Consulting and compromising: the (non-)religious policy preferences of British Members of the European Parliament

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The United Kingdom (UK) provides an important case study when analysing the influence of religious attitudes and values on political behaviour in the European Union. Our research shows British Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to be relatively at ease working with the different faith-based organisations which seek to influence the European policy process - and much more so than many of their colleagues from other member states. This can potentially be explained by the more 'pluralist' political culture which is prevalent in the UK, and can also be related to the comparatively high rates of non-church attendance amongst the British sample which facilitates their even-handedness towards different groups. This, in turn, produces a resistance to allowing religious factors to disproportionately influence European policymaking.

Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is the arena of the European Union (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. The EU promotes a narrative of cohesion, convergence and unity which explicitly encompasses democratic beliefs and values; meanwhile, the EP seeks to democratically represent the interests of all sections of society, including both religious and non-religious citizens (EP n.d.).

In many ways, the EU has repeatedly displayed a determination to remain formally secular, mimicking a classic French-style *laïcité* in both its treaties and directives (see Foret and Riva 2010). Yet this frequently made comparison arguably presents only a partial picture - in fact, the way different religious interest groups in Brussels are forced to compete on an even 'playing field' also has distinct overtones of the American version of church and state separation. It was the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997 which first truly articulated the importance of protecting fundamental rights and promoting non-discrimination in relation to religion (EU n.d.). 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). Indeed the logic of the EU's now longstanding policy of 'privatising' religion has become even more strained since the European Commission (EC) and the European Parliament (EP) started to legislate increasingly in areas of social policy and human rights, complementing their traditional interest in trade and economic affairs.

So while religion may help to define Europe, it plays a much more ambiguous role in the EU. 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 wider multi-level governance appears to be highly complex. Pinning down the precise influence of religion on

the government and politics of Europe seems challenging. Nevertheless the United Kingdom (UK) provides an important case study when analysing the influence of the religious attitudes on political behaviour and public policy. While the UK may not formally separate church and state - with Anglican bishops even sitting and voting in the upper house of Parliament - the wider policy environment unquestionably embraces the democratic spirit of equality of opportunity, applied regardless of race, religion, gender or sexuality. Members of Parliament (MPs) operate under strict codes of conduct, which cover even the way they meet constituents: for example, it is against the rules for MPs to try to help a voter who does not live in their constituency (HC 2012). Detailed regulations also cover the way individual donations are made to party organisations and election campaigns (El C n.d.). The entire political system – while far from perfect – is nevertheless designed to aid access and transparency in relation to the business of government.

Since the socio-economic reforms initiated by Margaret Thatcher's governments from 1979 onwards, Britain has developed a 'pluralist' political culture comparable with those of other parts of the 'Anglosphere' like the United States (US), where elected representatives are comfortable consulting with interest groups on an equal and open basis (Dahl 1961). This can be contrasted with the more 'corporatist' system that has traditionally operated across much of Western Europe, including large economies such as Germany, where governments establish formal social partnerships with a select few business organisations and trade unions which then play a central role in public policymaking (Heeg 2012). Meanwhile accompanying 'ever closer union' in Europe a sophisticated system of interest group politics now fully operational in Brussels has developed. This system can be likened to the longer established equivalent in Washington DC: public affairs functioning as a profession, replacing the politics of class, region or religion (Mahoney 2008).

Given what has been implied about aspects of the lobbying environment operating in the European Quarter of Brussels, we should expect Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from the UK to be relatively at ease working with the different religious and nonreligious representations seeking to influence different parts of the European policy process. Our research shows that this is indeed the case, and more so than it is with many of their counterparts from other member-states. We can also attempt to relate this to the comparatively high rates of agnosticism and atheism amongst the British sample, and also to the way that they believe public policy should be formulated – for example, in reference to foreign policy and the accession of Turkey as a EU member state.

The survey questionnaire and the British MEP sample

The main instrument used for collecting data about the religious preferences of the British MEPs was a survey questionnaire, controlled centrally by the Institute for European Studies at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). This allows wider comparisons to be made with the other member-states included in the 'Religion at the European Parliament' (RelEP) project (http://www.releur.eu/): Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain. 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, including the individual work of MEPs, the wider work of the EP and ultimately the activities of the EU as a whole. 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 EP 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 EU approach religion, especially its most democratic and representative arm, the EP?

We start by examining the profiles of the British MEPs. Sixteen out of a total 73 (22%) responded to the survey questionnaire. This type of response rate is typical of an elite survey of this nature, but still large enough to allow us to draw wider conclusions about what

British 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 with the responses from other member states (which also generated a similar response rate – 167 out of 736 MEPs, or 23%), we are certainly able to track certain patterns of attitudes and behaviour. Fortunately, the 16 respondents from the UK represent a range of different party groupings, terms served and committee specialisation.

Five Liberal Democrats, four Conservatives, three Labour members, three UK Independence Party members, and one Scottish Nationalist participated in the survey. This meant that the largest parliamentary group represented was the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). The obvious point to make in addition to the above is the total absence of MEPs from the European People's Party (EPP) in the UK section of the survey sample. Perhaps the most visible formal link of all between religion and politics in the EU can be found in the chamber of the EP via the work of the EPP, the political movement that brings together MEPs who are Christian Democrats, and which, prior to the 2014 elections, constituted the largest elected group with 270 members. The EPP seeks to promote values and policies which have a religious origin, albeit not as centrally as it once did (Duncan 2013). Yet in Britain, the centre-right party, the Conservative Party, has no ideological links at all with Christian Democracy, and their MEPs even sit in an entirely different party group in the EP chamber, that of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). This move came about as a result of increasing Euroscepticism in the party, and a growing unease at being part of the group that formally describes itself as 'Europe's Driving Force' (EPP n.d.).

We can also link this absence of Christian Democracy in Britain with the more pluralist interest group culture already mentioned. After all, the corporatist consensus across much of Western Europe in countries such as Germany, The Netherlands and Austria is ultimately a Christian Democratic one with its origins in the implementation of various components of the European Social Model (ESM) – a middle-way in policymaking which argues that economic growth should not come at the expense of social cohesion. In comparison, the UK adheres to a much more Anglo-American political economy model which restricts state interference in the free market and, as a consequence, promotes a more fluid and open system of organised interests (including, as in our case, faith-based ones).

Nine out of 16 members (56%) were elected in the 1999-2004 term with the next biggest intake (four or 25%) coming in 2004-2009. Only one (6%) was elected for the first time only in 2009, while two (13%) 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, 13 out of 23 – with two vice-chairs included in the sample. As we can see from Table 1 below, this means that the British sample included a relatively experienced group of parliamentarians compared with the EU-wide sample involving all the member states.

Table 1. Number of terms served at the European Parliament.

Number of terms	Percentage of sample (UK only)	Percentage of sample (EU)
1	6	47
2	25	30
3	56	14
4	13	5
5	0	2
6	0	1
7	0	1

These data collectively allow us to draw some conclusions about the wider religious views of British MEPs. It is unlikely that their basic responses to the questions would be dramatically different on 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. While previous research has focused on the way faith-based groups lobby the EC in Brussels (Leustean 2012), the survey questionnaire also allows us to *quantify* and *measure* political influence. 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 EP has been handed more powers, the EC has remained the EU'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 Conference of European Churches (CEC), for example, as well to treaties and constitutional reforms (Leustean and Madeley 2009). Yet the arena of the EP ought not to be ignored, especially given its overtly representative democratic remit. In an era when the democratic deficit of Europe is frequently highlighted (Cheneval and Schimmelfennig 2013), and with the Eurozone crisis raising many questions about the legitimacy of the political structure of the EU, such questions are especially timely.

An open door policy: the influence of religious interest groups

Are religious interests represented effectively by British MEPs? 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 most damaging criticisms levelled at the EU is that it has failed to create a functioning public sphere with a European civic society (Dür and Mateo 2012). Interest groups may well lobby at a European level but rarely exclusively: rather, they maintain one eye on their own national policy environments. 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 (Putnam 2000). 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 politicians respond?

Taken together, Tables 2, 3 and 4 reveal an important trend in the responses of British MEPs. First, in Table 1, we see that they are probably more comfortable using the terminology of 'political realities' than the language of 'personal inspiration' when it comes to discussing the impact of religion upon their work activities. These responses are interesting as they show the British politicians acknowledging religion primarily when they are forced to engage with it as part of a professional relationship – 32% (6) as a social and political reality combined with 21% (4) as an interest group. However, 21% (4) of British MEPs are willing to openly admit that they mix religion and politics as a consequence of their own personal belief system – slightly less than the European average (31%). This also reinforces the argument that British MEPs – who are broadly in line with other European MEPs here – are quite happy to engage with different religious and non-religious groups, on the understanding that they have a legitimate right to representation and to participate fully in the political process.

Table 2. Religion and MEP activities.

Type of intervention (several responses possible, ranked 1-3)	Percentage of sample (UK only)	Percentage of sample (EU)
as a source of personal inspiration	21	31
as a social and political reality	32	38
as an interest group	21	19
other	16	7
no effect	11	4

A related survey question, meanwhile, asked the MEPs to consider the differences in behaviour within the context of multilevel governance (Table 3). Is the place of religion in the EP comparable with their experiences in national politics and government? We can note the difference between the responses of the British MEPs and the EU-wide average: 38% (6) of

UK respondents state there is no difference, compared with 19% (3) who say that there is a difference. Even taking into account the relatively high 'did not answer' rate here, this can be still considered a departure from the way their other European colleagues have answered. 53% state there is a difference between the national and EU contexts. While we cannot say for sure what has caused that, we can speculate that it is linked to British MEPs feeling more comfortable in the policy and lobbying environment of Brussels.

Table 3. Experiences in national politics.

Different from national politics?	Percentage of sample (UK only)	Percentage of sample (EU)
yes	19	53
no	38	33
did not answer	43	14

Table 4 focuses specifically on that lobbying environment: the survey asked how often the MEPs were in contact with religious or philosophical interest groups. While the responses from the British MEPs are broadly in line with those of the European average, with both showing healthy levels of contact with religious and philosophical groups, a closer inspection does suggest that the UK MEPs are in contact slightly more with such organisations. 19% (3) state that they are in contact once a week or more, for example, compared with only 4% of the European sample. 38% (6) state that they are in contact a few times over the course of a parliamentary term, compared with only 22% of MEPs on average. Also, only 13% of respondents state that they have never been lobbied by such groups. We can therefore say that most of the British MEPs have been lobbied by religious or faith-based organisations at some point.

Table 4. Contact with religious or philosophical interest groups.

Frequency of contact	Percentage of sample (UK only)	Percentage of sample (EU)
once a week or more	19	4
once a month or more	6	12
a few times a year	13	30
a few times over the course of a term	38	22
never	13	14
did not answer	12	17

While the individual tables so far do not necessarily reveal a hugely marked difference between the UK and EU respondents, they do potentially imply that the UK MEPs are generally comfortable working within this type of pluralist policy environment functioning within the EP. Additional qualitative comments from the survey and interviews also reveal that British MEPs appear to approach this from a member-state perspective: that is, if they have a constituent who is active in a group then this will potentially help with gaining access: this appears to be the key rationale that lies behind meetings being set up, according to the MEPs.

Overall then, we see that while British MEPs are consulted regularly by faith-based organisations and churches, and often from their local constituencies, they are also clearly able to function independently. Religious representatives are certainly listened to respectfully, but beyond that there is no admission from MEPs that they are given undue access of influence. Religious and faith-based groups are not given special privileges or access to the corridors of power in Brussels or Strasbourg beyond what one might reasonably expect, but they are given their rightful place as part of a wider network of lobbies, interest groups and organisations.

'We don't do God': belonging but not believing?

On the occasion of his 50th birthday in May 2003, the then British prime minister Tony Blair gave a suitably glamorous interview to the American magazine *Vanity Fair*. The wide-ranging topics which were discussed included both the political and the personal, but when the interviewer David Margolick asked Mr Blair about his Christianity, the prime minister's powerful director of strategy and communications Alastair Campbell stepped in immediately:

'Is he on God? We don't do God. I'm sorry. We don't do God' (Brown 2003). Clearly, many elected British politicians do indeed 'do God' – the existence of influential internal party groupings such as the Conservative Christian Fellowship (CCF) and the Christian Socialist Movement (CSM) are testimony to that. Nevertheless, Mr Campbell's comments do neatly sum up the culture which is probably most prevalent among the British whereby generally politicians try to keep their religious views to themselves out of a fear of being perceived to be slightly odd. This has little to do with church attendance levels but instead is part of a government system where neither American-style personality politics nor Western European Christian Democracy have much resonance. Or as Pulzer would have it (1967, 98): 'class is the basis of British party politics; all else is embellishment and detail'.

The findings of the survey are very unambiguous at this point: compared with the European-wide sample as a whole, British MEPs are not particularly religious at all. We see the beginnings of this diverging pattern in Table 5 below, with a slightly higher percentage of non- or low church attendance compared with the European sample. However it should also be stated that the British respondents were broadly in line with the wider European sample in the sense that very few of them seemed prepared to answer what they must consider to be an essentially personal question.

Table 5. Church attendance.

How often do you attend church?	Percentage of the sample (UK only)	Percentage of the sample (EU)
never	6	3
once a year	0	1
holydays only	19	10
once a month	0	16
once a week	13	18
more than once a week	6	2
did not answer	56	49

Table 6, on the other hand, does begin to add much more detail to the figures. Here we can see that only 19% (3) state that they are religious people while 25% (4) say that they are not believers and another 25% (4) state that they are 'convinced atheists'. We can discern a real divergence between the number of European respondents who define themselves being religious and the number of British respondents: 47% of the EU aggregate total state that they are religious. We can also conversely note the reverse picture when we look at the number of non-religious and convinced atheists: only 15% and 14% respectively.

Table 6. Religious identity.

How would you define yourself?	Percentage of the sample (UK only)	Percentage of the sample (EU)
I am a religious person	19	47
I am not a religious person	25	15
I am convinced atheist	25	14
did not answer	31	25

Meanwhile Table 7 also highlights disparities between the British respondents and the European sample taken as a whole. Many more British MEPs say they do not believe in God than their European MEP colleagues (44% (7) compared with 15%) and conversely fewer say that they do believe in the existence of a personal God (25% (4) compared with 32%) or some sort of spirit or life force (6% - just one MEP - compared with 18% of all European respondents).

Table 7. Personal beliefs.

What do you believe?	Percentage of the sample (UK only)	Percentage of the sample (EU)
there is a personal God	25	32
there is some sort of spirit or life force	6	18
I don't believe there is any God, spirit or life force	44	15
did not answer	25	36

The 'pluralist' culture referred to earlier has no direct connection with low church attendances in the UK – after all, the United States has high attendance rates in comparison and is the home of pluralist politics (see Hertzke 2009). However, what we can perhaps suggest is that the UK's 'secularism' reinforces the pluralist policy arena which we have identified. Clearly, low levels of religiosity do not produce pluralism but they do possibly strengthen aspects of it, making it easier for policymakers to be even–handed in their dealings with different groups. After all, whenever aspects of America's separation of church and state do come under threat in relation to the constitution – for example, the provision of school prayer - the source tends to be faith-based organisations (FBOs) (see Wilcox and Robinson 2010). Furthermore, in general, these responses reflect patterns of religious behaviour and social attitudes in wider British society. When the MEPs were asked in a separate question whether they belonged to a religious denomination, 40% (6) stated that they did, against 44% (7) who stated that did not. As we shall see in the next section, while people are often happy to identify broadly as Christians, their attendance at church and institutional or practical attachment to religion is much less consistent. We now turn to look at this in more detail, in order to provide background and context for the patterns of responses which we are detecting amongst the MEPs.

Representing the people: the national context

In our analysis so far, we have identified two key ways in which UK MEPs differ from the average EU MEP. First, they seem more willing and open to dealing with all types of religious interest group and are not challenged by that prospect, perhaps as a result of being used to a similar culture in London as well as local British politics. Second, they are themselves more atheistic and non-religious with especially low levels of church attendance. In fact Britain has long provided scholars interested in the interface between politics and religion with a distinctive case (see Steven 2010). Uniquely amongst advanced industrial western democracies, 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 in the introduction, no confessional parties such as the Christian Democrats.

The decline in British church attendance since the 1960s is well documented; however, in general it is a somewhat complicated and multi-layered picture. The eminent British sociologist of religion Grace Davie has charted a growing trend of 'believing without belonging' (1994): in other words, people still feel some of spiritual force but no longer feel the need to comply with the social convention of attending their local church on a Sunday morning. There is also a third dimension which is perhaps of most interest to political scientists: whether or not people self-identify as 'Christian', 'Muslim' or 'Jewish'. Here again, when looking at the British context, there is evidence of decline in strength of religious identification, but equally, as we shall now discuss, the figures are not totally conclusive.

In the most recent government census (2011), 33.2 million people (59.3%) in England and Wales still described themselves as 'Christian' (ONS 2011). The previous census in 2001 was the first time that the question 'what is your religion?' had been asked in Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland): then 71.7% had answered 'Christian'. There is an estimated Muslim population of around 4.8%. Clearly this shows a drop in the number of people identifying as Christian but it also reveals nearly 60% of respondents still identifying as such. Meanwhile, as Figure 1 below shows, there is still a large (albeit falling) number of people who do go to their local parish church on a Sunday morning. Indeed in many urban areas - especially ethnically diverse parts of London - Protestant Evangelical churches are even growing in popularity (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009, 136; Brierley Consultancy 2013). Linked to this is the fact that while there has been a decline since the 1960s in the number of Britons who believe in God, a substantial number also still do so.

Figure 1. Belief in God and usual Sunday church attendance.
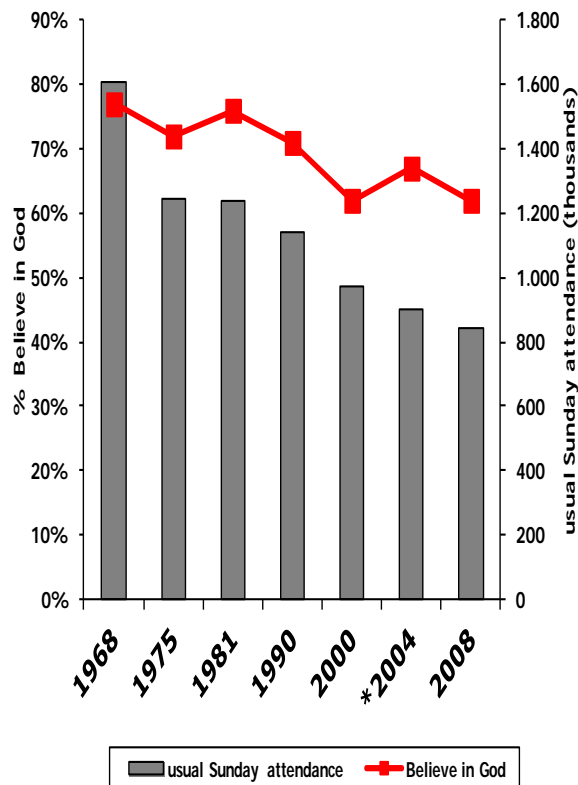
Finally it is worth noting that the Church of England remains the established state church with the queen as its head. 26 of its senior prelates sit and vote in the British Parliament at Westminster in London. Even in the government's latest plans to reform the upper chamber, the House of Lords, to make it more democratic, the draft bill guarantees the continued presence of the bishops or 'lords spiritual' (CO 2012). So politicians, including MEPs, are respectful of the place of Christianity in the development of British democracy without necessarily feeling any compulsion to be under its control. We can also make comparisons with the behaviour of national Members of Parliament (MPs). Tables 8 and 9 below show the responses of MPs who participated in the PARTIREP survey (http://www.partirep.eu/datafile/comparative-mp-survey) organised by a team of Belgian political scientists (2007-2011). In Table 8, we see that large numbers of British MPs regard promoting the views of religious interest groups as being important. For example, 22.2% regard it as being very important, the most popular response and not one replicated by any of the other member states apart from Germany.

Table 8. Importance of promoting the views and interests of a church or religious group by country (national and regional MPs).

Degree of importance	Country (%)															Total (Av.) (%)
	AUT	BEL	FRA	GER	HUN	IRE	ISR	ITA	NET	NOR	POL	POR	SPA	SWI	UNK	
1 (no imp)	15,4	25,0	31,4	3,8	9,3	8,7	5,7	7,2	20,8	19,4	12,2	8,1	14,8	22,7	11,1	13,6
2	10,6	21,9	19,6	10,0	9,3	17,4	8,6	12,0	9,4	22,2	12,2	15,1	12,7	23,7	7,4	13,4
3	16,0	18,8	15,7	10,5	13,4	17,4	14,3	18,1	9,4	16,7	19,5	14,0	10,5	12,4	16,0	13,9
4	23,9	16,4	21,6	15,5	14,4	17,4	20,0	25,3	22,6	19,4	39,0	24,4	15,3	14,4	19,8	19,2
5	10,6	6,2	3,9	20,9	21,6	8,7	25,7	15,7	18,9	13,9	12,2	18,6	12,2	13,4	16,0	14,7
6	13,8	7,8	3,9	17,2	14,4	21,7	5,7	8,4	9,4	5,6	2,4	4,7	14,0	10,3	7,4	11,4
7 (very imp)	9,6	3,9	3,9	22,2	17,5	8,7	20,0	13,3	9,4	2,8	2,4	15,1	20,5	3,1	22,2	13,8
TOTAL (N)	188	128	51	239	97	23	35	83	53	36	41	86	229	97	81	1467

Last, we see in Table 9 that British MPs were out in front in terms of the number of times they met with religious groups. For example, 12.1% of them met with representatives of religious groups once a week, significantly more frequently than MEPs from any of the other member states apart from Hungary, with only 2.2% stating that they had (almost) no contact, a response which was easily the lowest amongst all EU member states.

Table 9. Frequency of contact with churches or religious organisations by country (national and regional Mps).

Frequency	Country (%)															Total
	AUT	BEL	FRA	GER	HUN	IRE	ISR	ITA	NET	NOR	POL	POR	SPA	SWI	UNK	(Av.) (%)
at least once a week	4,1	1,5	0,0	6,4	15,5	0,0	6,2	5,2	1,9	2,7	8,5	1,0	2,2	2,0	12,1	4,7
at least once a month	16,4	6,1	4,8	33,9	24,7	10,3	25,0	9,3	7,4	10,8	17,0	9,4	6,6	6,9	30,8	15,9
at least every three months	27,7	17,6	17,5	32,7	20,6	17,2	18,8	23,7	25,9	18,9	10,6	21,9	15,8	17,6	39,6	23,3
at least once a year	29,7	26,0	42,9	21,9	23,7	48,3	6,2	43,3	33,3	35,1	36,2	27,1	23,7	29,4	15,4	27,5
(almost) no contact	22,1	48,9	34,9	5,2	15,5	24,1	43,3	18,6	31,5	32,4	27,7	40,6	51,8	44,1	2,2	28,5
TOTAL (N)	195	131	63	251	97	29	32	97	54	37	47	96	228	102	91	1550

The sample of British MEPs appears to be very similar to the equivalent one for British MPs in their attitudes towards the way religious groups ought to be accommodated. In turn, these attitudes are representative of the wider British population: fewer people may attend church than in previous years, but there remains evidence of widespread religiosity as well as respect for aspects of religion being prominent in public life. In the 2010 British Social Attitudes Survey, 50% of respondents stated that 'all religious groups should have equal rights' compared with only 24% who disagreed with that sentiment. As the survey authors put it, 'religion has personal and social benefits, but faith should not be taken too far' (Voas and Ling 2010).

'Render unto Caesar…': directives and policies

So far, we have argued that British MEPs are more at ease than many of their European colleagues with the concept of regularly meeting with religious interest groups as a result of the pluralist political culture prevalent in the UK. We have also seen how that is reinforced by trends in wider British society which is relatively secularised in many respects. This final section focuses as a case study on aspects of the work of the wider EU to emphasise the distinctive way in which British MEPs approach these types of affairs. Once again we see similar secularist patterns emerging: more specifically, we note that the MEPs are not comfortable at all with the idea that Europe's Christian heritage should be highlighted in the Lisbon Treaty, nor do they have any desire for the EU to have a 'real policy' towards religions.

As Table 10 below indicates, there appears to be no real appetite on the part of British MEPs for the EP, the EC or any of the other European actors in Brussels to develop a strategy for engaging more with religions such as Christianity or Islam either institutionally or collectively. 63% (10) state that they do not think the EU should have a 'real policy' towards religion, compared with only 31% (5) who do. In fact, this is actually in line with the

aggregate European figures showing 72% in agreement that the EU should not try to develop such a policy.

Table 10. EU policy towards religions.

Should the EU have a real policy towards religions?	Percentage of the sample (UK only)	Percentage of the sample (EU)
yes	31	28
no	63	72
did not answer	6	0

Thus far, the views of the British MEPs are consistent with those of their European colleagues: there should be a separation between church and state when it comes to public policy formulation. But a more pronounced contrast comes when we look at the idea of enshrining the status of Europe's Christian heritage in the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, the de facto constitution of the EU. While 41% of Europe's MEPs state that this would have been desirable, only 19% (3) of British MEPs feel the same way. Moreover 75% (12) say they do not think this would have been a good idea compared with 48% of the European average. The views expressed by Pope Benedict XVI and also Chancellor Angela Merkel that Europe's religious heritage should be acknowledged (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. The contrast here with the rest of Europe is very pronounced indeed.

Table 11. Lisbon Treaty and Europe's Christian heritage.

Should the Lisbon Treaty have made reference to Europe's Christian heritage?	Percentage of the sample (UK only)	Percentage of the sample (EU)
yes	19	41
no	75	48
did not answer	6	10

Finally, Table 12 below focuses on a key dimension: MEPs were asked whether they felt religion had a role to play in the way Turkey's candidature for accession to the EU was received. 75% (12) replied that 'yes', religion was relevant – and this is back in line with the wider European average of 69%. While we do not know if the MEPs feel that this is a good or a bad thing, it is a striking finding nonetheless. European integration is indeed a Christian project 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)

and one that many MEPs do not support. Indeed Britain has long been an outlier in relation to Turkish accession with governments of different political persuasions, Conservative and Labour, continuously being Turkey's biggest cheerleader when it comes to EU membership (BBC 2013).

Table 12. Religion and Turkey's accession to the EU.

Does religion play a role in the way Turkey's candidature was received in the EP?	Percentage of the sample (UK only)	Percentage of the sample (EU)
yes	75	69
no	6	20
did not answer	19	11

Finally, we see the MEPs putting their values into action: the average MEP does not think the EU should seek to develop a formal policy in relation to religion or religions in Europe. Yet despite this, the perception amongst all MEPs – regardless of nationality - is that aspects of European enlargement policy are heavily influenced by religious factors, contrary to the official EU position. Moreover, perhaps unsurprisingly, the British MEPs are prepared to take this neutral stance a step further than most of their European colleagues and express their satisfaction that no mention was made in the Lisbon Treaty of Europe's Christian heritage.

Conclusion

Analysing the survey responses of MEPs collectively, especially those from the UK, provides us with some interesting patterns of political behaviour. First we can state that religious organisations are able to successfully exert influence on the EP and that religion therefore still very much has some sort of institutional political power. Equally, however, there are no hidden agendas: MEPs are understandably not prepared to admit to being under the control of religious organisations or faith-based groups. Second we can note a substantial departure from the European average with regard to the British MEPs' personal beliefs: while a clear majority of MEPs state that they do believe in God, British MEPs are considerably more agnostic. Indeed, they appear to be even more atheistic than the wider population in the UK, although there is still evidence that they identify with a religious denomination. Nevertheless the UK is now one of Europe's least religious member-states (EC 2010), so these findings are not unreasonable placed against that backdrop - and arguably reinforce pluralistic behaviour in the process. Third we can conclude that the EU is perhaps at its most religious when it is looking beyond its boundaries – for example, in relation to enlargement policy. The MEPs – both British and from other member states - are clear that the reason for the delay in allowing Turkey to join the EU is heavily linked to religious factors despite what the EC would officially contend. Meanwhile the British MEPs go further, arguing that that it was correct that the Lisbon Treaty made no reference to Europe's Christian heritage.

'Multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt 2000) can be said to summarise the British MEPs' approach to the politics of religion - a Europe for all with different groups, religious and non-religious, coexisting alongside each other. The scholarly literature from social scientists has shifted quite significantly since the orthodoxy of the 1960s which proclaimed that religion

was no longer of interest – and in many ways it is Eisenstadt's theory which has gradually come to personify that gear-change, arguing that in modern advanced industrial democracies like the UK, different sets of values need not be mutually exclusive. Eisenstadt (2000, 1) 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'. So according to the survey responses of the British MEPs, the EU should neither deny its Christian roots nor trumpet them as central to its existence. The status of religious lobbies within the EU can be said to be broadly respected, but no more and no less than that of other groups, organisations or interests. Freedom of religion is protected and supported certainly, but not if it impacts upon the freedoms of other European citizens.

There is evidence throughout the survey responses and interviews of the European politicians showing considerable sensitivity to the views and values of their constituents. British MEPs appear very adept at seeking to place themselves in the mainstream of public opinion, which itself reflects generational shifts in societal behaviour. Church populations in the UK are falling – they remain significant but they do not have the institutional power that they once had - and it remains to be seen whether they will again in the future. Our MEPs tread a moderate line, respecting religion while not necessarily practising religion themselves. Europe is the historic home of Christianity but it now leads the world in levels of atheism and is the only continent where church attendances are not rising (Norris and Inglehart 2004). MEPs from the UK appear highly professional at attempting to reconcile these two competing spheres through a pluralistic process of political consultations and compromises.

Notes on Contributor

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