail.

For his part, Pope Francis, the first non-European pope in over a thousand years, has reoriented papal relations with Europe in ways which might be aptly described as bringing forward post-secular dynamics and insights. As Barbato, Giorgi and Palmisano’s essays

in this volume describe, Francis has defined his papacy as one that regards Europe (and European politics) from the periphery (see also [Ferrara 2016](#); [Giovagnoli 2019](#); [Faggioli 2020](#)). In major addresses to European institutions (including the European Parliament and Council of Europe in 2014, the Heads of State and Government of the European Union in 2017, and the Bishops' Conference of the European Community in 2020), Francis has often lamented the loss of Europe's élan ([Francis 2020](#)), and its creative fecundity, especially in the fields of human rights ([Francis 2016](#)). In one of his first major speeches to European institutions, he referred to Europe as "elderly and haggard" and a barren "grandmother" ([Francis 2014a, 2014b](#)). In a 2016 speech while receiving the Charlemagne Prize, he lamented, "What has happened to you, the Europe of humanism, the champion of human rights, democracy and freedom? . . . What has happened to you, Europe, the mother of peoples and nations?"

Throughout his pontificate, Francis has invited Catholics, and especially Catholic politicians, to help renew Europe, to make her fertile again, a process he envisions as rebuilding Christian Humanism, one he describes as "humble, generous, joyful and of the people" ([Francis 2015](#)). In doing so, Francis has imagined a relationship between Catholicism and European politics which is defined by service, mercy, witness, and its relationship to the poor. As in the quotes above, Francis sees Europe as the original mother and champion of human rights, democracy and freedom, and repeatedly "dreams of a new European humanism" ([Francis 2014a, 2014b, 2016, 2017](#)). Like Benedict XVI, Francis argues that the renewal of the project of humanism in Europe requires an openness to transcendence and to its Christian roots. In his address to the Heads of State and Government of the European Union in 2017, for example, he recalled Alcide de Gasperi's 1954 speech on Europe, in which de Gasperi says, "Even if I affirm with Toynbee, that at the origins of European civilization there is Christianity, I do not intend by that to introduce any exclusive confessional criteria to the appreciation of our history. I only want to speak about that common European heritage, of that unified moral sense which exalts the nature and the responsibility of the human person, with his ferment of evangelical fraternity . . . with his desire for truth and justice, honed by a thousand-year-old experience" ([De Gasperi \[1954\] 1990](#)).

Francis, again like Benedict XVI, has also emphasized the centrality of Christ in his vision of humanism, writing that, "We can only speak about humanism by beginning with the centrality of Jesus, discovering in him the features of the authentic face of man . . . Jesus is our humanism." ([Francis 2015](#)).

Yet, Francis has been simultaneously wary of identifying Europe too closely with Christianity, which he links to a dangerous account of Christian triumphalism and even colonialism and which he contrasts with Christian Humanism as a politics of service. Thus, in an interview in 2016, commenting on his identification of the multiple roots of Europe, Francis said,

"We need to speak of roots in the plural because there are so many. In this sense, when I hear talk of the Christian roots of Europe, I sometimes dread the tone, which can seem triumphalist or even vengeful. It then takes on colonialist overtones. John Paul II, however, spoke about it in a tranquil manner. Yes, Europe has Christian roots and it is Christianity's responsibility to water those roots. But this must be done in a spirit of service as in the washing of the feet. Christianity's duty to Europe is one of service." ([Francis 2016](#))

One important feature of this vision of European humanism has been Francis' consistent promotion of interreligious dialogue as a key to structuring the political engagement of the Catholic Church with Europe. As Barbato explores in this volume (see also [Driessen forthcoming](#)), through his support for dialogue, Francis has embraced a model of religious-civic engagement which has promoted multi-religious collaboration, active citizenship and religious renewal within society.

Critically, while Francis has affirmed the political vocation of Catholics, he has deflected any direct political influence of the Church in party politics, or in favor of specific

Catholic alliances or the explicit mobilization of the faithful for political positions. Antonio Spadaro, a close collaborator of the Pope and director of the *Civiltà Cattolica*, has referred to this stance as Francis' "post-Carolingian" position on Europe, writing,

"In this way, [Pope Francis] radically refutes the idea of the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth, which was at the base of the Holy Roman Empire and all similar political and institutional forms, such as and including the 'party.' If so understood, in fact, the 'chosen people' would enter into an intricate interweaving of religious, institutional and political dimensions that cause them to lose awareness of their universal *diakonia* and would place them in opposition to those who are alienated, who do not belong, the 'enemy' (Spadaro 2016, p. 339).

This also sheds light on the meaning of Francis' remarks (2020) that he dreams "of a Europe marked by a healthy secularism, where God and Caesar remain distinct but not opposed" as well as the absence of attempts by the Vatican under Francis to encourage any remobilization of Catholic associational life in politics, as Italian Bishops sought to do in vain during the 2010–2011 crisis by rallying various Catholic unions, movements and personalities to step into the fray to form a new Catholic political alliance. Those attempts have been suspended during the papacy of Francis.

Some scholars have argued that the public diplomacy of the Pope has become paradoxically more clerical as a result, or at least as clerical as other papacies (Diotallevi 2016). Without the institutional mediation of society-wide Catholic political associations, the papacy under Francis has had to make a direct appeal to states and politicians for its political ideals (on immigration, ecology, dialogue, development, poverty and peace) and accept silent but suboptimal alliances (Faggioli 2018) with political parties who share their concern. It has also left the remnant Catholic electorate without a political home in many Catholic European countries.

Despite Francis' positions, the early 2010s also saw a large mobilization of lay Catholic individuals and families, largely independent of any organized Catholic leadership and without direct support from the papacy, for conservative social values. These include France's *Manif pour Tous* movement, which saw thousands of French protesting marriage equality legislation, Italy's *Family Day* protests, as well as large Croatian and Polish protests against abortion and the resettlement of refugees, as Resende and Hennig document in this volume. Subsequently, a number of these protests merged in non-linear ways with Euro-skeptic and anti-immigration populist parties, creating a new religious dynamic within them. These movements loosely bundled a number of themes which wed elements of Catholic values discourses to Christian civilizational discourses and claims of greater sovereignty from the EU. That discourse has fashioned itself as reasserting an unapologetic public religious presence in defense of traditional Catholic sexual ethics, family-centered welfare policies (typically excluding gay families), and national Christian identities. It has tarred the EU as an anti-religious, technocratic, "soft totalitarian" project that undermines the values of the Christian peoples of Europe which Christian nationalists define as providing the true source of political freedom.

This reassertion of Catholic identity politics was met with evident tension by Vatican officials and Bishops Conferences across Europe. National Bishop conferences, for example, denounced the German state of Bavaria's decree that all public offices must display a crucifix in their foyers in 2018,⁴ as well as Matteo Salvini's repeated brandishing of the rosary at populist political rallies in 2019, in which he entrusted Italy and Europe to the Virgin Mary.⁵ In this volume, Resende and Hennig analyze the eventual rejection of Catholic Nationalist anti-immigration policies by the Polish National Bishops' conference following a period of alliance between conservative Catholics and Catholic Nationalists in

⁴ See, for example, coverage by Rebecca Staudenmaier, "Germany: Bavaria's controversial cross rule goes into effect," *Deutsche Welle* (31 May 2018).

⁵ See, for example, coverage by Mattia Ferraesi, "How the Catholic Church lost Italy to the Far Right," *New York Times* (4 July 2019); Anna Momigliano, "Papa, Don't Preach," *Foreign Policy* (20 June 2019); and Christopher Lamb, "Salvini criticized for using Catholic symbols at rally," *The Tablet* (20 May 2019).

support of the Law and Order Party (PiS). This push-back by the institution of the Catholic Church illustrates the limits inherent in new forms of Catholic nationalism which reject the Catholic synthesis of modernity codified at Vatican II. At the same time, it illustrates the widening levels of internal polarization within the wider Catholic Church body that this diverse body of Catholic nationalists draws on for support.

Survey data on religion and politics in Europe caught latent and not-so-latent support of Catholic citizens for the policies of a number of these parties, in ways which openly split with those desired by the Holy See in Rome, especially over immigration. Hence, a [Pew Research Center \(2018\)](#) report found that religiosity across Europe was strongly associated with nationalist sentiments. Western Europeans who identified as Christian and were regular church-goers in key Catholic countries (including Austria, Belgium, Italy, Ireland and Spain) were more likely than those with no religious affiliation to express negative feelings about immigrants and religious minorities.⁶

There are also important transatlantic dimensions to the growth of Christian Nationalists in Europe, both in its ideas and its networks. Hence, transatlantic groups such as the International Catholic Legislators' Network⁷ and the National Conservatism or "Nat-Con" conference series have regularly assembled conservative and religious nationalist intellectuals to meet and think together with populist politicians. The figures of Viktor Orbán and Steve Bannon are particularly emblematic of this trend. For his part, Orbán, who is not a Catholic, has explicitly sought to reclaim the mantle of Christian Democracy as a protest against what he targets as liberal authoritarianism. In doing so, he has redefined Christian Democracy as an illiberal movement opposed to aggressive secularism ([Müller 2020](#)). Like other upcoming nationalist and populist European leaders, including Salvini (Italy), Kaczynski (Poland) and Marion Maréchal (France), Orbán has drawn support and sympathy from a number of intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic who have likewise attacked liberalism in favor of more religious and nationalist projects. This includes scholars and public intellectuals such as Ryszard Legutko, Yoram Hazony, Patrick Deenen, Roberto de Mattei and Rod Dreher, who have regularly travelled to meet Orbán and other populist leaders in Europe and spoken positively of them in their public writings.⁸

For his part, Steve Bannon has helped underwrite the *Dignitatis Humanae Institute*, housed in a former Cistercian monastery outside of Rome, as a school of formation designed to train a new generation of Christian nationalist elites. The development of the Dignitatis Humanae Institute, and the EU parliament working group on Human Dignity from which it springs, is illustrative of the growth of what [Foret \(2015\)](#) has described as "muscular political Christianity in the EU". The Institute was founded by Benjamin Harnwell in 2008. Harnwell at the time was working at the European Parliament with a Conservative British MEP to help draft a Universal Declaration of Human Dignity which responded to the omission of the reference to God and Christianity in the EU constitution.⁹ The Human Dignity Declaration (and the Institute) defines democracy as a historical development of Christianity. For the institute, human dignity and, thus, human rights can only be protected and cultivated in their fullest sense through an explicit recognition of their Christian meaning, as being endowed by a creator God, not given or defined by a secular state. Many Catholic politicians and thinkers reference the Vatican II declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* as grounding Catholic support for freedom of conscience, freedom of

⁶ Of course, similar polls under past papacies have found sizable numbers of European Catholics splitting with prior popes on different sets of issues, including on abortion, divorce, sexuality, and the nature of the Eucharist (see, for example, [Garelli et al. 2003](#)).

⁷ Which held working meetings in Fatima in 2019 with Viktor Orbán and Mick Mulvaney (President Trump's Catholic chief of staff at the moment). See, for example, coverage by Marie-Line Darcy, "Le discret passage de Victor Orbán au sanctuaire portugais de Fátima," *La Croix* (8 August 2019).

⁸ See, for example, coverage by Zack Beauchamp, "The American right's favorite strongman," *Vox* (10 August 2020) and Michael Driessen, "The surprisingly Catholic roots of the European Union," *America Magazine* (23 April 2020).

⁹ The institute was also formed in response to the failed nomination of Rocco Buttiglione to the European Commission in 2004, which some saw as connected to the constitutional debate over reference to the divine in the preamble. Buttiglione, nominated by Silvio Berlusconi, was a former Christian Democratic party member and had made controversial public statements about homosexuality and women, but who had also strongly advocated for the inclusion of a reference to Christianity in the EU constitution. Both Pope John Paul II and Marcello Pera defended Buttiglione, who subsequently accused the EU of "creeping totalitarianism" and helped to create the Humanae Dignitatis Institute in response.

religion, democracy and human rights widely understood. In this volume, for example, Diotallevi holds up the *Dignitatis Humanae* declaration as encapsulating a distinctively liberal Catholic understanding of modernity and explicitly contrasts it with the current politics of Catholic sovereigntists. The Universal Declaration of Human Dignity, instead, reasserts the document's emphasis on the revealed truth of Christ as both the foundation and aim of freedom (on this point, see [Areshidze 2017](#)). In doing so, it recuperates an idea of Christian Europe which is closer to Europe's ultramontane Catholic past, and advocates a more conservative, exclusivist interpretation of Christian Democracy.

In making this argument, the Dignitatis Humanae Institute, like the National Conservatism conferences, has also mobilized a number of conservative Catholic intellectuals and religious authorities¹⁰ who increasingly view the synthesis of modernity which drove the Church's position on Europe in the postwar years as being deeply broken if not inherently mistaken. An important feature of the Catholic modern sensibility was confidence in the philosophical tradition of natural law as the basis for defining religious freedom and for grounding human rights, as Taylor details in this volume. It understood a natural law-based model of politics as limiting the power of the state and preventing it from fully managing and subordinating religious authority, institutions and communities. Various scholars, in fact, view the triumph of such a model as the result of a pragmatic Catholic strategy for overcoming the problems of totalitarianism and the costs associated with Catholic support for a variety of early modern authoritarian regimes ([Moyn 2015](#); [Chamedes 2019](#)). In doing so, as Taylor and Diotallevi analyze in this volume, the Catholic modern synthesis dropped the former insistence of the Church on a strictly confessional model of politics and advocated for a more open model of religion–state–society partnership in which religious authorities and communities engaged with a plurality of political and social actors as co-creators of democratic political life. In Benedict XVI's formula, this model was held up as restoring a balance between faith and reason, which worked to mutually limit, purify and complete each other.

Despite its early triumph as a postwar political synthesis, European society and politics lost interest in this formula of religion–state–society co-partnership as a model for politics in Europe, as [Roy \(2020\)](#), Diotallevi, Taylor, Barbato and others in this volume point out. Increasingly animated by a different conception of freedom and morality which was consonant with a more materialist and individualist conception of the world and the human self, both the European Union and individual European nation-states adopted more secular political and legal frameworks throughout the late 20th century.

Some scholars view this process as a final unburdening for Catholicism and its relationship to Europe, releasing it to fully return to the Christian origins of Gospel witness, as Barbato characterizes Pope Francis' emphasis on mercy, service and life on the periphery. Other scholars have observed the opportunities which this new environment offers for the experimentation of new forms of religious dynamism, such as those captured by Giorgi and Palmisano in this volume. As Giorgi and Palmisano illustrate, the evolution of continental European society continually challenges Catholic ways of thinking about politics and spurs innovation as a result.

At the same time, however, the perceived triumph of a more aggressively secular European state has created new grounds for a hardened, revived opposition to it. As Taylor writes, this perception has fed an "erosion of confidence in the human rights project among Catholics in Europe" and, as Diotallevi notes, fears that a French-style model of *laïcité* has finally subordinated religion throughout the European Union. This opposition has

¹⁰ A number of these authorities have also been identified as leading public opposition to Pope Francis. Cardinal Burke, for example, who was one of the principal authors of the *dubbia* lodged against Pope Francis' teaching on the family and marriage in *Amoris Laetitia*, was a close associate and patron of the Dignitatis Humanae Institute and famously met Bannon when he visited Rome in 2014, a meeting arranged by Harnwell and which was described as a meeting of minds and hearts. Burke (together with other Church officials, like Cardinal Renato Martino) subsequently broke with the Institute (in 2020) over Bannon's interest in making a film of Frédéric [Martel's](#) book (2019), *In the Closet of the Vatican*, which exposed the widespread prevalence of a suppressed but active gay culture within the high ranks of the Vatican and the Roman Curia. Harnwell and Burke feature prominently in Martel's book.

also strengthened in the absence of strong European political forces explicitly mobilizing support for a Catholic-inspired project of modernity, as well as the disinterest of the institutional Catholic Church in supporting such mobilization. As Resende and Hennig write in the case of Poland, the rise of a more authoritarian version of Polish Catholic Nationalism was partly the result of the death of Pope John Paul II and the political vision he embodied. John Paul II had combined a conservative critique of society in both moral and political terms, with deep commitments to democratic institutions, rights and freedoms. That vision had provided a restraining force against Christian nationalism and channeled Catholic communities' political energies into democratic action. Thus, the decline of a Christian Democratic understanding of Europe, the growth of a more aggressively secular understanding of the foundations of European politics, and the loss of confidence in a liberal Catholic model of modernity have all fueled the neo-sovereigntist turn, and an increase in support for a more openly confessional and nationalist vision of politics as the basis for legitimate authority and political community in Europe. Conservatives and traditionalists in Poland, Italy, France and elsewhere have supported nationalist parties as a result.¹¹

3. Contributions of the Volume

Twenty years into the new millennium, the relationship between Catholicism and European politics is an open question once again, marked by fierce debates about the future of Catholic modernity that recall those of a century ago (Taylor, in this volume). The contributions to this volume offer a guide to these debates, by conceptualizing and revealing the various sociological, theological, geopolitical and organizational dimensions which animate them. In doing so, these analyses paint a portrait of Catholic-inspired politics in Europe and indicate the ways in which they may recompose or remain fragmented across the continent.

In terms of chronology, Taylor and Diotallevi begin by revisiting the intellectual, theological and social history of the formation of Catholic modernity, or what Taylor refers to as "Catholic cosmopolitanism". Taylor, in particular, retraces the ways in which 20th century Catholic thought drew on the longer tradition of Catholic political thought to "present political Catholicism in the idiom of human rights, liberal democracy and modern international law", a process which saw the Church embrace and provide critical support for pluralism, freedom and the postwar European project. For Taylor, Catholic cosmopolitanism's salient features include its grounding in the tradition of natural law and Christian humanism (especially as formulated by Jacques Maritain) and its rejection of positivism and totalitarianism. Formulating this distinctiveness also highlights the ways in which the gradual secularization of European politics, including Christian democratic politics (especially in Germany), have made it difficult for further Catholic synthesis with late modernity. As such, Taylor's conclusion reflects on the extent to which the original cosmopolitan synthesis has been cast into doubt. Whereas natural law was championed by Catholic cosmopolitanism as creating the basis for a shared public devotion to human dignity and human rights, it has now become a source of breakage between religious and secular conceptions of politics in Europe. Taylor chronicles this evolution as the distance registered in the space between Robert Schuman's 1963 statement that "Democracy owes its existence to Christianity" (in his final book, *Pour l'Europe*, published in the year he died) and the 2015 statement by the Catholic philosopher Thomas Pink that, "Without that shared understanding of the good of religion, an understanding that depends on some form of political recognition of the truth of revealed religion, there can be no mutually acceptable articles of peace between Church and state."

Diotallevi, for his part, revisits the identity and ideas of the intra-Catholic alliances which produced the victory of liberal Catholic modernity at Vatican II, and considers

¹¹ Here, too, the Dignitatis Humanae Institute is instructive, capturing the shift in support of conservative Catholic thinkers and electorates from center-right parties to more far-right ones; in other words, from the Christian Democratic party formations represented by Rocco Buttiglione to the populist, nationalist Lega party of Matteo Salvini.

their impact and evolution through the turmoil of the late 1960s in Europe. In doing so, Diotallevi seeks to qualify the analysis of Vatican II as the victory of a progressive Catholic understanding of politics. Instead, he reads Vatican II as the triumph of a coalition consisting of both liberal *and* progressive Catholic forces united against a more conservative and authoritarian wing of the Church. Critically, for Diotallevi, it was the liberal idea—and not the progressive one—which most influenced both the doctrines and leadership (particularly in the figure of Pope Paul VI) of Vatican II.

Through this framing, Diotallevi highlights the similarities between the model of democracy and religious freedom embraced by Catholic modernity at Vatican II and the traditional Anglo-Saxon understanding of liberalism, with its emphasis on a limited role of the state and the importance of civic associational life. Diotallevi contrasts this model with the more statist understanding of modernity held by progressives, including Pope Francis today, which he argues is more influenced by the French political tradition. For Diotallevi, the Catholic progressive understanding of modernity emphasizes welfare and equality over individual freedom and the role of the state over tertiary associations. In this conceptualization, Diotallevi interprets both the progressive and conservative wings of the Catholic Church as holding essentially intransigent positions with respect to liberal modernity. Only the liberal Catholic model, for Diotallevi, was capable of embracing modernity without “renunciation or captive spirit, but rather with sympathy and without any subordination . . . not as a loss, but as a gain, and not only for society but also for faith and the Church.” Among other things, the long, gradual loss of this liberal Catholic position, for Diotallevi, has made it less likely that the public contribution of Catholic political actors to democratic European politics will either be recognized or welcomed. While the liberal democratic model of Catholic modernity won out in Vatican II, much of the story Diotallevi outlines is that of its long decline since, and the growth of confessional and secularist models, both conservative and progressive, in its wake.

While Diotallevi and Taylor offer insight into the intellectual and sociological background framing Catholic politics in recent European history, the contributions of Barbato, Resende and Hennig, and Giorgi and Palmisano offer portraits of contemporary Catholic dynamics in motion.

For their part, Resende and Hennig consider the rise of new forms of Catholic nationalism in Poland, their close alliance with the populist Law and Order party (PiS) and the reactions of liberal and mainstream conservative Polish Catholic prelates to them. Drawing on work by Gryzmala-Busse (2015) and Philpott (2004) on the variable influence of the institutional Church in democratic politics, Resende and Hennig conceptualize the reasons for the Polish Bishops’ eventual rejection of the Polish Catholic nationalist line. In the years immediately following the death of Pope John Paul II, the Polish Catholic Church had increasingly supported a conservative policy agenda aimed at insulating Catholic legal positions, especially on abortion and sexuality, from secular political agendas. The Catholic Nationalists added a strong defense of Polish Nationalism, defined as the homogenous political community of Catholic Poles, and advocated for the establishment of Catholicism as a state religion in ways that recalled 19th century Polish nationalist positions.

These positions came to a head in 2015 as Catholic Nationalists, together with the PiS, mobilized against the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Poland. Although Pope Francis rebuked Polish Catholics for refusing immigrants hospitality (while in Krakow for World Youth Day celebrations in 2016), Resende and Hennig find that it only had a limited impact on Polish politics. Rather, they argue that internal divisions and the perceptions of increased reputational costs led the Polish Bishops to distance themselves from the movement, denounce nationalism and reassert a model of separation-but-cooperation between the Church and state in Poland. In this case, despite the strength of the Catholic nationalist position, Resende and Hennig find that the pull of the Catholic democratic center continues to place strong limits on its success. The Bishops remain bound to an understanding of Catholic democracy enshrined in the teachings of Vatican II and when pushed to break with them, they did not.

Giorgi and Palmisano explore a different expression of contemporary Catholic dynamism in European society, namely the development of influential new forms of women's movements and ideas within the broader Catholic Church. In their article, they focus especially on the ideas and institutions articulated by the *Voices of Faith* initiative, which presents itself as seeking change on the role of women within the Catholic Church and from a position of faith. Giorgi and Palmisano interpret the movement and others like them as illustrating an ongoing evolution of women's approaches to religion that is in dialogue with contemporary European society. The group is engaged in redefining what it means to be a Catholic feminist, and what it means to be a woman in the Catholic Church, with important debates about complementarity, traditional Catholic ideas about femininity and what Pope John Paul II named the "feminine genius". The group rejects a number of these positions, and reinterprets others but, critically, it does so on the basis of Gospel norms, the teachings of Jesus and the experience of the early Christian Church. In doing so, Giorgi and Palmisano view the group as an important example of what religious reorganization might look like when started from the periphery. Whereas a number of the authors in this volume analyze the critiques that Catholic nationalism or Christian Democracy have made of European politics, Giorgi and Palmisano consider the critiques that new women's movements make within the Catholic Church, challenging the authoritarian legacies of its structures and laying bare the ways in which they are not faithful, theologically and organizationally, to the spirit of the Gospels.

Finally, in ways that have some parallel to Giorgi and Palmisano's research, Barbato explores the geopolitical meaning of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis' relationship to Europe through the prism of their papal travels or "pilgrimages". Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson, Barbato conceptualizes the pilgrimages and international travels of the popes as creating communities imbued with political meaning. In the Catholic case, the global, transnational nature of the Church further embeds these pilgrimages with geopolitical significance, reflecting the Church's stock of soft power that draws on the "latent hard power of the support of the masses". Barbato offers a history of modern papal travel and then analyzes the destinations and messages of the papal visits of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. While both Popes have developed messages of religious renewal, service, peace and faithfulness, Barbato reads important differences in both audience and content. Benedict XVI's travels were clearly in tune with his ambitious project to shore up the heartland of Catholic identity in Europe, which he saw as under threat by both political secularism and Islam. Thus, Benedict XVI travelled to traditional centers of Catholic Europe and offered a message that the European Christian heritage was one that was worth maintaining and cultivating in a post-Christian, post-secular environment. While Barbato sees Benedict XVI focusing on the question of culture, Pope Francis has taken a different approach to Europe. Like Benedict XVI, Pope Francis has travelled widely in Europe and spoken with high European representatives and institutions often. But he has reversed a number of priorities in doing so. Hence, Pope Francis has avoided travelling to the centers of the European Catholic heartland. His first visit was to an immigrant facility on the Italian Island of Lampedusa, latitudinally further south than the city of Tunis (Tunisia). He has often visited European places, in the Balkans and the Caucasus, where Catholics represent a minority, and in doing so, reached out to Muslim migrants, secular Europeans and the wider "interreligious periphery" of Europe.

Barbato interprets these travels as evidence that Pope Francis is less convinced in a strategy of religious renewal which relies on the reconstruction of the structures of Catholic culture in Europe. Instead, Pope Francis pursues a strategy of witness and service through the periphery, one that focuses "on the Gospel alone that calls for the welcoming and caring of the stranger in need". He concludes, "What looks sometimes like a culturally footloose approach that only focuses on the Gospel of loving and caring for your neighbor is also a geopolitical strategy in a secularizing and demographically declining Europe that seeks to rebuild the Church with the interreligious masses of the migrants."

The relationship between Catholicism and European politics is being redefined today by a tussle of new forces, figures and ideas. The contributions to this volume help us to conceptualize and understand them.

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