

THE RELEVANCE OF THE SECULAR AND THE RELIGIOUS IN THE EU'S EXTERNAL ACTION

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Introduction

From the return of the Taliban following US withdrawal from Afghanistan to the genocide against the Uyghurs, or even the pandemic and the role played by religious communities and churches, examples of the relevance of religion in contemporary global crises abound. What does this mean for EU external action? To what extent do the religious and the secular impact EU external action? What does it tell us about the EU's identity as an actor of international relations? In her book *Secular Power Europe and Islam*, Wolff researches the role of the religious and the secular in EU external action, an area that is emerging in EU diplomatic practice and to which she brings novel data.

Ukraine and global crises through the religious prism

2022 marks the return of geopolitics with the war in Ukraine and the revived unity of the EU's strategic autonomy and the reinvigoration of NATO. Power politics is back with discussion over nuclear armament, (non)-conventional warfare, hybrid threats and cyberattacks. Most strikingly, it is an existential crisis whereby European values such as democracy and human rights are under attack and to which the EU has demonstrated resilience and a fast capacity to act by sending arms to Ukraine or planning to cut down gas supplies by the end of 2022.

Beyond these demonstrations of power and unity, one would quickly dismiss the more complex dynamics at hand, ranging from the local to the transnational and that include aspects that are initially not so much about power politics. One aspect is the role of the religious and to what extent religion has been mobilised by Putin for many years to justify his actions, dividing the Orthodox Church, and including for instance an important split between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church. For Lustean, we are in fact witnessing a religious war, with the advance of Russian troops towards Kyiv perceived also as an important "religious site" to conquer. Peace mediation has been importantly mobilised by various religious actors from the Archbishop of Canterbury to Pope Francis.

This therefore brings us to discuss the role of the religious in international relations. Beyond theoretical debates on whether we are living in post-secular times characterised by a resurgence of the religious, or whether the religious has always been at the centre of international relations,

there is ample evidence that, since the Cold War, the religious has not left the international. 9/11, the US diplomacy investment in promoting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), or even the fall of the former Yugoslavia where ethno-nationalism became quickly intertwined with the religious are all examples where IR scholars have struggled in applying “traditional IR paradigms” (Haynes, 2021: 2).

Decentring EU foreign policy

In my book *Secular Power Europe and Islam* I provide the first comprehensive analysis of how the EU engages in its external action with the religious, in particular in the Mediterranean region and in relation to Islam.

This endeavour is part of a broader conversation on decentring EU foreign policy, acknowledging the contestation of Europe as a global power at home and abroad and to provide insights into what diplomatic practices are in place to allow the EU to enter into a conversation with a pluriversity of views in a multiplex world order, where the EU model is only one of the types of modernities available (Wolff and al., 2022). By uncovering how the EU relates to the religious and exploring how secularism is mobilised in the EU's narrative, I engage with the three steps of the decentring agenda proposed by Fisher-Onar and Nicolaidis (2014): to provincialize EU studies and question deep-rooted Eurocentric narratives, to engage with the perspectives of “others”, and to reconstruct the external praxis on the basis of mutuality and local empowerment. Lately this agenda has been gaining a renewed interest in the light of the increasing contestation of EU foreign policy by illiberal state actors such as China or Russia, but also as illustrated during the vote at the UN General Assembly by most African countries on Ukraine. It is also about recognising that Europe is as much as about Europe as the non-European and to provide steps for self-reflectivity in EU diplomatic practice. As argued with my co-authors in another article, we believe this is the way to go if the EU wants to remain a relevant actor in the world. The idea is to “recognise delegitimising patterns” (Nicolaidis, 2020: 28) and to work towards co-constitution of EU external action.

Engaging with the religious: a secular business for the EU

The book reviews to what extent religion has been a blind spot of EU studies scholars and diplomats who still hold secular views that regard the religious as something of the private sphere and not of the competence of the EU. The “secularisation thesis”, which claims that modernity and development would bring secularisation, is still a major paradigm that is difficult to undo, especially because of the lack of religious literacy amongst diplomats and IR scholars.

Reviewing the EU's narrative on the religious, I show that secularism is central to the EU's self-biography and conditions its relationship with the significant Other (Islam here). Secularism is not just conceptualised by the EU as a functional separation of public and private affairs but is a concept that is socially constructed both within the EU and the various domestic settings of the separation of state and church, as well as in the way it externally promotes secular values. Secularism is part of the EU's collective identity and takes different meanings within the diversity

of the European political community. Secularism is thus subject to politicisation with dynamics of contestation and negotiation, as some associate secularism with freedom, while other more conservative views see secularism as part of a Judeo-Christian identity.

Pursuing religious engagement as a step towards a more inclusive Europe

In spite of internal divergences, the EU has nonetheless developed practices of religious engagement with faith-based actors and religious leaders worldwide but also with communities of “like-minded” nations such as the US or Canada via the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy. Borrowing from the Ontological Security approach developed by Anthony Giddens, I show that the EU's self is reflective and confronted to anxieties about its security, and it has developed some religious engagement policy in its headquarter and with delegations on the ground in order to develop routines and practices that help it to fix its secular identity. The development of training for EEAS diplomats on the religious, the diplomatic policy and practice to promote freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in particular since 2013 are examples where we see that the EU engages with the religious in order to fix and solidify its identity of an EU liberal-secular power. An interesting initiative to engage with civil society is the Global Exchange on Religion in Society launched in 2019, a step towards more self-reflectivity.

To conclude, I show that the EU external action to become more religiously literate is probably a welcome approach to remain a relevant actor in a world that is becoming increasingly religious. By 2050 people affiliating with a religion will have increased while people identifying as atheists or agnostics, except for France and the US, will have declined, according to [Pew](#). At the same time, it is important that the EU starts to recognise that the religious as much as the secular is part of its identity. The EU is not an “a-religious sphere” since EU faith-based actors are also important lobbying actors in EU decision-making. Its secular identity has been constructed together with the religious and there is no shame in recognising that and continuing to promote secular values abroad, as long as these are acknowledged as being the result of a very specific historical negotiation that happened in Europe. Engaging with the religious abroad means understanding the plurality of views on the religious and the secular and, for instance, that secularism in the Mediterranean is mostly associated with authoritarianism. Similarly, more input on [fighting racism and discrimination at the level of EU institutions](#) is a parallel step to promote an inclusive Europe where diversity in ethnicity, religion and culture is celebrated rather than dismissed in a one-size-fits-all approach. Only then will the EU remain a significant actor in international relations, able to maintain a multilogue with the rest of the world while deciding on its own strategic priorities.