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## [Book Review of:] Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### **Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy**

FRANÇOIS FORET

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015, Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics, xiv + 232 pp (hardback £64.99) ISBN: 978-1-107-08271-7

‘Religion is more and more on the agenda of the European Union’; so Foret begins the covering letter to the members of the EU which accompanies his questionnaire about religion and EU politics and EU politicians (p 294). According to Foret these members are the ‘most representative sample of European leaders’ (p 8). The author is a professor in Brussels, working close to the European political centre, and his book is based on the first objective data on the religious beliefs of the European decision-makers. It was not easy research, nor is this an easy book to read. But both religion and the European Union are important issues.

Chapter 1, about religion in the process of framing a European polity, deals with such subthemes as neo-functionalism (‘Are gods part of the “spillover” effect?’), intergovernmentalism (the contribution of the different national religions), multi-level governance (a description of how religious interests are represented) and neo-institutionalisms (‘national path dependencies’ and deinstitutionalised religion). The chapter also deals with the process of European integration for the policies of the EU relating to religion. More specifically, it contrasts models of the Union as a consociation of states, where religious passions are contained nationally, and as a federation, where spheres of competences must be defined and ethical lines drawn centrally. Policies are identified: for prohibiting violence, ensuring diversity and subsidiarity, and as a possible means of protecting religion from politics. The role of religion is discussed on the basis that the Union is an empire. Here religion may be seen as a marker, fixing internal and external boundaries, and as a demarcation line for identity, both within the EU and for its relations with outside bodies.

Chapter 2 focuses on religion in the process of selecting European rulers, compared with the American context. According to Foret, religion still plays a significant, if elusive, part in the process of selecting European elites, including judges and civil servants. Chapter 3 is concerned with religion in the European electoral process. Foret concludes that, although not obvious, it leaves more than a trace. He states that ‘when it comes to the way religion is treated, national and party affiliations are of great importance’ (p 9). Religion is unfit to constitute an autonomous foundation for European polity or projects but it still plays a role in

how members of the European Parliament make decisions. It has the capacity to attract both political and media recognition.

Chapter 4 investigates religion and political socialisation in Brussels. To measure this, Foret distinguishes between religion as a belief and/or as an identity, and religion as a social network. Religion as a belief or identity is present in party, national and denominational loyalties. In their networks, members of the European Parliament interact more with actors that share their religious heritage and/or their interest in religious matters. Religious belief and identity affect the membership of a network. Here, however, Foret hypothesises that 'there is a general trend whereby European elites comply with the prerequisites of the EU as a community of norms in matters of religion' (p 10).

The perspective of Chapter 5 is religion and public action, dealing with the tension between religion as an object and as an occasional component of public policy. Foret elaborates on this with regard to welfare and moral issues in relation to political conflicts. Although the EU does not have direct authority concerning religion, the topic is regularly on its agenda. So it is a matter for EU politicians and parties to deal with, and in some cases they may abuse it as a 'scandalising' issue in order to attract public attention.

Chapter 6 turns to the legitimisation of the EU and focuses on religion in the public sphere. This includes the Christian heritage of Europe and the resilience of religious references in such European symbols as the European flag and the euro. Throughout the book Foret makes clear that the foundation of the EU was closely connected with the Roman Catholic Church. In the final chapter, Foret writes about the external identity of the Union in relation to the religions of its neighbours, about European diplomacy and about the EU's international profile. The last is illustrated by the cartoons crisis. The EU is seen here as a non-player in a non-existent clash of civilisations. Religion is a significant component in transatlantic relationships and Foret draws a comparison with the United States. And religion is a constitutive part of the global perception of the EU.

Foret's interesting research is impressive, although there are problems with the categories he uses. Respondents were asked first whether they belonged to a religious denomination and if so whether they identified as 'a. Catholic, b. Protestant, c. Orthodox, d. Other Christian, e. Jew, f. Muslim, g. Sikh, h. Buddhist, i. Hindu, j. Atheist, k. Nonbeliever/agnostic and l. Other (please be precise)' (p 299). Positively, Foret includes 'Sikh' as a category but it is strange that the list contains the category 'Atheist'. An atheist would probably not want to be considered as belonging to a religious community and could well pass over the more detailed questions. In any case, it is doubtful whether these categories are sufficient for understanding multi-religious belonging nowadays. Only 'Catholic', 'Protestant' and 'Orthodox' are given as separate categories. 'Other Christian' needs further elaboration, for example Anabaptist, Baptist, Pentecostal and Anglican. When it comes to Jews, Muslims, Hindus and

Buddhists, why not, at least, distinguish between Sunni and Shia Muslims? It seems overly Eurocentric nowadays for academic researchers in the field of religion, law and/or society to include a category as 'other'. Current academic discourse needs to rethink categories from the perspective of multi-religious belonging, of different understandings of belonging in general, and of religious diversity. It would have been desirable for the research team to include a social scientist of religion or a theologian. Also, the book would have been improved with a clear introduction, a sub-research question and a summary and conclusion for each chapter.

Despite these qualifications I read this dense book with great interest and pleasure. I recommend it to anybody with an interest in domestic, European and international political studies and/or politics, religion and society. Foret reveals not only a secular but also a religious European Union political canopy.

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## Freedom of Religious Organizations

JANE CALDERWOOD NORTON

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016, xvii + 232 pp (hardback £60.00) ISBN: 978-0-19-968968-2

Until recently the question of the collective dimension to religious liberty was largely neglected in legal and theoretical scholarship. That has begun to change, notably with the publication of Julian Rivers' book *The Law of Organised Religions*, reviewed in this *Journal*.<sup>1</sup> Jane Norton (a lecturer at the University of Auckland) has produced another timely contribution, focusing on the position of religious organisations in English law.

The central question the book addresses is how the state should respond to activities or norms of religious organisations that potentially differ from English law or its underlying values. As Norton acknowledges, a frequent source of tension in practice is between associational religious freedom and equality norms over such questions as the employment of women or LGBTQ+ persons, as well as membership criteria or the provision of goods and services. Moreover, questions arise of whether the courts should supervise the decisions of these organisations in order to protect the interests of disaffected members or to resolve internal property disputes. The status and position

1 (2012) 14 Ecc LJ 133.