The right and religion in European Union politics: from 'confessionalism' to 'conservatism'

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Abstract

The intimate relationship between religion and parties of the right in European politics has been well documented in political science, encompassing both the long-standing partnership between the church and Christian Democrats as well as the more recent adoption of Christian identity and symbolism by radical 'right-wing' parties. Yet in this contribution, it will be argued that in the 2019–2024 session of the European Parliament (EP), it is a third right-of-centre group that has now emerged as the clearest proponents of the role of Christianity in the modern-day European Union (EU). The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), led by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS), regularly and consistently advance the case for 'freedom of religion' and the positive role of churches as institutions in public affairs. While Christian Democrats have become secular, 'catch-all' peoples' parties, and 'far-right' politicians are criticised for exploiting tensions over multiculturalism, it is the European *conservatives*, with their 'Euro-realist' agenda, who now represent the most novel and intriguing aspect to the interface between religion and the right in EU party politics.

Introduction

The close relationship between political parties of the right and Christianity in Europe has been long documented in the political science and European Union (EU) studies literature, with recent elections across European states providing new and fresh case studies (see Hanley 1994; Van Hecke and Gerard 2004; Accetti 2019). However, it would be wrong to interpret this as 'business as usual' as different elements of the relationship have also now evolved significantly in terms of the various institutional actors involved. The long-standing partnership between Christian churches and Christian Democratic parties, despite their 'confessional' origins, has gradually and steadily become weaker as CD politicians have embraced more socially liberal positions to reflect shifts in their core electorate (see Duncan 2006; Van Kersbergen 2021). Meanwhile, the more recent adoption of Christian identity and symbolism by radical 'right-wing' parties has been

broadly criticised by many as merely an opportunist attempt to capitalise on interracial tensions over immigration in European countries (see Marzouki et al. 2018).

In this contribution, it will be argued that, in fact, a third and in some ways 'newer' right-of-centre party family has now emerged as the clearest proponent of the role of Christianity in the modern day European Union. The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), led in the European Parliament (EP) by members (MEPs) from Poland's Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS), regularly and consistently advance the case for 'freedom of religion' and the positive role of Christianity in public affairs. With their 'Euro-realist' agenda also advocating a related respect for freedom of association and the continuing sovereignty of EU member states, it is the ECR who now represent the most novel and still under-researched aspect to the important interface between religion and the right in EU party politics. European *conservatives*, not the increasingly secularised Christian Democrats, or the radical right, now appear to have the most 'joined up' and consistent position on religion's place in the public sphere. Politicians from the European Conservatives and Reformists are confident in their 'soft' Euro-scepticism (or 'Euro-realism', as they would have it) as it emanates from the same place as their affection for 'freedom of religion' (Steven 2020; Steven and Szczerbiak 2022). They unashamedly value the traditional boundaries of European nation-states as well as the traditional values and social attitudes contained within those states.

The existence and growth of the ECR across different European countries as well as the EU itself is a very strong confirmation of Von Beyme's 1985 analysis of the different dynamics of European party politics (see also Mair 1990; Ware 1996). His development of the influential concept of '*familles spirituelles*' represented the first sustained attempt to identify 'conservatism' as being a distinct party family from both 'Christian Democracy' (CD) and the 'radical right' within the context of West European politics. The absence of confessional CD parties in the English-speaking world is noticeable and reflects different paths in history and culture, including in relation to the role of the state. The vocabulary of 'conservatism' has always appeared to enjoy particular relevance in countries like the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), where related ideas around 'small government' and free market economics have also had more resonance than in continental Western Europe. Ultimately, Christian Democrats in countries like Germany,

Belgium, and The Netherlands are much less hostile to the role of the state in domestic politics and society than, for example, British Conservatives or American Republicans who value most the freedom of the individual, the freedom of the market, and the freedom of nation-states.

While precise theoretical definitions of conservatism in politics are often contentious, it is widely acknowledged that *conservatives* tend to value the freedom of the individual over the state, and also maintain a related respect for the freedom of long-established institutions and conventions (see Garnett 2018). Norton states that 'Conservatives have an instinctive set of beliefs' (2021, 2), highlighting in the process the conservative suspicion of radical ideas or dogmatism. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) is broadly considered the first attempt to set out the conservative predilection for conserving that which already exists and placing a value on this, seeking to reform incrementally and only when necessary. More modern conservative thinkers like Michael Oakeshott (1962) and Roger Scruton (2014) also echoed these Burkean sentiments in their writings, emphasising what it means to be of a conservative 'disposition'. It is then no surprise that conservatives value religion as a traditional set of beliefs and churches as important institutions in society, and substantially more so than 'left-leaning' or 'progressive' voters and politicians – the latter arguing that government ought to be transformative, not merely steady or competent.

As Table 1 shows, since the 2019 EP elections, the ECR has 66 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), making it the fifth largest grouping behind the European People's Party (EPP), the social democratic Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in Europe (S&D), the liberal Renew Europe (RE), and the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA). It is important to acknowledge that the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberals, and Greens have all been active in EP party politics since either the late 1970s or the early 1980s, while the ECR was only set up in 2009. The British Conservatives were the main drivers of this move, desiring a more Euro-sceptic alternative to the federalist and Christian Democratic EPP in the European Parliament. At the 2014 elections the ECR emerged as the third-largest grouping, holding the status of 'king maker' in the Parliament until the 2019 elections. While the 2016 United Kingdom referendum and the consequences of Brexit have obviously seen MEPs from the UK

Conservative Party forced to leave the Hemicycle, MEPs from Law and Justice in Poland and others very much keep the organisation of the ECR functioning and moving forward.

Table 1 around here

This contribution then analyses the relationship between parties and religion in European Union politics. In particular, it focuses on right-of-centre parties which have traditionally enjoyed the closest institutional relationship with Christian churches in Western Europe. It is worth noting the relative absence of literature on the relationship between politics and religion within the context of political parties, political behaviour, elections, and parliaments i.e. specifically political science. Traditionally, the field has been dominated by issues more cognate to international relations and Huntington's famous 'clash of civilisations' thesis (1996). Haynes argues that one explanation for this is the highly fragmented context – for example, studying the role of religion in Indian party politics is completely different from studying the role of religion in French party politics (2020).

This contribution builds on earlier work by the author (2016; 2020; 2022) in relation to the European Conservatives and Reformists which involved interviews with MEPs, the manipulation of European electoral statistics, as well as work in the Conservative Party archives at Churchill College, Cambridge.[1] The discussion in this contribution primarily constitutes a mapping of the extant scholarly literature on the relationship between conservative or right of centre political parties and Christianity in Europe, along with a contemporary analysis of public discourse around the place of religion in EU member states, especially Poland and Italy. It adopts a broadly institutionalist methodology,

arguing that the role of institutions is key to understanding and explaining democratic politics, including both churches and political parties.

European conservatives and the Christian churches

Traditionally, the intimate nature of the relationship between Christian voters and parties of the right was matched at an institutional level with Christian Democrat politicians acting as fierce defenders of the substantive public role of the church in Western European societies. Church leaders would openly endorse CD parties at election time in countries such as Italy (Warner 2000) and especially in the sphere of education, priests and clerics would even play an active role in political decision-making in Western European states like Austria, Belgium, Germany, and The Netherlands (see Hanley 1994). Modern day CD parties have their origins in confessional movements of the nineteenth century, which sought to protect the church – especially the Roman Catholic Church – from state interference or equivalent interference from lay or secular interests. Up to this point, the Catholic Church had enjoyed tremendous power as the main source of education in many European countries, and was therefore able to control other economic resources. Yet today's Christian Democratic parties have moved a long way from their confessional roots, with many changing their names to 'people's parties' (for example, in Austria and Spain, as well as the main CD faction in the European Parliament, the EPP) and with those who continue to retain the CD label now fundamentally 'secularist' in their policies in any case (Duncan 2006; Accetti 2019; Van Kersbergen 2021).

It is argued in this contribution that, rather than the Christian Democrats, it is now the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) party family who consistently show the most sympathy to the more socially conservative positions associated with traditional Christianity and, in particular, the Roman Catholic Church. This is an essentially new argument not made previously in the political science literature, which tends to focus either on the aforementioned decline of Christian Democracy as a confessional social movement or on the controversial attempts by the radical right to frame Christianity as the main bulwark against the rise of Islam and wider Muslim immigration to Europe.

However, neglected in the literature is the generally low-key and respectful way the European Conservatives and Reformists group try to maintain the influence of churches as spiritual and moral institutions in a fast-moving and complicated European Union.

Partly, this is as a result of the leading ECR member party, Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), attempting to replicate what it has successfully achieved at a member-state level and tie together its affection for Polish nationhood with its affection for the Roman Catholic Church. Catholicism has long been an important element to Polish society and was widely credited with Poland's ultimate resistance to domination by the Soviet Union (see Szczerbiak 2018). Its dominant leading figure, PiS party leader and former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczyński, is a devout church-going Roman Catholic; Mr Kaczyński has displayed a determined public commitment to try to ensure that the European Union does not promote unnecessarily socially liberal ideas around identity, gender, and sexuality, and holds a deep-rooted distaste of the way the EU apparently attempts to push this agenda onto countries where such ideas are less than universally popular, such as in Central and Eastern Europe. In the summer of 2021 the archbishop of Krakow, Marek Jędraszewski, publicly thanked Mr Kaczyński for his service to Polish society, stating that he and his late brother Lech (the former president of Poland), had been a 'gift of God' (Notes from Poland 2021).

Polish MEPs dominate the ECR due to their large numbers, moulding the stance of the party grouping on social policy amongst other areas, along with like-minded MEPs from the Czech Christian Democratic party, the Civic Democrats (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS), who helped to found the group in 2009 and who have been in power in Prague since 2021 (see Table 2). The second largest faction within the ECR are Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FdI) led by Giorgia Meloni, the Italian prime minister. While FdI and PiS are by no means 'sister parties' (and indeed the former would be labelled 'far-right' by many), Ms Meloni has also shown a capacity for respecting the Catholic Church in a way that neither the more moderate Christian Democrats nor many more radical 'right-wing' parties achieve. Ms Meloni said famously in a speech in central Rome: 'I am Giorgia. I am a woman. I am a mother. I am a Christian' (Meloni 2019). In an autobiography, she has written that: 'I have never ceased to believe in God. But the intimate dimension is so very personal that it cannot and must not be used as a

paradigm of a collective political movement or indeed of a nation. My faith in God is imperfect, doubtful, painful, but it is mine and only mine' (Meloni 2021). The explicitly *conservative* attempt to display respect for Christianity in a non-controversial and mainstream fashion is striking. According to political scientist Olivier Roy (2022): 'The Italian Church leaves a door open to Giorgia Meloni because she does not compromise Christianity'.

Table 2 around here

In contrast, the religious origins of the Christian Democrats and the EPP in the European Parliament are now ostensibly relegated to the past – today, they stand firmly for a centrist, moderate, and 'catch-all' ideology ('*Die Mitte*') that seeks above all to protect European societies from any type of crises that may occur via the main mechanism of European integration (see Kirchheimer 1966). One consequence of this is that CD parties can often appear unprincipled when it comes to domestic policies, almost to the point of having no core policies at all on economic issues such as free trade, business or taxation rates, or on social issues such as abortion or human sexuality. Voting behaviour patterns have also shifted substantially – outside of Catholic regions such as Bavaria, CD politicians appear less afraid to offend Christian voters over social issues (see Accetti 2019; Van Kersbergen 2021).

The relationship between the 'radical right' and the church is also extremely uneven. It is widely acknowledged that more overtly far-right politicians have also started to proactively align themselves openly with Christianity, primarily as a means of protecting what they consider to be important components in a traditional European society (see

Arato and Cohen 2017; Marzouki et al. 2018). These parties are ideologically hostile to immigration into their respective countries, in particular non-white and Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa. The Identity and Democracy (ID) faction in the European Parliament is made up of parties that are much more overtly right-wing in their views than the European Conservatives and Reformists, such as National Rally from France (*Rassemblement National,* RN,), League from Italy (*Lega per Salvini Premier*, LSP) and Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD). These parties are 'hard' Eurosceptic and traditionally regard the EU as an international organisation they would like to see disappear altogether (see Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008).

Not only are ID parties hostile to the mass movement of people and open borders, they also frequently emphasise their role as political outsiders (Identity and Democracy 2023). In order to be seen as the true representatives of the people who vote for them, they regularly seek to capitalise on the division between those who they regard as the 'real' Europeans and the 'non-European' immigrants (see Mudde 2019). Scholars such as Mudde (2019) and Müller (2016) have built up a large body of literature trying to explain what drives voters to support this category of politicians and indeed what motivates these politicians in the first place to break from the mainstream and propose radically different policies from the political centre. Meanwhile, Minkenberg (2017; 2018) has been one of the most prominent political scientists to track the relationship between the right and religion while Roy (see Marzouki et al 2016) has also researched this paradigm in great depth, often with a focus on European politics.

Yet in their recent edited volume on the topic, Marzouki et al. (2016) argue that right-wing political parties effectively 'hijack' religion, even to the extent of not being deterred when church representatives object to being used for political or electoral purposes (see also Arato and Cohen 2017). Clearly, churches are nervous about being seen as too close to non-mainstream parties, even if these parties often appear *prima facie* to be apparently on their side. Aspects of this are backed up from research by Schwörer and Romero-Vidal (2020) focusing on the extent to which 'radical right' parties in Europe actually focus on religious issues in their election communication materials and campaigns. While they find an increase in anti-Islam sentiment being expressed, they do not detect a significant rise

in pro-Christianity sentiment – in other words, these parties may well be using non-Christian immigration as an issue upon which to base their election campaigns, but this does not extend to them actively or regularly expressing any positive views on Christianity more than any other party. This is important as the parties themselves know to which voters they are trying to appeal, and this manifesto analysis suggests that many right-wing parties do not regard Christianity itself as a vote-winner but merely anti-Islam sentiment as constituting the main component of that strategy (see also Kallis 2018).

RN leader Marine Le Pen has previously said that it is important that the pope from the Vatican does not think he can tell French people what to do and how to live their lives (Green 2017). League leader Matteo Salvini has frequently clashed with church leaders in Italy, including the archbishop of Milan, Mario Delpini, over his critical pronouncements on immigration into the country. The senior Italian prelate suggested that it was not Christian to propose a closed doors policy towards immigrants or refugees (Roberts 2018). Similarly, Protestant churches in Hungary have also at times spoken out on the Fidesz government's statements around what its leader, Viktor Orbán, labels true 'Christian Democracy', as well as so-called 'illiberal democracy' in contrast to the Western European version (Biró-Nagy 2017). There exists a scepticism that any of these politicians have a genuine affection for Christianity or for churches as institutions – rather, they represent a convenient hook upon which they can hang their radical right ideas about the drawbacks of multiculturalism and non-white immigration.

In contrast, it is argued in this contribution that leading European Conservatives and Reformist member parties such as PiS and FdI are not trying to 'hijack' religion in the same fashion as politicians from the radical right ID faction outlined above. Mainstream Catholics in Poland and Italy vote in large numbers for PiS and FdI respectively, helping both into power in Warsaw and Rome (see Szczerbiak 2012; Baldini et al 2022). In parallel, church leaders in Poland and Italy have shown either outright enthusiasm or tacit trust for conservative pronouncements on social issues, while at an EU level, the European Conservatives and Reformists party family are the most vocal advocates of 'freedom of religion' and it is to this more formal and institutional dimension that the contribution now turns.

Conservatism and the importance of institutions: freedom of religion

In the previous section, it was explained that European conservatives have substantial affection for Christianity as a religion, and that there exists a type of mutual institutional respect in countries like Poland and Italy between politicians and clergy. Yet that mutual respect is also ideologically profound and has an EU-wide dimension. The ECR, first and foremost, regards itself as 'conservative', meaning that it enthusiastically supports the concept of 'freedom of religion' and the need to defend the interests of the church from that of what it perceives to be the liberalising, secular state (European Conservatives and Reformists 2023). This can be contrasted with left-of-centre or progressive parties who are noticeably more hostile to the role of the church in society, as well as the aforementioned Christian Democrats who are much more ambivalent about secularism than in the past. Finally, 'far-right' ID parties stand accused of merely being interested in exploiting the church for their own short-term, anti-Islam gains.

At EU-level, the ECR has a joined up set of conservative policy proposals that reflect its predilection for a small state, rule of law, and cultural traditions. Its 'Euro-scepticism' or 'Euro-realism' stems from its *conservatism*, as does its affection for Christianity and family values. In the same way that ECR politicians dislike what they perceive as the overreach of the European Union into the independence of sovereign member states, they equally disapprove of any overreach on the part of the secular state into what is the traditional territory of the church, i.e. on policy matters related to social and moral affairs. Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, for example, has no warmth for elements of European integration when Poland's sovereignty is apparently compromised, while aspects of PiS's antipathy towards Brussels are also orientated around social issues – the EU's often socially liberal stance on rights, equalities, sexualities, and genders does not fit well with PiS voters' *conservative* approach to the same issues (Law and Justice 2023).

The European Conservatives and Reformists prefer the term 'Euro-realist' to 'Euro-sceptic', and protest that they merely want to improve the European Union for the better, not abandon it or reject it altogether (Steven 2020). As ECR's formal summary on the European Parliament 2014 elections webpage put it, 'the ECR believes that the EU has a role to play in the 21st century but it should focus on delivering cooperation between its member countries, and finding practical solutions to problems and challenges of the 2050s, not of the 1950s' (European Parliament 2014). The ECR may oppose 'ever closer union' and believe that the EU ought to 'do less better' but it does not oppose the existence of the EU itself – merely that it ought to respect the independence of its member states more. The ECR's 'realist' position on the extent of European integration is similar to its moderate and *conservative* position on religion and the influence of churches at an EU-level – broadly respectful and supportive whenever it is appropriate for the freedom, independence, and self-governing autonomy of individual member states.

In western democracies it has traditionally been the right that actively supports the role of institutions in building a stable society. Whether it is the law, the church, or parliament, right-of-centre parties support the institutions of society sincerely and consistently. Parties on the left – even centre-left Social Democrats – are arguably more ambivalent about institutions, believing instead passionately in progressive politics, social change, and *transformative* ideas. Europe has a long-standing Christian heritage and Christian Democrats also have a proud tradition of promoting institutions, yet the modern day, CD-led EU does not always recognise this in relation to social policy and issues around equalities. There are aspects and elements within this issue that are potentially liable to come directly into conflict with each other – for example, traditional Christian views of marriage and family potentially clash with liberal, western ideals around human sexuality and identity. The EU has long tried to tread a fine path between 'freedom of religion' and 'freedom from religion', and that includes the way MEPs in the European Parliament formulate and pass legislation in areas of social policy and related competences (Leustean and Madeley 2013). Within the European Union, the wider and longer standing Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ) in particular has developed a rationale for how to accommodate religious freedoms in the context of liberal representative democracy and the wider rule of law. Nevertheless, the AFSJ also allows the EU to develop a consolidated position across EU-27 in relation to harmonising common rights and values that arguably runs counter to Christian concepts of family life.

Since 2009, Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) foresees an 'open, transparent and regular dialogue between the EU institutions and churches, religious associations or communities, philosophical and non-confessional organisations'. This broad and inclusive approach to religion reflects a compromise within the EU where faith-based organisations (FBOs) are granted a formal structured mechanism that enables them to be in regular contact with decision-makers while at the same time not being awarded a special status that places them above secular groups or associations in the way that, for example, a traditional state church in a member state might experience (see Steven 2009). Yet it is the Christian Democrats in Western Europe who have been some of the most enthusiastic supporters for introducing social policy measures linked to sexuality and gender that in the past would have been opposed on the grounds of going against scriptural teachings (Legutko 2016: 155; see also interview with Legutko 2017) . Parties such as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Germany, for example, are confessional in origin yet now resemble a 'catch-all' party for all Germans, Christian or not (see Kirchheimer 1966). Equalities and human rights have steadily become important touchstone elements to European integration and the EU is an enthusiastic promoter of liberal western values globally orientated around freedom of identity.

The modern-day EU, led consistently by Christian Democrat figures in the Commission, Councils and Parliament, as perceived by ECR politicians from Poland, Italy, and elsewhere, is not always on the side of the Christian church but instead favours globalised, liberal, secularising forces who wish to marginalise it and in the process its centuries-old traditions. After the failure of the Lisbon Treaty (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union 2009) to include a passage on the importance of Europe's Christian heritage in its preamble, despite the support of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the more socially liberal interests contained within the EU have very much been to the forefront of decisions (see Mudrov 2016). Member-state governments such as those in Poland and Italy in particular have become increasingly frustrated by what they perceive to be an absence of sensitivity on the part of many MEPs in the European Parliament towards more socially conservative Eastern European and Southern European nations. Moving firmly and steadily away from confessionalism, the central

philosophy of the modern-day Christian Democrats has increasingly prioritised economic managerialism, rule of law, and political stability.

Meanwhile, there is also a clear difference between the ECR's wider affection for 'freedom of religion', which they regard as being the need for the church to be free from interference from the secular state, and ID's affection for closed nation-state borders, which is much more explicitly orientated around the need to keep European societies 'white' and 'Christian-looking' and leads ID's MEPs to be much more 'hard' in their Euro-scepticism. It can even be said to represent an entirely different issue. Clearly, open borders and freedom of movement are core principles of European integration with the establishment of the Schengen Zone and considered to be one of the greatest achievements of the EU since its inception as the European Economic Community in the 1950s. For ID politicians, however, Schengen represents a substantial overreach by the EU where the sovereignty of member states is severely compromised by such a policy. In particular, large-scale migration from Islamic countries has obviously altered the character of cities and urban areas in Italy and France and the far right regard this as regrettable (see Identity and Democracy 2023).

Formally at least, the ECR merely dislikes what it sees as Western Europe's predilection for globalisation and secularism rather than adopting a principled hostility towards all non-white, non-Christian, and non-European immigrants. For ID MEPs, the position on immigration is much more binary and they are extremely hostile to European integration as a result, while the ECR is merely sceptical about some aspects of how the Schengen Zone functions and the real-life practicalities of open borders. There is also a difference in emphasis overall: for ID politicians, reducing immigration is the main priority whereas for the European Conservatives, there is a much more active and concerted attempt made to protect the principles of 'freedom of religion'. The ECR dislikes what it sees as the bland Western European secularism of the EPP but, at the same time, does not advocate a systematic closing of Europe's borders, nor does it show open hostility towards non-European immigrants (see Steven and Szczerbiak 2022).

Over the last decade the ECR has carved a niche for itself in EU politics by sitting on the political spectrum between the Christian Democrats and the more 'radical right', and that

achievement is also of direct relevance to the focus of this contribution and the relationship between the right and religion. Part of the ECR's activities since 2009 has been to argue that it is possible to be pragmatic and 'sensible' over important issues, trusting the 'common sense' of voters over EU 'elites' whilst also eschewing overtly extreme positions on immigration and multiculturalism (see European Conservatives and Reformists 2023). At an EU level, the ECR has been broadly successful in charting a path that sees itself considered part of the political mainstream, even if some of its member parties (for example, the Sweden Democrats – *Sverigedemokraterna* – and the Finns Party, *Perussuomalaiset*) are undoubtedly considered much more radical or even 'extremist'. In the 2014–2019 session the Belgian MEP Anneleen Van Bossuyt served as chair of the influential parliamentary committee on the internal market, while Polish MEP Anna Fotyga chaired the important Security and Defence sub-committee. In the 2019–2024 session the Belgian MEP Johan Van Overtfeldt became chair of the powerful Budget Committee. In January 2019 the EPP's leader in the European Parliament and candidate for Commission President, Manfred Weber, praised the ECR in a press conference – stating that the group was much better in his view at starting trilogues and working collaboratively in Brussels and Strasbourg than the Greens (Fortuna, 10 January 2019).

Leading ECR member party Brothers of Italy (FdI) has also frequently been accused of being far right (see Ammassari and McDonnell 2022) and there is no question the party has its origins historically in that ideological territory. Nevertheless, within the context of contemporary Italy as well as the modern day EU, Brothers of Italy appear overall to be considered more 'mainstream' than overtly radical right parties such as the League in Italy (LSP), National Rally (RN) in France, and Alternative for Germany (AfD). For example, the former president of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, is happy to serve in 2023 as Italian foreign minister in Ms. Meloni's government. Moreover, both Brothers of Italy and Law and Justice in Poland have together made the European Conservatives and Reformists one of the leading voices in the European Union in favour of strongly backing Ukraine in the conflict with Russia. When Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni met with Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary-general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), in November 2022, Mr Stoltenberg stated: 'Many congratulations to you on your appointment as Prime Minister of Italy. I look forward to working closely with you. And I also welcome your strong personal commitment to NATO,

to our transatlantic Alliance between North America and Europe. And it is important that we work closely together, especially at this critical moment for our security' (NATO 2022). All of this stands in contrast with the much more 'ambivalent' stance on Russian power adopted by 'far-right' figures such as Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini (see Laruelle 2021).

In the previous section, it was argued that the European Conservatives party family enjoys healthy relations with Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church in states such as Poland and Italy, and in this section, it has been argued that this represents a profound ideological position that marries consistently with the ECR's wider stance on European integration and EU politics. Conservative enthusiasm for Christianity's role in society, along with strong support for NATO in international relations and geopolitics, represents a joined-up and distinctively 'Euro-realist' disposition on public and social affairs. It also helps to counterbalance a more controversial ambivalence in relation to the separation of powers and 'rule of law' especially in states such as Poland and Italy (see Szczerbiak 2018; Ammassari and McDonnell 2022).

Conclusions

The broad starting premise for the focus for this contribution has been to test the long-established relationship between the political right and Christianity in Europe – while the left in partisan terms has often been either ambivalent or even hostile to religion in the past, right-of-centre parties have traditionally been the first to its defence when faced with criticism of its value or influence. This has also been reflected broadly in voting behaviour patterns, where church-going Christians were always conventionally much more likely to vote for Christian Democrat parties at elections and where, rightly or wrongly, some voters for more right-wing parties frequently identified immigration, especially non-white or non-Christian immigration, as being a factor in them offering their support to these types of parties. Yet it is clear that these rather two-dimensional relationships have either been in steady decline or fail to adequately capture the true nature of the relationship between the right and the church in 2020s Europe.

In terms of institutional relationships, Polish and Italian MEPs from the European Conservatives and Reformists enjoy a close relationship with the Catholic Church at a member-state level. Church leaders in Poland and Italy appear to be broadly appreciative of the way Law and Justice and Brothers of Italy place the defence of Catholicism prominently in their wider political platform, despite initial misgivings about the latter party in particular being too close to the far right in relation to immigration. In contrast, politicians from more emphatically and consistently far-right parties in member states such as National Rally in France and the League in Italy have frequently clashed with the clerical leaders of the Catholic Church, who dislike the far right's hostile policy stances on immigration and multiculturalism, and the argument that European values are under threat from Islam. CD politicians meanwhile, in countries like Germany, Belgium, and The Netherlands, have pinned their own party colours firmly to the secular mast-pole.

In parallel, the European Conservatives and Reformists party grouping have also developed a sophisticated position on the benefits of an American-style 'freedom of religion' at EU level. Ultimately, this is rooted in the idea that freedom of religion is as important as freedom of expression, freedom of speech, and freedom of association, and that it is therefore an important element of democracy. This stance also explains why the group is enthusiastic about international organisations such as NATO but much less so about elements of European integration. This position can also be contrasted with the views of parties on the left (and also effectively now the CD), which would be much more lukewarm to the idea that democracy is closely related to freedom of speech and much more interested in promoting values around equalities and human rights, along with upholding international law. Meanwhile, the far-right group Identity and Democracy has much less to say about the deeper philosophical rationale for their policy positions – their only priority is to practically strengthen borders and reduce immigration, with religion merely one element for achieving that objective.

The decline in an openly confessional outlook amongst Christian Democrat parties and a rise in populist, Euro-sceptic parties on the right in recent years have both been well documented. Yet despite their preference for speaking about religion and Islam in particular in their political platforms, the far right actually has a fractious relationship with both Christian churches and Christian voters. Moreover, the cooling of the

relationship between Christian Democracy and the church ought not to be confused with a decline in the importance of the interface between the right and religion in European party politics. Instead, the party family in the European Union that provides a re-energising of that interface is the European *conservatives* who enjoy good relations with the leadership of the Catholic Church at member-state level, and have a well thought-out position on the importance of 'freedom of religion' and Christianity more widely across the European Union.

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[1] This research was conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, Regulation EU 2016/679). The compliance with rules of ethics and data protection was verified in consultation with the relevant bodies of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, the university managing the survey, in March 2020.