Religion in European multi-level parliamentary politics: the policy preferences of British and Irish MEPs

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Abstract

The United Kingdom (UK) and Republic of Ireland provide two distinctive cases for those investigating the role of religion in the politics and government of the European Union (EU). In particular, we can examine the relevance of faith-based values to the policy preferences of British and Irish Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) via an analysis of the responses to a Europe-wide survey questionnaire – the first of its kind, generating a representative cross-section of elite opinion. Across a range of competences and issues, we can detect a consistent desire on the part of the EU's elected party politicians to maintain a separation of church and state, and an ability to distinguish between religious beliefs and political actions. MEPs appear to be moderate in their views on religion and close to the centre of wider public opinion. A common sentiment present in the answers to many of the questions is that, while churches or faith-based organisations should be respected equally, they should not exert undue political influence. The paper argues that this stance can be explained by a rational or vote seeking interpretation of political behaviour.

Introduction

Religion helps to defines Europe, but plays a much more ambiguous role in the European Union (EU). The EU has repeatedly displayed a determination to remain formally secular, mimicking a French-style laïcité in both its treaties and directives. However, the logic of this policy of separating church and state has become more strained since the European Commission and European Parliament have started to legislate increasingly in areas of social policy and human rights, complementing their traditional interest in trade and economic affairs. Some commentators question the success of the EU in finding the right balance between promoting religious freedoms and protecting freedom from religion (see Foret and Itçaina 2011). So despite the fact that Christianity has its institutional home in Europe, contributing substantially in the process to what constitutes the core of European identity, the role of churches and faith-based organisations in European integration and multi-level governance appears to be highly complex.

Perhaps the most visible formal link between religion and politics in the EU can be found in the chamber of the European Parliament. In particular, we can identify the work of the European People's Party (EPP), the political movement that brings together Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who are Christian Democrats, and which presently constitutes the largest elected group with 270 members. Not only does the EPP seek to promote values and policies which have a religious origin (albeit not as centrally as it once did – see Duncan 2006), its members operate within the confines of the European Parliament, the arena of the EU which focuses most on issues related to human rights, political culture and national identity. While other parts of the European Quarter of Brussels are preoccupied with trade agreements, tariffs and agricultural quotas, those who operate within the Espace Léopold, as well as in the main plenary hemisphere in Strasbourg, have always sought to interpret their remit in a way that represents the concerns of ordinary European citizens and wider European civil society.

Interestingly, then, as a consequence, both the UK and Ireland provide important case studies when analysing the influence of the religious beliefs of MEPs on their political behaviour, due to the noticeable absence of Christian Democrat politicians elected in these two member states. In Britain, the centre-right party, the Conservatives, have no ideological links at all with Christian Democracy, and their MEPs even sit in an entirely different party group in the European Parliament chamber, the European Conservatives and Reformists

(ECR). This move came about as a result of increasing Euro-scepticism in the party, and a growing unease at being part of the group that formally describes itself as 'Europe's Driving Force' (European People's Party 2013). While four Irish MEPs from the political party, Fine Gael, do work under the umbrella of the EPP, they would also hold significant ideological differences from mainstream European Christian Democracy (see Gallagher and Marsh 2002). So how does that core point impact upon the various policy interests of these MEPs representing constituencies from across the UK and Republic of Ireland?

Furthermore, how do the British MEPs who are members of the other political groups like the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) or the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) relate to this distinctive political context? The secular tradition of European socialism has historically less resonance in either the UK or Ireland due an absence of an anti-clerical tradition and the different relationships between church and state, especially in Britain. Indeed, Christian Socialism has its historical and ideological roots in England – a philosophy that merges a religious compassion for one's neighbours with a political predilection for fairness and equality. But does that dimension have significance for the focus of our study? We should not confuse the absence of Christian Democracy in the anglo-sphere of Europe with a lack of importance of religion in the public sphere – indeed, on the contrary, a lack of a social movement mobilised, as Christian Democrats were, post-war, to protect the Church from the Government, is potentially a sign of strength, not weakness (see Steven 2010).

Religion, then, can be a source of great division in society but it can also provide us with ways of tackling collective action problems and other fundamental social dilemmas – and the British and Irish contexts are particularly interesting in this respect. Christian values and party political policy platforms can often be inter-related, especially in reference to ethical and rights-based questions. The partisan and electoral role of religion – while inevitably multi-faceted - can perhaps be contrasted with the more prominent behaviour of religion in internal relations and conflict. Here, recent studies have tended to emphasise the way religious beliefs act as a source of social change – and how policy-makers must act in response to this (see Rehman 2007). However, in focusing more on the civil society role of religion and its place within wider political participation, we can see its potential for aiding co-operation and consensus, rather than simply a social phenomenon which must be controlled. In this respect, the work of American political scientist and public policy

professor, Robert Putnam, is key (2000; 2010). Putnam argues that Christianity - within the appropriate domestic context of an advanced industrial society - is ultimately a source of bridging 'social capital' and inclusivity, rather than a negative commodity. In particular, religious citizens are much more likely to vote, identify with a particular political party, and participate in charitable work: 'churches and other religious organizations have a unique importance in American civil society', according to Putnam (2000: 65) He argues that 'faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America' (2000: 66). Yet how does this compare with the Western European context? Linked to this, how closely do the beliefs and values of Europe's elected politicians correspond to those of Europe's voters? By analysing religion, we can use the case study as the basis of a deeper discussion of the 'quality of democracy' within the European Union.

The European Union promotes a narrative of cohesion, convergence and unity which explicitly encompasses democratic beliefs and values. Meanwhile, the European Parliament seeks to democratically represent interests of all sections of society, including both church attendees and non-believers. Yet how effectively does it do this – and how realistic is that objective in the first place? Are party groups consistent when it comes to approaching policy issues such as bio-ethics or the fight against religious discrimination? And how do the UK and Ireland fit into this governance environment, given their relatively distinctive 'anglo-sphere' contribution to the European level of electoral and party politics?

There are other wider themes upon which the research touches. Britain has long provided scholars interested in the interface between politics and religion with a distinctive case. Uniquely, the UK has an unwritten constitution with no bill of rights, senior clergy sitting in the upper house of Parliament in London and, as has already been noted, no confessional parties. Britain has also long provided scholars interested in European integration with an unusual case - one of the 'big three' member states along with France and Germany, yet also traditionally the most Euro-sceptic and most 'awkward partner' for the Euro-crats in Brussels (see George 1998). This article examines how these two dimensions relate to one another – for example, we know that previous research shows a correlation between Euro-scepticism and Protestantism (Foret and Itçaina 2011). Such an analysis is made even more interesting by including the responses of Irish MEPs. The Republic of Ireland, while geographically close to the UK, is a quite divergent case, both in

relation to its religious heritage and its attitudes towards European integration. Ireland is one of the EU's most devoutly Roman Catholic member states, and also one of its most pro-European (European Commission 2011). Nevertheless, the UK and Ireland also have much in common and the data garnered from the survey questionnaire sample allow us to highlight where there exist obvious patterns or trends. Perhaps of even more importance will be wider comparisons with other member states included in this *Religion at the European Parliament* (RelEP) project, http://www.releur.eu/ - namely Austria, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

The survey questionnaire

The main instrument used for collecting data about the religious preferences of the British and Irish MEPs was a survey questionnaire, controlled centrally by the Institute for European Studies at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. The survey was divided up into a number of different sections based around a range of themes connected to religious issues and European government affairs. A first set of questions gathered information on the socio-political profile of the MEPs i.e. their nationality, age, national party political membership and European political grouping, seniority in the European Parliament in relation to terms served, and their participation in the Parliament's various policy committees. A second set of questions dealt with MEPs' view of the impact of religion on the way the European Parliament works specifically as an institution. The purpose here was to establish whether or not religion as an inherently multi-dimensional variable has any effects on the overall functioning of the Parliament. A third set of questions tackled religion in the political practice and political socialization of MEPs more personally and individually. The influence of religion with the political process is to be understood firstly in terms of the frequency with which a representative takes religion into account when framing and formulating public policy, and secondly, whether or not this process is as source of personal inspiration, or of a more practical nature linked to lobbying and the activities of interest groups and consultations. A fourth set of questions investigated the precise policy sectors and thematic debates where religion is the most salient as an issue on the European agenda. Fundamental rights, cultural and ethical problems and external relations are all areas where we can expect religious actors and issues to be involved. As an 'identity resource' - for example as a reference to the Christian heritage of Europe in treaties -

religion cannot avoid polarisation between those who are in favour, and those who are against, or at least less sympathetic. The fifth and final part of the questionnaire looked at the religious preferences of MEPs in terms of beliefs, practices and attitudes. Questions from international values surveys (European Social Survey, European Values Survey, Eurobarometers) are utilised in order to provide a standard against which to assess the religious profile of MEPs compared with the average European voter.

Christianity plays a historically important part in the civic life of European nations so how do MEPs approach the influence and power of the Church? How sensitive is the European Parliament to religious issues and matters of faith? Religion – via Christianity - can be said to be core to European identity, uniting different nationalities when language can sometimes divide them. Yet how does the European Union approach religion, especially its most democratic and representative arm, the European Parliament? While previous research has focused on the way faith-based groups lobby the European Commission in Brussels, the survey questionnaire allows us to *quantify* and *measure* political influence much more scientifically. The policy analysis approach mentioned before is understandable – the role of interest groups in EU government is arguably more prominent than the role of parties and elections. Even since the European Parliament has been handed more powers, the Commission has remained Europe's central political institution and 'engine of integration'. As scholars have attempted to untangle the place of religion in the EU, they have looked first to the role of the Council of European Churches, for example, as well to treaties and constitutional reforms (see Leustean and Madeley 2011). Yet the arena of the European Parliament can no longer be ignored, especially given its overtly representative democratic remit.

Are religious interests, then, represented effectively by MEPs? Does a 'quality of democracy' audit of the Parliament reveal any biases in public policy-making? Freedom of religion is one of the core principles actively promoted by the EU in its neighbourhood policy (ENP), and embraced especially enthusiastically by democratically elected MEPs – yet is freedom of religion protected within the borders of the EU by those same elected party politicians? One of the great criticisms levelled at the EU is that it has failed to create a functioning public sphere with a European civic society. Interest groups may well lobby at a European level but rarely exclusively – rather, they maintain one eye on their own national policy environments. Ironically, despite its denominations, the Christian Church's structure

lends itself naturally to a European-wide system of governance, and can be seen as an enabler of Europe from the 'bottom-up'. While churches can hardly be said to 'democratise' the EU, their capacity for creating healthy social capital and community engagement is often the envy of many political parties and politicians (see Dalton and Wattenberg 2002). Linked to that, their ability to stimulate public debate and mobilise public opinion about moral and ethical questions is also considerable. So how do our European politicians respond?

(1) Profiles of the Members of the European Parliament

We start by examining the profiles of the British and Irish MEPs. 19 politicians out of a total 84 responded to the survey questionnaire. This represents 23% overall, including 22% of British members (16 out of 73) and 25% of Irish members (3 out of 12). This type of response rate is typical of an elite survey of this nature, and is large enough to allow us to draw wider conclusions about what British and Irish MEPs think about religious issues, especially when there is unanimity or near unanimity of responses, as there frequently is with many of the questions involved. Taken as a whole, we are definitely able to track certain patterns of attitudes and behaviour. Fortunately, the 19 respondents represent a range of different party groupings, terms served and committee specialism.

Five Liberal Democrats, four Conservatives, three Labour members, three UK Independence Party members, one Scottish Nationalist, one Fianna Fail member, one Irish Socialist and one Independent participated in the survey. With the Independent and Fianna Fail MEP joining together with the Liberal Democrats, that meant the largest parliamentary group represented were the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). The obvious point to make in addition to the above is the absence of MEPs from the European People's Party (EPP) – this was a combination of no Christian Democrat presence in the UK, and a lack of Fine Gael politicians in Ireland taking part in the survey. Nine out of 19 members were elected in the 1999-2004 term, with the next biggest intake (five) coming in 2004-2009. Two were elected for the first time only in 2009, while three were first elected back in 1994. Two of the respondents have since resigned as MEPs, while one has changed political party. A range of parliamentary committees are represented by the respondents – in total, 14 out of 23 – with three vice-chairs included in the sample. We will not seek to overly-emphasise the differences between the British and Irish members for the purposes of this particular piece of research – ultimately, they can effectively be joined and analysed

together, as we can detect common responses to the various survey questions throughout. No one question produced a serious divergence between the UK and Irish members.

These data collectively allow us to draw accurate conclusions about the wider religious views of British and Irish MEPs. It is highly unlikely that their basic responses to the questions would be dramatically different to the majority of issues, as there is often agreement amongst the respondents. Clearly, a larger response rate would have produced more detail and explanations but, for our purposes, we can still evaluate the underlying values and attitudes on display, and make a valid contribution to the literature on politics and religion; EU politics; interest groups; and electoral and partisan politics.

(2) Religion and the work of the European Parliament

The second section of questions analyses collective religious identities; political or partisan identities; and also national identities. Do MEPs act with religion in mind at any point? Theories of 'belonging', loyalty and group representation are all explored in depth. The European Parliament is the European institution where these MEPs operate so their perceptions of how the legislature operates in relation to religious matters can be insightful.

V001 - According to you, does religion have an effect on the functioning of the European Parliament?

Yes	11
No	7
DNA	1

In response to question one, we see a marginal majority arguing that 'religion does have an effect on the functioning of the European Parliament'. This shows that, while British and Irish MEPs are content to admit that religion is relevant, there is obviously some hesitancy and caution as well to admit that the functioning of the Parliament is profoundly affected by religion in terms of how it works. The response to this first question can be considered a typical theme that runs through the responses to other relevant questions, as well.

V002 - At the European Parliament, religion:

reinforces the identity of each political group	5
blurs the identity of each political group	1
has no effect on the identity of each political group	11
DNA	2

Question two focused on the effect of religion on parliamentary party groups. It asked the MEPs to choose from one of the following responses: 'religion reinforces the identity of each political group'; religion blurs the identity of each political group'; or religion has no effect on the identity of each political group'. Five MEPs chose the first option, one chose the second while 11 chose the last. So far, then, MEPs are reluctant to credit religion with too much influence on the specifically partisan and electoral activities of the European Parliament. A clear majority felt that religion had no effect here, despite the fact the largest group, the European People's Party is made up predominantly of Christian Democrat (CD) politicians. Europe may well be a 'Christian Democratic' project with founding fathers such as Robert Schumann and Konrad Adenauer prominent CD politicians but it would appear that political cleavage does not dominate the thinking of the MEPs in the way that we might have anticipated.

V003 - Does religion have a different importance depending on the nationality of European MPs?

Yes	16
No	1
DNA	2

The responses to question three elucidated much more information. The third question asked MEPs whether they felt religion had a different importance depending on the nationality of individual MEPs. Here, with one exception all respondents said 'yes', they did feel nationality was relevant. This seems reasonable – Europe may be secularised but there are many member states which remain highly religious, including Ireland, but also Poland, Slovakia and Italy. Their MEPs do not come to Strasbourg or Brussels regarding religion as irrelevant – on the contrary they arrive in Brussels and Strasbourg highly conscious of the influence of religion on the civil societies in their home countries.

V004 - Does religion create differences between MEPs who are Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or from other religions?

Yes	6
No	10
DNA	3

The final question in this section asked MEPs whether they felt religion created denominational differences between Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox politicians? Here, a slight majority said 'no', they did not feel that, but with six MEPs feeling that it did. So it would appear that any perception that religion causes divisions in the Parliament are not accurate, but that pre-existing identities, especially national identities, do play a part. European politics and government do not drive a wedge between Protestants and Catholics, and again, we should not be surprised by that. In modern societies across the EU like Britain

and Ireland, the most fundamental difference now lies between faith and atheism or agnosticism, rather than between Christian denominations.

Our key conclusion, then, in this second part of the survey is that national identity does very much appear have a role to play in EU politics and governance. The member state from which the MEP originates is perceived to be a significant factor when it comes to influencing his or her policy decisions. We can conclude, then, that MEPs are conscious of the nation state and civil society which they are representing. Indeed, we can even go so far as to say that the national identity of an MEP is perceived to be more significant than their partisan identity when it comes to issues of a religious nature. Civil society, then, is present in the European Parliament. National and religious identities are closely inter-twined, at times – and recognisably so by the responses of these British and Irish MEPs.

(3) Religion and the work of Members of the European Parliament

This section contained six questions in total, focusing on the work of individual MEPs, rather than the parliament as a whole.

V005 - As a MEP, do you ever take religion into account?

Permanently	2
Often	4
Rarely	6
Never	7

Question five asked the MEPs whether or not they ever 'take religion into account' when formulating policy and voting? The response was relatively negative – seven respondents stated that they never took religion into account, while six stated they rarely took religion into account. Nevertheless, a total of six MEPs stated that they either permanently or often took religion into account, which does indicate some influence.

V006 - If religion intervenes in your activity as an MEP, is it (several responses possible):?

as a source of personal inspiration	4
as a social and political reality	8
as an interest group	4
other	3
no effect	2

Question six was much more descriptive in tone. It focused on how religion intervenes in the activities of MEPs – practically, personally or philosophically? Eight British and Irish MEPs said that it intervenes as a 'social and political reality' – the most popular response – while four stated it intervened more as a 'source of personal inspiration', and four 'as an interest group'. This response is very interesting – it shows rational, office-seeking politicians only encountering religion when they are forced to engage with it as a social movement or a pressure group. Relatively few MEPs are willing to openly admit that they mix religion and politics within their own personal belief system.

V007 - Is the place of religion in the European Parliament different from your experiences in national politics?

Yes	4
No	7
DNA	8

Question seven asked MEPs to consider the effects of multi-level governance. Was the place of religion in the European Parliament different from their experiences in national politics and government? However, the answer was far from conclusive – eight stated they did not know, seven that it was not, and only four that it was, so we cannot really infer much from that type of reply, overall. While a number of the respondents had served at different levels of government in the UK and Ireland, they clearly did not feel they had sufficient expertise to answer the question properly.

V008 - Has your experience at the European Parliament changed your views on the relationships between religion and politics?

Yes	3
No	15
DNA	1

Question eight asked MEPs to consider whether or not their experience of being elected to the European Parliament had changed their views on the relationship between religion and politics more widely. 15 stated 'no' that there had been no change in views overall – a categorical answer, and one that should not be surprising. Again, it is highly unlikely that elected politicians from parties would admit that they have changed their mind over such an important issue.

V009 - How often are you in contact with religious or philosophical interest groups?

once a week or more	3
once a month or more	1
a few times a year	4
a few times over the course of a term	6
Never	3
DNA	2

Question nine focused on lobbying – how often were the MEPs in contact with religious or philosophical interest groups? Six – the largest number - stated that they were in contact with religious interest groups over the course of a parliamentary term, but with a total of eight stating that they were in contact either once a week, once a month or a few times a year. We can say, therefore, that most of our British and Irish MEPs have been lobbied by religious or faith-based organisations at some point, which is an important point to note. Question 10, meanwhile, generated a number of interesting examples of the sort of groups with which the MEPs have been in contact, with a slight bias toward local faith-based groups or churches operating in the regional constituency of the politicians.

Overall, then, we see that MEPs are clearly able to function independently but are also consulted regularly by faith-based organisations and churches. Religious representatives are certainly listened to respectfully, but beyond that, there is no admission from MEPs that they are given undue influence. They are given their place, but no more. MEPs appear, at times, to approach this from a member state perspective i.e. if they have a constituent that is active in a group, then that will potentially help with gaining access. But there is no hint at all that religious or faith-based groups are given special privileges or

access to the corridors of power in Brussels or Strasbourg beyond what one might reasonably expect.

Again, this seems eminently reasonable – even in a member state like the Republic of Ireland, where weekly Roman Catholic church attendances at mass remain high (Iona Institute 2011), voters and politicians are also keen to stress the separation of church and state. Irish parties and politicians in Dublin promote the image of a forward-looking democracy, and in that sense, any attempts by the Catholic Church to exert too much authority are likely to be resisted. Where MEPs are fortunate in this respect, however, is that abortion – the Catholic Church's number one policy priority – is not in the policy domain of the European Union, so the desire for the Church to lobby European politicians over that issue is diminished significantly. Same sex marriage is also ultimately a policy issue reserved to the member states, despite the evolution of social policy within the work of the EU and especially the Commission and Parliament.

(4) Religion and the work of the European Union

In this section, MEPs were asked six short but related questions about the EU itself, and wider themes related to European integration.

V011 - Which are the issues on which religion is most important at the European Parliament? (please rank the three first responses in order of importance)*

external relations	3
freedom of expression	5
the fight against discrimination	7
social policy	6
economic policy	2
culture and education	3
other	6
not any	1

*figures represent aggregate totals of issues identified

The most popular reply to question 11 was that the 'fight against discrimination' was the policy area where religion is the most important. We can surmise that this is partly because discrimination can have both an internal and external policy focus for the MEPs. However, we also note the popularity of the response to social policy and freedom of expression. So, generally, we can say that the MEPs relate religion primarily to these types of rights and equalities–based issues.

V012 - Should the EU have a real policy towards religions?

Yes	6
No	12
DNA	1

Question 12 inquired whether the MEPs felt the EU should have a 'real policy' towards religions. 12 replied negatively, while six replied positively. There appears to be no appetite, then, on the part of MEPs for a European Constitution mentioning religion, or for the Commission in Brussels to develop a strategy for engaging more with Christianity or Islam institutionally or collectively.

V013 - Should the Lisbon Treaty have made reference to Europe's Christian heritage?

Yes	5
No	13
DNA	1

Question 13, meanwhile, asked the MEPs whether they felt that the Lisbon Treaty should have made reference to Europe's Christian heritage. Again, a clear majority stated they did not think this, which would be consistent with the other findings. We can perhaps note the peculiar British context that is probably relevant here, however – the views expressed by Pope Benedict XI and also Angela Merkel that Europe's heritage should be acknowledged (see Traynor 2007), would not find much popularity within the UK context, where the whole concept of the 'roots' of Europe are probably much less central.

V014 - Does religion play a role in the way Turkey's candidature was received in the European Parliament?

Yes	13
No	3
DNA	3

Question 14 is a key one – MEPs were asked whether they felt religion has a role to play in the way Turkey's candidature for accession to the European Union. Almost all replied that 'yes', religion was relevant. While we do not know if the MEPs feel that this is a good or a bad thing, it is a striking finding nonetheless.

V015 - Does religion play a role in the external relations of the EU?

Yes	8
No	8
DNA	3

Related to this, question 15 asks whether religion has a role to play in the external relations of the European Union. Here, there was a split amongst the respondents – half felt it did have a role to play, while half felt that it did not. The slightly open-ended nature of the question may have led to some hesitancy here.

V016 - The President of the European Parliament regularly meets with representatives of major European religions to discuss current affairs. Is it a good thing?

Yes	11
No	4
DNA	4

Finally, there was a question (16) that focused on the specific work of the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz MEP. Obviously, Mr Schulz, a German Social Democrat, regularly meets with representatives of major European religions to discuss current affairs, but was this a good thing? 'Yes' replied a majority of respondents.

The perception amongst all MEPs concerning external relations is that European neighbourhood policy and enlargement, especially with regard to the accession of Turkey, is heavily influenced by religious factors. Again, then, we see civil society factors gaining prominence within the sphere of the European Parliament. The accession of Turkey has many pros and many cons, with economic as well as population variables at play – for example, if Turkey were to join it would be second only to Germany in population size. But our MEPs are clear that the EU's distinctive civilian foreign policy can only go so far – Turkey may be a long-standing political candidate for accession to the Union, but its civil society appears to be a big barrier for many MEPs. European integration is indeed a Christian project, it would appear, in this respect. Yet this is not the formal explanation for why Turkey has not yet acceded to the EU. According to various actors, geography rather than religion is the most salient factor - but this seems a somewhat partial interpretation (European Commission 2013). Even related issues to do with women's rights can be linked to religion. MEPs were not asked to comment on whether they thought this was a good thing or not - nevertheless, the clarity of response is an interesting finding. MEPs are perhaps able to speak more openly here because they know they are line broadly with public opinion in their home member states (European Commission 2007).

(5) The values, beliefs and social attitudes of Members of the European Parliament

Finally, this section of the survey questionnaire investigated the values and religious beliefs of the British and Irish MEPs.

V017 - Do you belong to a religious denomination?

Yes	9
No	7
DNA	3

Question 17 asked the MEPs whether they felt they 'belonged 'to a religious denomination, with just over half responding positively and just under half negatively.

V018 - To which religious denomination do you belong?

Catholic	5
Protestant	2
Orthodox	0
Other Christian	0
Jew	0
Muslim	1
Sikh	0
Buddhist	0
Hindu	0
Atheist	0
Agnostic	0
Other	1

In terms of the nine who responded positively to question 17, five MEPs identified as Roman Catholic, two as Protestant, one as Muslim, and one as ecumenical'.

V019 - Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?

never	1
once a year	0
holydays only	3
once a month	0
once a week	3
more than once a week	2
DNA	10

In question 19, the British and Irish MEPs were asked how often they attended religious services. Eight replied that they attended church either more than once a week, once a month or only on holy days.

V020 - Independently of whether you go to Church or not, how would you define yourself?

I am a religious person	4
I am not a religious person	4
I am convinced atheist	5
DNA	6

In question 20, four stated they were a religious person, but nine said that they were not a believer. We can relate those responses to those given in questions 18 and 19, and identify wider patterns of behaviour representative of voters in the UK, in particular. While people

are often happy to identify as Christian, their attendance at church and institutional or practical attachment to religion is less consistent (see Voas and Ling 2010).

V021 - Which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs?

There is a personal God	6
There is some sort of spirit or life force	1
I don't believe there is any God, spirit or life force	8
DNA	4

In response to question 21, we also see patterns that reflect wider public opinion. The MEPs are basically divided over whether or not God exists. This is interesting as it shows they are able to distinguish between personal faith and organised religion.

V022 - How much do you agree and disagree with each of the following?

	Agree strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Don't know	No answer
a/Politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office	1			4	12		1
b/ Religious leaders should not influence how people vote in elections	7	1	3	4			1
c/It would be better for Europe if more people with strong religious beliefs held public office		3	2	2	8	1	1
d/Religious leaders should not influence government decisions	7	3	4	3	1		1
e/If a nurse were asked to help perform a legal abortion, she should be allowed to refuse on religious grounds	5	6	1	2	1		1

In relation to the multiple choice question 22 on values contained at the end of the survey, a clear bias was shown towards a liberal inclusiveness – for example, politicians who do not believe in God were still very much considered fit for office. Religious leaders should not try to unduly influence how people vote in elections. It would not be better if more people in Europe with strong religious beliefs held public office. Religious leaders should not influence government decisions. A nurse should be able to refuse to conduct an abortion on religious grounds if he or she feels that way. The MEPs, then, can be said to be highly representative of wider British and Irish society. Their views are very mainstream, liberal and pluralistic. We see our MEPs seeking to be as moderate and as inclusive as possible. In that sense, they are highly representative of their societies – the role of religion in British society remains central but not dominant.

The Church of England is established, and its prelates sit and vote in the British Parliament in London. The last census showed an overwhelming response indentifying with Christianity. Protestant evangelical churches in urban areas are growing in popularity. The decline in British church attendance since the 1960s is well-documented – however, there is still a large number of people who do go to church (Barley 2006). Linked to this, while there has been a decline in the number of Britons who believe in God over the same period, a substantial number still do so. Clearly, defining 'belief in God' is problematic – for example, the 2008 British Social Attitudes Survey created six categories of belief, including relatively ambiguous answers such as 'I don't believe in a personal God but I do believe in a higher power of some kind' (Park et al 2010: 68). But once again, we can be clear that substantial numbers of Britons possess some sort of Christian value system – no matter how vaguely defined.

The number of people who identify with one denomination also remains high. In the last government census (2001), 37.3 million people in England and Wales described themselves as 'Christian'. In the UK as whole, 76.8 per cent of people stated that they were Christian, with 22.2 per cent identifying as Anglican (13.4 million). In Scotland, people were asked their specific denomination, with 2.1 million answering 'Church of Scotland', and a total of 3.3 million as 'Christian'. There is an estimated Muslim population of around 3 per cent. The 2001 Census was the first time that the question 'what is your religion?' had been asked in Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland). While this makes comparisons over time difficult, the 2001 data nevertheless shows the continuing strength of church identity, if not

necessarily of regular Sunday morning church attendance. So politicians, including MEPs, must be respectful of the place of Christianity in the development of British democracy, without necessarily being seen to being under its control.

Conclusion

Analysing the survey responses from MEPs from the UK and Ireland collectively provides us with some interesting patterns of political behaviour – from below (civil society), from above (international community) and 'in the middle' (interest groups). If we examine the first of these perspectives, we can note that MEPs are no more or less secularised than the wider population, and are representative of ordinary Europeans. In terms of the 'middle', we can state that religious organisations are influential in the EU, and that religion, therefore still has power, although there are no hidden agendas either, at least none that are detectable via a survey. In terms of externally, the EU is perhaps at its most 'religious' when it is looking beyond its boundaries – for example, enlargement and the accession of Turkey.

With religious political issues, then, we see Europe's elected politicians 'follow the votes' (see Downs 1957): religion as a freedom of expression is encouraged and supported as being a 'norm', while religion as an identity or group belief is handled carefully. So when it comes to discriminating against EU citizens because of their religious beliefs, our MEPs are naturally against such behaviour. We also see in their responses that MEPs are happy to recognise the importance of religion as a social and a political reality. Meanwhile, when it comes to identity, we see politicians treading softly. It would also be wrong to conclude that just because some of the survey responses indicate that MEPs do not regularly take religion into account, that religion is therefore entirely irrelevant. In this sense, we can evaluate that MEPs are as much in touch with their electorates and constituents as MPs. They understand the importance of representing the civil society out of which they come. They communicate an inclusive approach that signals a willingness to try and be as representative as possible. This can be broadly regarded as a successful aspect of the work of the European Parliament as it tries to represent the civil society and public sphere Europe. The status of religious lobbies within the EU can be said to broadly respected but no more and no less prominent than other groups, organisations or interests. Freedom of religion is indeed protected and

supported but not if it impacts upon the freedoms of other European citizens – for example, in relation to human sexuality, gender discrimination or abortion.

'Multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt 2000) can be said to summarise this approach - a Europe for all, with different groups co-existing alongside each other. The EU neither denies its rich Christian heritage nor does it trumpet it as central to its existence. Its politicians merely deal with religious issues on an individual basis. Society is present, then, at the supra-national level of the complex system of multi-level governance operated by the European Union. Social capital can be linked to civilisation and political culture referred to by Eisenstadt. The scholarly literature from social scientists on religion has shifted quite significantly since the new orthodoxy arrived in the 1960s proclaiming that religion was no longer of interest – and in many ways, it is Eisenstadt who has gradually come to personify that shift, arguing that in modern advanced industrial democracies like the UK, different sets of values co-exist alongside one another, and disagreeing with the idea that secularisation is an irreversible and inevitable trend. Eisenstadt criticises scholars who 'assumed, even only implicitly, that the cultural program of modernity as it developed in modern Europe and the basic institutional constellations that emerged there would ultimately take over in all modernizing and modern societies' (2000: 1).

So elected European politicians always seek to represent public opinion and place themselves in the mainstream, in exactly the same way as national party politicians do. MEPs can be said to be no more or no less sympathetic to churches and faith groups than any other level of modern society. Church populations are falling – they remain significant, but they do not have the power that they once had, and it remains to be seen whether they will again in the future. Our MEPs tread a moderate line between respecting religion but not necessarily adhering to religious views which, at times in Europe, can be peripheral. Europe presently leads the world in secularism – it is the only part of the globe where church attendances are not rising (see Norris and Inglehart 2004). Europe is the historic home of Christianity but it is also now the home of atheism and agnosticism. We should not be surprised that the European Parliament attempts to reconcile those two spheres - it makes very clear rational, vote-seeking sense.

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