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Introduction: religiously oriented parties and democratization

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The role of religion in politics is still understudied as a consequence of the so-called “secularization paradigm”, which has been hegemonic in twentieth-century social sciences. Particularly, the role of religiosity within political parties has often been neglected for two reasons. First, there is a widespread normative prejudice about the role of religions in democratic and democratizing systems, where they are perceived to be illiberal and potentially anti-democratic actors. Second, there is the methodological difficulty of defining them with precision. This introduction to the special issue proposes the concept of the “religiously oriented party”. This is a party whose policies are openly based on a specific interpretation of religious precepts, but it can also be a formally secular one with relevant sections of its manifesto dedicated to religious values, explicitly appealing to religious constituencies, and/or a party including significant religious factions. With this definition in mind, the introduction explores the relationship between religiously oriented parties and democratization. Finally, the introduction presents the articles included in the special issue.

Keywords: religion; democratization; political parties; secularization; introduction

Introduction

Studies of both political parties and democratization have tended to neglect comparative analyses on the role that religiously oriented parties play in democratic and democratizing political systems. More specifically, there is a dearth of studies on the topic encompassing different areas and religious traditions. There are numerous works on religious parties operating in specific contexts, but thorough comparative analyses of the phenomenon are rather rare. As is shown below, there are three main reasons for this neglect.

First, in broader terms, the role of religion in politics was understudied for a significant amount of time as a consequence of the so-called “secularization paradigm”, which has been hegemonic in twentieth-century social sciences.¹ While a number of academic studies have begun to fill the gap in more recent times,² the role of religion is still perceived by many according to the perspective of

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secularization, seeing it as a factor destined to become private or to utterly disappear from the public sphere, becoming increasingly irrelevant in politics and society due to the advance of modernization. Thus, even after the resurgence of the role of religion in politics throughout the world in the late twentieth century, many social scientists would like to see it “evaporate, becoming a bad dream limited to the eighties”³ rather than seriously addressing it.

Second, in normative terms, parties with an explicit religious identity were often regarded *a priori* as a negative phenomenon, characterized by an anti-systemic worldview and hindering stability and peaceful coexistence. In the words of Nancy Rosenblum, many scholars regard them as “not real parties [...] opportunistic and not committed to electoral democracy [...] intransigently ideological, uncompromising, militant, extremist [...] aim[ing] at conforming public policy to the imperatives of a single faith [...] authoritarian in their organization and goals [...] culturally conservative, even anti-modern [...] resist[ing] progressive social policies necessary for democratic stability” and therefore creators of “potentially radical political instability”.⁴ This also implies a negative normative assessment about the influence of such parties on democracy and democratization processes, preventing so far a thorough analysis of the phenomenon.

Third, there are methodological problems with the definition of religious party, which is both loose and controversial. This has meant often subsuming religious parties into other categories of parties such as the proto-hegemonic fundamentalist, the mass-denominational – and pro-democratic – as well as the nationalist religious. In turn, each category includes parties from different geographical and cultural contexts and therefore often with peculiar ideological and structural features.⁵ These definitional difficulties are solved by concentrating on single cases or on regional studies where only one religious tradition is examined. In addition, area studies scholars are often reluctant to compare them to different contexts, not only because of the more general attitude of social scientists, but also because there is a reluctance in defining some parties as “religious” – and to compare them with parties belonging to other religious traditions regarded as more extremist – because it would apparently give a bad name to the party or to the religious tradition it belongs to. This explains in part why comparative works on religious parties are outnumbered in the literature. This special issue tries to overcome this definitional problem through the concept of the religiously oriented party. This is a party that can be explicitly religious or formally secular, where religious values in its manifesto are clearly identifiable, where explicit appeals to religious constituencies are made and/or where significant religious factions exist within the party.

As mentioned, clear definitions of religious parties are very rare and scholars, at times, refuse to provide them.⁶ When available, they are usually narrow in scope, designed to describe only parties fully committed to the implementation of a religious vision. For example, M. Hakan Yavuz defines a religious party as a party “whose ideology is derived from or shaped by religious ideas and which mobilizes the grassroots on the basis of shared religious identities”. According to Yavuz, such

parties seek “*regime change* [italics in the text] by implementing their religious worldviews”.⁷

A more helpful insight into the phenomenon can probably be drawn by assembling and analysing different features of it that are important in constructing the category of “religiously oriented party”. To begin with, religious parties are marked by an “associational nexus” with religious institutions and associations, crucial for the creation of the party itself and later for the mobilization of its grass roots.⁸ However, religious parties cannot be regarded as a mere extension of religious organizations in politics because as they grow they usually develop their own organization and a specific message, which is often different from the one proposed by the religious institutions they stem from.⁹ Although they were often created as a consequence of the religious/liberal cleavage, with the aim of defending religion from anti-clerical forces, they can also be motivated by more assertive reasons, such as widening the role of religious values in society.¹⁰ While in their early phases they are sometimes led by clerics, their leaders are usually laymen who often end up competing with religious leaders to define the meaning of the sacred message for society.¹¹ They can have a name and a political platform explicitly referring to the religious tradition they belong to, but at times they might hide it out of legal considerations, or to mark their independence from religious institutions.¹² In addition, their development can imply the inclusion of much wider non-religious concerns, in their manifestos or political programmes.¹³ This evolution can imply also the widening of their original, mainly religious, social base, to include an appeal “to all voters except convinced anti-clericals”.¹⁴ It follows that most of the above-mentioned features not only describe explicitly religious parties, but also formally secular parties, such as the Republican Party in the US, the People of Freedom and the Northern league in Italy, the Likud in Israel, or the Nationalist Action party in Turkey, bringing us back to definitional problems.

This special issue is a novel attempt to overcome the normative, conceptual, and definitional problems by relying on the wider notion of the religiously oriented party. In addition, and given the usually problematic relationship between religious parties and democratization that the literature often underlines,¹⁵ this special issue analyses the influence of specific types of religiously oriented party on democracy and democratization processes. In more established democracies, the rise of religiously oriented parties is associated with the return of identity battles over the extent of individual rights that run the risk of taking countries back to more illiberal times. Demands emanating from religiously oriented parties against the perceived excesses of liberalism are held to destabilize the pluralism democratic mechanisms uphold. In democratizing countries, the illiberal stances of religiously oriented parties on a number of issues such as minority rights or women’s rights are often accompanied by demands for what can be described as limited democracy in so far as the very procedures of democracy should in no case “offend” religious precepts by permitting the passing of legislation believed to be contrary to God’s law.

It follows that more recently there has been increasing interest in the ways in which religious actors influence democracy and democratization;¹⁶ but studies have focused mainly on religious organizations active in civil society, mostly neglecting religiously oriented parties. The novelty of this special issue therefore rests on filling an important gap in democratization studies, as religiously oriented parties are increasingly central in processes of regime change and democratic consolidation. Particularly, this special issue will assess the influence of different types of religiously oriented parties through analyses that encompass different regions, religious traditions, and regime types. Geographically, the special issue includes works about cases from different areas: Europe (Italy, Northern Ireland), South America (Chile), the Middle East and North Africa (Tunisia, Turkey and Israel), and South-East Asia (India). As a consequence, the cases are also related to different religious traditions (Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam). Finally, the special issue includes established democracies, democracies whose consolidation is still ongoing and democratizing countries, in order to show the influence of religiously oriented parties in the different phases of democratization processes.

In the first article Luca Ozzano provides the theoretical discussion and framing of the concept of religiously oriented parties and the way in which they might influence democracy and democratization.¹⁷ From an in-depth analysis of the literature on political parties, Ozzano derives a typology of religiously oriented parties that is a useful guide to understanding their nature, their organizational models and, crucially, how they might impact on democracy and democratization. Ozzano's contribution categorizes five types of religiously oriented parties, with different organizational and ideological features: the conservative, the progressive, the fundamentalist, the religious nationalist, and the camp type. Ozzano's analytical guide informs the rest of the contributions, providing a map through which case studies can be analysed in order to derive some general lessons that are discussed then in the conclusion.

In the second contribution Sultan Tepe examines polarization processes and the role religiously oriented parties have in such processes in Israel and Turkey.¹⁸ The article shows how polarization in deeply divided societies, where the religious/secular cleavage is particularly strong, can be marked by some contradictory trends. Specifically, the work highlights the necessity to address the issue of polarization not only at the elite level, but at the level of the parties' constituencies and the individual level. On the one hand, the article shows that religiously oriented parties' supporters tend to acquire information and to orient their action according to partisan lenses. On the other hand, the ability of the individuals to engage in politics beyond the boundaries provided by political parties can provide an escape route from this polarization trap. This last finding is quite important for the politics of both democracies and democratizing countries in so far as it points to the enduring relevance of civil society activism or other forms of civil engagement that might moderate some of the more divisive stances that religiously oriented parties promote.

The third contribution addresses the increasingly important discussion of the moderation through inclusion thesis¹⁹ and how it relates to democratization.

This thesis predicts that the moderation of anti-systemic and extremist parties, that is, the acceptance of democratic procedures, human rights, and a market economy, comes about through inclusion. However, Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone,²⁰ in their examination of the case of the Tunisian Islamist party *Ennahda*, highlight how its political moderation is the product of the ideological re-elaboration of the failures it experienced over time rather than inclusion into the political system. Traditional assumptions about moderation argue that it is inclusion, participation, and acceptance from other political parties that bring about ideological moderation and political pragmatism in the case of highly ideological parties, including religiously oriented ones. However, it can also be argued that inclusion at an early stage of democratization of a highly ideological religiously oriented party might be detrimental to the process of democratization itself because it legitimizes an actor that is not genuinely committed to liberalism and democratic procedures. Thus, at times, it might be exclusion by other opposition forces and by the regime that forces an extremist party to revise its positions: moderation through exclusion. This has important implications in terms of the timing of the opening up of the political system.

Christophe Jaffrelot, looking at Hindu religious nationalism, argues that moderation did not occur in India through inclusion and that, if anything, inclusion made Hindu religiously oriented parties more radical on a number of issues, hindering a further consolidation of the plural Indian democracy.²¹ In this case, the connection to a strong grassroots social movement seems to represent the most relevant factor to explain the swinging orientation of the Hindu parties between extremism and pragmatism. It follows that the consolidation of democratic practices can depend on the relationships that might exist between social movements and the party created to represent their views.

Looking at the heritage of the religiously oriented Christian Democratic Party in Italy, Alberta Giorgi analyses the way in which the “Catholic” vote still remains a significant factor in the consolidation of the democratic stability of the second Italian republic despite decreasing church attendance and increasing secularization in the country.²² Specifically, she analyses a recent debate related to proposals aimed at rebuilding a new single Catholic party according to the post-World War II model of Christian Democracy. The article demonstrates the impossibility of recreating a single home for Catholic voters (because of both the evolution of the Catholics’ political culture and some institutional changes), although the way in which different parties, ranging from right to left, have attempted to construct political programmes that take into account religious values has not diminished. This speaks to a current peculiarity in many democracies, whereby religious voters are highly courted and more engaged as such despite a general breakthrough of secularization.

A similar paradox is examined by Juan Pablo Luna, Felipe Monestier, and Fernando Rosenblatt in their contribution on religiously oriented parties in Chile.²³ Despite increasing secularization, two parties firmly rooted in the Christian tradition consistently outperform the other parties in the system at the polls, contributing to making religious issues central to politics. In an interesting twist,

however, the two parties represent different religious sensibilities, with one party more concerned with social issues and therefore “progressive” and the other more conservative and more sensitive to ethical issues. Their history and political positions also reveal much about the way in which Chile exited from authoritarian rule and consolidated its democracy.

In the final contribution, Eoin O’Malley and Dawn Walsh examine the religiously oriented parties in Northern Ireland in the context of the consolidation of the consociational democratic arrangements following the peace agreement of 1998.²⁴ On the surface, Northern Ireland’s main parties and their supporters are clearly divided along religious lines and therefore may find inspiration in religion when it comes to their confrontation and to policymaking. On closer inspection, O’Malley and Walsh highlight how religion might actually be a proxy for other more substantive divisions: therefore, the religious orientation of parties is not *per se* a factor of divisions hindering the progressive consolidation of the power-sharing agreement.

Through the concept of religiously oriented parties, the special issue examines the way in which they are relevant to contemporary debates on democratization and the quality of democracy. First, according to Ozzano’s typology of religiously oriented parties, it defines the role played in democratization by the different party types, taking into account both instauration and consolidation processes involving newly democratizing countries, and problems of democratic stability involving established democracies. Moreover, it deals with the issue of party change: can “undemocratic” and illiberal religiously oriented parties become acquainted with democratic values and institutions, as suggested by the moderation thesis, and even switch party type, towards models fully accepting of democratic rules as well as social and political pluralism? The conditions under which this might materialize are explored by all authors through a detailed empirical analysis of selected case studies.

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Notes

1. Swatos and Christiano, “Introduction – Secularization Theory”; Aldridge, *Religion in the Contemporary World*; Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.”
2. See for example: Haynes, *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*; Fox, *Religion, Politics, Society, and the State*; Anderson, *Religion, Democracy and Democratization*; Anckar, *Religion and Democracy*; Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion Into International Relations*; Haynes, *An Introduction*; Haynes, *Religion in Global Politics*; Haynes, *Religion, Politics and International Relations*; Lee, *Religion and Politics*.
3. Lawrence, *Defenders of God*, 8.
4. Rosenblum, “Religious Parties,” 42.
5. Gunther and Diamond, “Species of Political Parties”; Rosenblum, “Religious Parties”; Mohseni and Wilcox, “Religion and Political Parties.”

6. Mohseni and Wilcox, "Religion and Political Parties."
7. Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy*, 7.
8. Rosenblum, "Religious Parties"; Kalyvas, *The Rise*.
9. Mohseni and Wilcox, "Religion and Political Parties"; Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*.
10. Rosenblum, "Religious Parties."
11. Ibid.; Kalyvas, *The Rise*.
12. Galli, *I partiti politici italiani*; Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*.
13. Madeley, "To What Extent."
14. Krouwel, "Party Models," 258.
15. An issue discussed, among others, by Rosenblum, "Religious Parties"; Kalyvas, *The Rise*; Kalyvas, "Commitment Problems"; Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy*; Mohseni and Wilcox, "Religion and Political Parties."
16. Philpott, Shah, and Toft, "From Faith to Freedom"; Künkler and Leininger, "The Multi-Faceted Role."
17. Ozzano, "The Many Faces of the Political God."
18. Tepe, "The Perils of Polarization and Religious Parties."
19. Broucker and Kunkler, "Religious Parties."
20. Cavatorta and Merone, "Moderation through Exclusion?"
21. Jaffrelet, "Refining the Moderation Thesis."
22. Giorgi, "Ahab and the White Whale."
23. Luna, Monestier, and Rosenblatt, "Religious Parties in Chile."
24. O'Malley and Walsh, "Religion and Democratization in Northern Ireland."

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