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The Masks of the Political God: Religion and Political Parties in Contemporary Democracies (with a foreword by Jeffrey Haynes)

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Written by an Italian political scientist from the University of Turin, this book sets out to analyze the relationship between religion and political parties in contemporary democracies. His analysis is based on a comparison of five very diverse (geographically, religiously, and culturally) cases from around the world. He chose to compare developments over the last four decades in India (Buddhism and Hinduism), Israel (Judaism), Italy (Catholicism), Turkey (Islam), and the USA (Protestantism), in particular, complementing this with the example of the changing situation in Tunisia (Islam) as the sixth case. What all the cases have in common is the search for a definition or core of contemporary political religion. The book is a good example of linking already classical sociological approaches to social change, secularization, and desecularization with current political science approaches in identifying the political cleavages of the main partisan actors shaping the specific political cultures of different countries.

The book is divided into nine chapters, excluding the introduction and conclusion, the first three of which form the interpretive framework for the following six model cases. It is not only for readers from Central and Eastern Europe that a legitimate question may arise, even after reading the initial three theoretical and conceptual chapters, why there is only one European case among the selected countries, and even then only a seemingly typical example of change in Western Europe. In doing so, the author himself, as well as Jeffrey Haynes in the preface, also justifies the turn in the role of religion in the 1980s with examples in other European countries, such as Poland. The problem, however, is not that a certain geographical region (Central and Eastern Europe) or a historically specific politico-cultural area (post-communist countries) was left uncovered, but that a typical case of modern Europe fell out, built on a legacy of religious and worldview pluralism based on different constellations of the foundations of different countries' political cultures, such as Catholic-Protestant traditions (Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Hungary, and Slovakia), Orthodox-Catholic-Protestant traditions (Romania), or religious-secular traditions (East Germany, the Czech Republic, and Estonia). Perhaps unintentionally, then, a comparative situation arises where, alongside the Protestant United States, Catholic Europe stands out as a model.

Even in the absence of a more detailed look at the cases of European non-dominantly Catholic countries, however, the author's shift from the concept of a "religious party" to the alternative concept of a "religiously oriented party" defined as political party, focusing significant sections of its manifesto on "religious values," explicitly appealing to religious constituencies or including significant religious factions, is a much important contribution (50). His approach was built as a way to escape from the traditional, binary idea of "secular" versus "religious" parties (199). He stresses the idea that in the current historical phase, the role of religion in politics is increasingly neither, as Davie already stressed, a matter of belonging to religious communities and groups, nor a matter of believing and practicing, but rather it involves identifying with a collective identity (either real or imagined) and stigmatizing other

collective identities or different types of elites (sometimes including religious ones). “Therefore, religion - in the role of a marker of identity - becomes more and more frequently a mask, rather than a face, for political actors (providing it ever was a face for them in the first place)” (199).

Based on six criteria (ideology, attitude toward plurality, organizational model, relationship with interest groups, social base, and goals), he created a typology of five types of religiously oriented political parties: 1. conservative, 2. progressive, 3. nationalist, 4. fundamentalist, 5. camp (52–53). I discuss this typology in more detail precisely to illustrate the appropriateness of selecting another case from Europe to test the validity of the typology and its criteria beyond the cases examined in the book. This is because, according to the typology presented above, none of the significant political parties in Central and Eastern Europe would meet the criteria for classification as a conservative or progressive party type. Hungary’s Fides Party is defined as nationalist, but a closer look at the criteria raises questions as to whether, for example, Poland’s ruling PiS Party was more nationalist or more fundamentalist. Similarly, one could think of some strong political parties in the secularized Czech Republic (ODS) where they could be included in the typology. In fact, the third chapter of the book defines the typology of religiously oriented political parties that is crucial to the whole book.

Although all “ideal types” of religiously oriented parties are illustrated in different geographical and cultural settings, the author does not present them as typical (majority) in each context and even admits that not every type exists in every political system. Rather, he presents them in such a way that some types are more widespread than others. For example, he considers the “camp” type to be very rare. He defines it as a stabilizing presence in the context of “ethnically and religiously diverse countries with strong and cohesive minority communities” (201). As an example, he cites the Sikh party SAD and other small Indian parties representing minorities but, most of all, in the field of the Israeli ultra-Orthodox parties. At the same time, however, he treats the types as dynamic, meaning that one can gradually transform into another type, such as conservative into fundamentalist, or nationalist. Alternatively, the fundamentalist type may gradually transform into a conservative one.

In essence, the core of the author’s reflections is an attempt to explain the association of the far right with religious rhetoric or agenda, often carried under the banner of the protection of traditional values. He describes this relationship against the background of the relationship between the currently growing right-wing populism and the processes of secularization, which manifest themselves in the political sphere in a different way than in the past.

The second line of the author’s interpretation traces the trajectories of change of the parties. And it is this evolutionary line of each of the parties analyzed that shows what a detriment the absence of more specific cases is, since the selected cases fail to sufficiently illustrate the specific cases of political party profiling in, for example, a very historically and confessionally heterogeneous European space. In this respect, the first three theoretically attuned chapters emerge as key parts of the book. It is also what allows for a better understanding of one of the author’s conclusions that “there is not a single type of radicalization.” (204). Indeed, if we refer to radicalization as a process involving the rejection of pluralism and democracy and an increasingly conflict-oriented attitude (often based on polarizing identities), we can see that the model outlined in Chapter 3 implies two types of “radical” religiously oriented party types, the “fundamentalist” and the “nationalist” (204). Reflecting on the third line of analysis, tracing party cleavages, shows that only in two of the cases analyzed was there a traditional secular-religious cleavage: in Italy and Turkey.

The author summarizes his analysis in a few basic statements. He starts from the growing association of religion with nationalist, identarian, and civilizational attitudes, which could be observed in some cases in the past decades, but has recently become very evident as a consequence of the global rise of right-wing populism. In such a context, “religion is no longer

relevant as a practice or as a belief system, but only as a marker of identity in the context of a right-wing-populist identity based on a traditionalist-communitarian worldview" (212). The second conclusion is that the adoption of the concept of the "religiously oriented party" and the classification of five types of religiously oriented parties are very useful to show that religious tradition can be associated with very different types of parties and political platforms, whether from a pro- or anti-democratic perspective. The author concludes his book by stating that he has succeeded in affirming "the efficacy of the idea of the multivocality of religious traditions (at least in relation to their political role, if not in the theological realm) against any essentialist notion of a predetermined political role for religious traditions and their stance on democracy and human rights" (213). He also shows a relationship between these political changes and processes of secularization. In the past, traditional parties associated with religion were built on secular-religious cleavage. In this sense, they were also instruments of the perpetuation of religious institutions in society. Understood in this way, they were part of anti-secularization forces. However, looking at religiously oriented parties today, the author sees that "the 'religious' side of the political debate is mainly represented by right-wing populist political entrepreneurs and parties, often putting forward xenophobic and civilizational positions that might or might not be in accordance with those traditionally proposed by their religious traditions. Moreover, although defending 'religious' symbols and values, they do not necessarily adopt a pious lifestyle, and they even do not hesitate to harshly criticize religious institutions that do not align with their positions" (213). In this context, the author notes that these political parties and actors are not in opposition to the processes of secularization (at least in the sense of detachment from religious institutions and the loss of relevance of religious practices in everyday life); on the contrary, they are the carriers of secularizing tendencies.

It is by suggesting the relationship between secularization and rising right-wing populism as its agent that the book can be inspiring in reflecting on the dynamics of secularization (or desecularization) in post-Communist countries, which, after a period of structural secularization by the state (the Communist Parties), are undergoing, after two decades of desecularization, a current wave of right-wing populism, similar to that elsewhere in the world, associated with the protection of traditional values. In the case of Central and Eastern European countries, however, the question arises of how to deal with nostalgia precisely for the secular 'socialist' past, which is an integral part of the lived past of whole generations.
