RELIGION AND POLITICS: *Challenges to the Social Scientific Study of Religion*

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ABSTRACT: Based on a literature review, this paper addresses how political science and sociology incorporate religion in their theories and research. A particular focus is placed on how both sciences theorise the relationship between religion and politics. The paper argues that political science and sociology struggle with incorporating religion into their main theories, which reflect different views on religion's importance and its overall role in contemporary societies. Some key concepts, such as 'politicisation' and 'religionisation', are also discussed. A brief overview of the scholarship of religion in Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of communism is used as an example of how the radically changed social and political context was reflected in the scholarship. The paper's final section summarises current debates on religion, populism and culture in political science and sociology. It shows how a new way of communicating political messages produces complex and contradictory references to religion. While this is captured in the literature by interpreting religion as a cultural identity marker, the argument is that this should not be dissociated from the role of secular actors in imposing cultural features on some religions or political features on others.

KEYWORDS: religion, politics, political science, sociology, populism, culture.

To James A. Beckford (1942–2022),
for his inspiring thoughts, friendship and support

INTRODUCTION

'Does religion matter in society and how?' has been the central question since the beginning of the social scientific approach to religion.[1] How does it affect societies, and how does religion shape individual and social life from the point of view of social changes, various religions and various ways of being religious? This also applies to the religion–politics nexus. How does religion affect society's political structure and relations, and how does politics influence

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[1] This article is based on a keynote lecture "Religious and Secular Organisations in Political Constellations: Challenges for the Scientific Study of Religion" which I presented at the XVth ISORECEA Conference, *Drifting Apart of Consolidating? Religious and Secular Organizations in Political Constellations* (online), 28–30 April 2022. A part of the paper was included in an honourable lecture given at the Croatian Sociological Association meeting on 14 October 2022.

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religion? These issues have been extensively discussed in scholarship, mainly focusing on church–state relations, the governance of religious diversity and the role of religion in conflicts and wars. Concepts of religious fundamentalism and political (politicised) religion have been a part of this discussion. Still, there are some issues which are worthy of further discussion. Due to religion's continuous but ambiguous role in social processes, the question is how religion is conceptualised in the main theories about society and political processes. The existence of very different views on (1) whether religion is involved (enough) in theorising and (2) in how it should be incorporated are signs of a need for continuing reflection on the scholarship. Current and contradictory social processes underline this. Has religion (conditioned by secularisation as a process and secularism as an ideological standpoint) become less or more important? How can we understand and theoretically frame divergent trends?

The main aim of this paper is not to comprehensively cover religion–politics scholarship but to contribute to answering these two questions. Thus, the paper is divided into three parts. The first summarises a discussion from political science on how religion is covered and how it should be incorporated into its theories. The second looks at how religion and politics are discussed in sociology. This section presents some key concepts which sociology proposes in discussing the religion–politics nexus. It also includes a brief analysis of the literature on religion in Central and Eastern Europe. As the post-communist region has been unique in experiencing radical social change since the fall of communism, which included completely changed political and social attitudes towards religion, the issue is how that has been reflected in scholarship. The final section focuses on the ambivalent relationship among religion, populism and culture and how current scholarship captures this. It shows how populists' increasing references to religion align with understanding religion inside the cultural frame. However, these parallels to defining some religions (notably Islam) have strong political features. The concluding part discusses the need to interconnect debates on religion and politics with (a) the changing and complex, but still important, role of religion today, (b) the role of various actors who impose different interpretations of different religions and (c) the transformation of the political landscape and policy-making process.

This paper is primarily based on a review of the literature since the post-Cold War period, which coincided with the prominent role of religion in social and political processes in many parts of the world. However, to understand the current way of theorising religion and politics, references to the previous period are also made.

(Non)centrality of Religion in Political Science

Whether it is continued or resurgent, highly or less significant, the role of religion in social and political processes is undeniable. How is this reflected in political science scholarship? An unequivocal argument in many review articles is that political science pays little attention to religion (e.g. Grzymala-Buse 2012; Kettel 2012, 2016; Philpott 2002, 2009; Robertson 2011; Wald and Wilcox 2006). A comprehensive analysis covering 20 highest-ranked political science journals in the period 2000–2010 showed that among 7,245 published articles, only 1.34% had religion as a primary theme, and 1.2% had religion as a secondary theme. In total, 2.54% of the articles dealt with religion (Kettel 2012). Religion was much less discussed than other topics. For example, the topic of violence, conflict and terrorism as a primary theme was covered by 21.7% of articles in the same period. No evidence was found that the post-2001 period attracted many more articles dealing with religion, as the share of articles with religion as primary and secondary themes was 2.34% for 2000–2001, which rose to 2.58% for 2008–2010 (Kettel 2012, 98). This analysis proved the continuation of neglecting religion in political science, which was confirmed by a similar analysis for the 1960–2002 period (Wald and Wilcox 2006) and for the 1980–1999 period (Philpott 2002). Interestingly, this was also the case for regions that experienced wars and conflicts and in which religion played a substantial role, such as in the post-Yugoslav region (Veković and Đogatović 2019). The analysis showed that, in the 1990–

2018 period, 6.34% of articles in 21 leading political and social science journals in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia dealt with religion in some way. When the political science journal dealing specifically with religion (*Politics and Religion Journal*) was excluded from the analysis, the share of articles dealing with religion dropped to 4.85% (Veković and Đogatović 2019, 760). Some of the other review articles mentioned above are not based on such empirical insights but came up with the same argument about the marginal inclusion of religion in political science.

The more interesting question is what the reasons are behind this neglect. The answers listed are similar in the cited research. The key is the origin of political science in the second half of the 19th century. Like other social science disciplines, political science originated amid the 19th-century intellectual climate in which religion was seen in contrast to modern secular social development. Moreover, as a science focusing on the state and the main political actors, political science was firmly rooted in the Westphalian political order, meaning that the sovereign state, with its (secular) institutions became the sole legitimate actor. This was coupled with the dominance of the secularisation thesis during the 20th century and, in particular, in the post-Second World War era. Consequently, religion was not only seen in conflict with secular development but also as a force which could undermine democratic development. Such development was a Western experience that contributed to the Western bias of the intellectual spirit of political science. In connection with this, Wald and Wilcox (2006) pointed to the social origin of political scientists. Based on several studies on political scientists in the United States, they concluded that 'those who set the research agenda for the profession were almost universally uninvolved in organized religion and indifferent to it more generally' (Wald and Wilcox 2006, 526). While this was true for the generally more religious US context, it applies more to the less religious Western Europe.

The necessity of incorporating religion into mainstream scholarship appeared primarily in international relations as a branch of political science (Haynes 2021a, 2021b, 2022). The key events encouraging that direction were the Iranian 1979 revolution and the 9/11 attack on the United States, followed by other terrorist attacks in Europe and a growing salience of religions worldwide. This provoked some theoretical shifts (Haynes 2021a). Paying more attention to a range of national and international non-state actors changes, or partly undermines, the central role of states in international relations. The remaking of the world order has been a part of the new wave of globalisation, while a global outlook has revealed a series of non-state transnational actors and the dynamic between globalisation, glocalisation and pluralisation (Beyer 2013). However, the question remains: what is the role of religion in international relations? This relates to another critical issue of whether there is a need for new theoretical perspectives or a new subdiscipline: 'political science of religion' (Jevtić 2007; Kettel 2016)?

A few determinants situate religion's role in a particular context, which I note as particularly relevant to answering these questions.

First, the consideration of religion in international relations is not restricted to political/ international conflicts, whether religion advances or prevents them. Religion's social, hence political, role is much more comprehensive in providing values and orientation for people in everyday life (Haynes 2021a). As it is an almost constitutive part of the majority of human beings' lives, religion's influence is multifold and complex.

Second, religion's role in society varies among contexts and is constantly changing. To say that it is influential in society and that it influences politics or, in the context of international relations, that it influences foreign policy is thus too general. The roles of Hinduism in India, Judaism in Israel and various religions in the United States and European countries differ greatly. Besides the historical role of religion, the influence depends on the type of political

system, established church–state relations and the possibility of access to, for example, foreign policy making (Haynes 2021a).

This brings us to the third fact, which, although well known, should be remembered constantly. What counts as religion remains, if not controversial, subject to different interpretations. This can be expressed somewhat narrowly not as 'an essentialist category but one that is consciously, and unconsciously, innovative and manipulated by state and non-state actors, both secular and faith-based' (May et al. 2014, 339) or, preferably, in a more comprehensive way, as multifaced and having a profoundly socially constructed character. As underlined by Beckford (2003, 16), 'it has been difficult for social scientists to justify an approach that would put aside the strongly institutionalized assumptions about the generic givenness of religion in favour of an investigation into how human beings produced, reproduced, modified, challenged and rejected what they regarded as religion.'

Finally, the fourth point is the theoretical turn from the absolute dominance of a state-centred approach to the inclusion of a wide range of non-state actors. This does not mean that the role of states is significantly undermined or that states do not retain their privileged position. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the state's continuing role in regulating religion (Fox 2018, 2020) and determining its social and political roles (May et al. 2014, 340-341).

Proposals regarding the need to develop the specific political science of religion (or 'politology of religion', as proposed in an article by Jevtić 2007) did not find fruitful soil in the scholarship. An argument put forward involved the risk that a particular subdiscipline would result in parochialism and specialisation, while interdisciplinarity and cooperation would ultimately be needed (Kettel 2016). Instead, incorporating religious issues into mainstream theories of international relations might be a solution. However, the question is whether this is possible without much change in how these theories analyse the world's political processes. Sandal and Fox (2013) demonstrated which new issues and what ways they should be incorporated into the main theoretical perspectives in international theories (classical realism, neorealism, neoliberalism, the English school and constructivism). These issues and ways include religious worldviews (how religion influences the worldviews of policy makers and, consequently, the policy-making process, and how the religiosity of constituents constrains policy choices), religious legitimacy (religion as a source of legitimacy for the actions of various actors), religious states (embracing or supporting a specific religion), non-state religious actors (religious institutions as a source of political mobilisation or support of particular interests) and so on (Sandal and Fox 2013). In addition, religion can be, in some contexts, an explicit part of international politics, such as with the aim of promoting religious freedom worldwide. This should be studied further, as some analyses have shown that the political promotion of religious freedom as a part of international politics did not produce the intended results (Hurd 2015; Zelman and Fox 2022).

Another interesting approach is an attempt to deconstruct simple notions of secularism, desecularisation and religious freedom regarding international politics (Hurd 2017). A starting point is the claim that religion is an unavoidable part of human life. Still, this does not mean that all aspects of human life can be identified through religion. Thus, a detailed analysis is needed to reveal the complex interplay between what Hurds (2015) labelled 'lived religion' (beliefs and practices on the ground), 'expert religion' (knowledge of religion produced by experts) and 'governed religion' (religion constructed by governments). An extension of such analyses is the concept of 'soft power' (Nye 2004), which explained the specific power of religion in particular contexts in relation to other actors. Although not having a state's instruments (the legitimate use of physical force), religion can influence people through beliefs, ideas and values to reframe the actors' outlook in making policies (Haynes 2021a).

To sum up, this very short, if not reductionist, overview of the current political science debates shows anxiety in dealing with religion in political science. In other words, 'How do we resolve this conundrum: that is, religion is significant in understanding international relations versus religion is insignificant in understanding international relations?' (Haynes 2021b, 6). It is also interesting to note that political science scholars do not widely share the need to pay more attention to religion. However, some have produced innovative ways of analysing religion in the political arena. Still, the dilemma persists. As mainstream scholarship does not pay much attention to religion, how do we understand claims that religion has been a crucial factor in producing conflicts and wars? As argued by Sells (2003), religions became central conduits of conflict after the Cold War. Similar arguments can be found, for example, in Perica's (2002) book concerning the wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. The next section is about how these opposing views on religion and politics are reflected in sociology.

(Non)centrality of Religion and Politics in Sociology

Previously mentioned, Kettel's (2012) analysis ranked the leading sociological journals much higher than the leading political science journals in their coverage of religious issues. While the 20 highest-ranked political science journals contained only 2.54% of articles dealing with religion (as a primary or secondary theme), the 20 highest-ranked sociological journals included 4.92% of articles dealing with religion in the same 2000–2010 period (Kettel 2012, 97). Though one could conclude that the share of articles in sociological journals is also not remarkably high, it should be noted that Kettel's analysis did not include sociological journals devoted exclusively to religion. His study also showed that engaging with religion has increased more quickly in sociological journals than in political science journals. An apparent explanation for the higher scores is the place of religion in the work of the founders of sociology, which was soon translated into establishing the subdiscipline of the sociology of religion. This does not mean that the reasons for neglecting religion in political science do not apply to sociology. The dominant secular intellectual climate of the late 19th and 20th centuries, and the secularisation thesis in general sociological thinking and in the sociology of religion also played a role. Many years ago, Beckford argued that the success of the sociology of religion in producing its journals and scholarly organisations had contributed to its isolation from general sociology and other sociological subdisciplines and that concealing the social significance of religion from non-specialists had led to its insulation (Beckford 1985; Robertson 2011). Thus, the fact that sociological journals pay (a bit) more attention to religion than political science journals does not answer the question raised by Beckford (1985, 353) regarding why general sociology has failed to take religion seriously into account and how it has dealt with the continuing religious capacity to influence social processes in distinctive ways.

Some things have changed since Beckford made this observation. The new societal challenges and general theories dealing with them, from postmodernism, globalisation, feminism and new religious movements, and more specific theories, such as the sociology of knowledge and rational choice theory, have contributed to renewed interest in religion in sociology (Beckford 2000). This has prompted another question: how does religion fit into prominent and influential sociological theories, such as those on postmodernism and globalisation? Beckford (2000, 2003) warned that, in some influential postmodern theories (Giddens' and Bauman's being examples), religion is treated mainly as an abstract and fluid phenomenon, possibly as an influential cultural marker of identity, but not as an institutional power entangled in major sociopolitical processes and actors. In contrast, Castel's network theory, while focusing on just a small number of unrepresentative Christian and Islamic fundamentalist examples, gives an inaccurate picture of the role of religion in today's societies (Beckford 2000, 8). Following Beckford, this particular paper argues that the tendency to reduce religion to just a part of the cultural kaleidoscope or, contrarily, as a powerful political agent that bears almost sole responsibility for some (usually unpleasant) sociopolitical processes has remained a major challenge for the scientific study of religion.

The question of the (non)centrality of religion in sociology is not directly connected to politics, as is the case in political science. Furthermore, to recap, sociology has incorporated the study of religion more comprehensively from different theoretical perspectives and by focusing on numerous topics. As in political science, the renewed interest in religion has included its political dimension, that is, the impact of religion on political processes. Although this was most clearly visible in the rising attention on the public role of religion (Casanova 1994), a pathbreaking momentum was marked by Robertson's (1989) thesis on the politicisation of religion and the religionisation of government, which followed a similar earlier argument of the politicisation of theology and the theologisation of politics (Robertson and Chirico 1985, 239). In the context of this paper, it is worth mentioning the precise meaning that Robertson gave to his concepts and his overall theoretical frame. In sum, politicisation means (a) the interests of religions with governmental issues and (b) the interests of religions to coordinate religious commitments with secular-ideological perspectives and programmes (Robertson 1989, 11). Religionisation of politics means (a) the involvement of states with 'deep' issues of human life (from abortion to AIDS) and (b) the ways in which state-organised societies become an object of high identification (Robertson 1989, 14). Thus, Robertson's conceptualisation is specific and nuanced, although wide enough to include various examples of religiopolitical entanglements. It is worth stressing these detailed and nuanced meanings, as they are not apparent if someone starts from the literal meaning of 'politicisation' and 'religionisation'. Following Robertson, the argument is that politicisation understood as the governmental relevance of religion and as the legitimisation of religious views by non-religious ideologies is not something new and historically unique (see also Beckford 2012). Quite the contrary, this is new only regarding the historically short period during which the idea of the separation of religion and politics has existed, which is mostly a Western experience. Globalisation, being a more general theoretical outlook inside which Robertson (1992) examined the politicisation–regionalisation processes, changes social processes and involves a great amount of tension, some of which is captured, understood or transformed by religious responses. The issue is not a simple fact of reasserting religion into the public sphere (if religion was, at all, separated from the public sphere in the majority of the world) but of how and why (Beyer 2013).

The post-communist European region may serve as an interesting example. Although there were some differences among communist countries in how they treated religion, they all saw religion as part of the old pre-communist political order. Religion was seen as the opposite of atheism, a constitutive part of the communist system, and churches were seen as actors that were alien to the communist endeavour of building a new society (Zrinščak 2004). The fall of communism completely changed social attitudes towards religion, becoming a welcome social fact. How was that unique historical situation reflected in the scholarly approach to the religion–politics nexus? This will be illustrated through a brief analysis of the work of the International Study of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe Association (ISORECEA).[2] As the most important scholarly organisation in the region focusing on religion, ISORECEA has organised a series of conferences since the mid-1990s. Eight books have been published as collections of papers delivered at these conferences (Borowik 1999; Borowik and Babiński 1997; Borowik and Tomka 2001; Borowik and Zawila 2010; Marinović Jerolimov, Zrinščak and Borowik 2004; Révay and Tomka 2006, 2007; Tomka and Yurash 2006).[3] In total, 150 papers were published in these books.

Based on my estimation by browsing through all the papers, 84 (56%) were connected with the broad sphere of politics. The intention here was not to do a methodologically proper analysis of topics covered by so many papers but to get an overall impression of the focus of scholarly interests and whether there were any observable dynamics. Such a high share of the

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[2] For more information see: https://www.isorecea.net/

[3] The analysis included books published after ISORECEA was founded in December 1995 and those which collected papers delivered at respective conferences.

broadly described sphere of politics was due to many papers that dealt with the profound social transformation of the region and its impact on the social position and role of religions. The social context, from communism to post-communism, with its apparent political dimensions, was an unavoidable part of the analysis. This was more visible in the first three books (Borowik 1999; Borowik and Babiński 1997; Borowik and Tomka 2001), and particularly the second book (Borowik 1999), which focused on church–state relations. Topics of religious plurality and identity also produced many articles focusing on state regulation of and social attitudes towards religious diversity (Tomka and Yurash 2006), religion in the public space and links between religion and national identities (Borowik and Zawila 2010). Despite this, conferences and respective books in the 2000s witnessed a diversification of topics and perspectives in the scientific study of religion. Examples include topics of religious experience, religiosity and values, religiosity and delinquencies, non-religiosity, religion and welfare, and solidarity, which were researched without or with quite limited reference to the social context. This continued in the 2010s, when the ISORECEA journal, *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe,* was established. The majority of papers published in this journal brought topics not straightforwardly discussed into the broader sociopolitical context for publication in *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* during 2010–2021. Examples include topics of the new age, new religious movements, memorials, pilgrimages, Buddhism and intergeneration transmission. An exception was the 2019 issue, in which all four published articles focused on religion and right-wing populism (Herbert 2019; Hidalgo 2019; Huber and Yendell 2019; Öztürk and Pickel 2019).

The reference to social context and its profound political dimension in studying religion is not unexpected or odd. The cited books and the journal provided many nuanced analyses of how social changes impacted religion and how religions were part of that change by influencing the change, giving meaning to it and, eventually, reframing religions' role in societies. Thus, the region's scientific study of religion has fully reflected an uneven and painful path to the new social order. This was coupled with a discussion about what has been happening from a theoretical point of view. Is it proper to discuss desecularisation/revitalisation, secularisation/ individualisation or something in between (e.g. Műller 2011; Pickel 2011, Pollack and Rosta 2017)? In addition, are processes in the region similar or quite different from those in other European countries or even globally? Is such a strong impact of the social and political context unique or typical? To put this differently, what is the significance of such a 'peculiar' social development? As the title and the subtitle of one chapter in the book by Tomka (2011, 1) might suggest, 'Does religion in Eastern and Central Europe matter? The religious situation in Eastern and Central Europe – to whom is it important?'

There are a few additional remarks I want to make here.

Religion's political and social exclusion during the communist time reinforced (rather than invented or reinvented) its political dimension (Martin 2011; Tomka 2005; Zrinščak 2004). There was also a dimension of social life that was connected to but did not reduce the political one. The fact of the public invisibility of religion during communism did not mean its social invisibility, as religion's role was strong at various layers of private and communal life (Tomka 2005; Zrinščak 2004). One feature of this was the preservation of traditional forms of life compared to Western Europe. The political and social changes in the late 1980s and the 1990s brought significant changes to religion at the public level. However, this was not disassociated and should not be discussed and analysed separately from the non-state levels. Religion entered the new political arena with its strong inherited social bonds. Furthermore, the new social role of religion in post-communism, with all its possible consequences, is not isolated from the broader and contradictory political outlooks existing in society or from the role of religion in the different social spheres. Therefore, questions posed in many papers in cited books about the 'proper' social and political role of religion in post-communism should

not be dissociated from a broader transformation of politics and a redefinition of religion in European societies. My argument is that this is not adequately described either by the secularisation, individualisation or spiritualisation process, by the return or politicisation of religion or by the concept of public religion. Hence, the post-communist experience is a part of the broader picture. The contradictory developments inside the religion–populism–culture triangle can illustrate this.

A Challenging Topic in Political Science and Sociology: Religion, Populism and Culture

The fall of communism and the post-communist transformation evolved in parallel with new social challenges and the profound reconfiguration of political landscapes around the globe. Europe is not an exception. An example of this has been the collapse of the traditional (post-Second World War) political structure in many countries and the recent rise of new political parties, many with a populist label. Populism has attracted much attention from political scientists and sociologists in relation to the populist reference to religion and culture. This has provoked a question about the need for a fresh theoretical look at the religion–politics nexus.

Two understandings of populism dominate the literature: populism as an ideology and populism as a discourse/political style (e.g. Bonikowski 2017; Brubaker 2017a; Šalaj and Grbeša 2017). Populism as a (political) ideology rests on understanding political ideology as a simplified social and political explanation of the world. In line with this, populists offer a simple and easily grasped interpretation of society through the basic division between honest people and corrupted elite/others. However, as almost everything is interpreted through that basic division, from socioeconomic determinants of the social position of individuals and groups to all pressing social issues, the ideological content of populism is relatively thin. It differs in its basic structure from other known ideologies and their contents. In addition, populism may be found on entirely different political spectrums, from the radical right to the radical left, which is not a usual feature of ideologies.

The second view, which seems to prevail in the literature, is an understanding of populism as a specific discursive and stylistic frame. The main idea of the populist strategy is to appeal to people's emotions, mainly through communication based on verbal and non-verbal semiotic modes. Specific discourse is upheld by 'gestures, emotional tone, imagery and symbolism', which highlights populism's political style (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 179).

What is of particular interest is the relationship between populism and religion (Brubaker 2017a; DeHanas and Shterin 2018). The social divisions on which populists base their core claims can be understood as vertical (people vs elite) and horizontal (people vs others). There is no precise definition of who belongs to the elites, as this depends on the context and political aims. Still, as underlined in the literature, elites are for populist (corrupted) politicians, which can also include the church hierarchy. Who the others are also depends on the context and political standpoints but can range from global/supranational elites (from the European Union [EU] to the United Nations or World Trade Organization to multinational companies and the wealthiest people) to those of other ethnic and religious backgrounds. The populists' references to religion are multifold, but two can be singled out.

The first reference to religion can be found in the moralistic description of people versus the elite, where people are those with sacred features (Brubaker 2017b; DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Marzouki, McDonnel and Roy 2016; Zúquete 2017). This Manichaeism approach introduces the cosmic or divine labelling of (sacred) people in contrast to immoral (and consequently not blessed) elites. There is no explicit reference to religion here. However, as the construction of who is sacred and who is not is fundamental to populist reasoning, this can be studied from the point of view of the sacralisation of politics. The closest theoretical frame is the concept of political religion that relies 'on an unchallengeable monopoly of power, ideological monism, and the obligatory and unconditional subordination of the individual and the collectivity to its code of commandments' (Gentile 2006, XV).

The second reference is an explicit mention of religion – that is, Christianity in the European context. If anything is common to populists in Europe, it is the underlying Christian identity of their countries. (DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Roy 2016b). A reference to religion is used by populists in quite different socioreligious contexts, from those highly religious to those highly secular (Brubaker 2017b; DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Marzouki, McDonnel and Roy 2016; Zúquete 2017). This raises the question of what such a reference means and how it should be interpreted. If, for example, Christianity is an essential reference in the political actions of some political groups/parties in different contexts, such as the Netherlands, France, Italy, Hungary or Poland, how should this be analysed? One of the answers lies in the secular and/or cultural interpretation of religion.

Notwithstanding the highly secular context in some countries, the reference to Christianity depicts the wish to underline the specific legacy of the current social and political order. This reference also marks differences from other religions, particularly Islam. Referring to religion/Christianity in more secular contexts (e.g. France and the Netherlands) does not mean supporting or wishing to boost religiosity or secure its prominence in society (van Kessel 2016; Roy 2016b). Even in the French *laicité* version, secularism does not contradict Christian identity. Quite the contrary, such an unusual mixture of Christianity and secularism underlines the difference from Islam (Joppke 2013; Roy 2016a, 2016b). Another context brings a slightly different picture, although it involves the exact mechanisms. In, for example, Hungary and Poland, Islam is not an issue, and populism evolves from the distance to different types of 'others', such as the EU, liberals, feminists, LGTBQI, migrants and so on (e.g. Ádám and Bozóki 2016; Stanley 2016). In addition, the role of religion in these two countries is not the same, which produces a different 'use' of religion that is less explicit or 'secondary' in Hungary compared to in Poland.

To resolve these complex relations between politics and religion, Yilmaz and Morieson (2021) introduced the difference between religious populism and identitarian populism. They analysed European populist experiences and their relations to religion as identitarian populism because populist politicians or groups are not primarily concerned with religion. Still, religion is used here as a civilisation-based classification of people. This differs from religious populism, which is closely linked to organised religion and adopts a straightforward religious programme. Identitarian populism is understood primarily through the 'civilisational' label, as European national identities are interpreted in terms of Judeo-Christian civilisation (Brubaker 2017b).

However, the problem here is that this may be true at a very general level. Important differences exist between the countries mentioned above. To understand these differences, I propose further analysing them by taking together a product of the following:

1. the level of religiosity in a country;
2. the general social role of religion in a country; and
3. the social production of 'otherness' in a country.

These three elements may help in understanding the populists' reference to religion. In this sense, identitarian populism, as described by Yilmaz and Morieson (2021), can be disaggregated into at least two categories:

1. cultural – when religion is a cultural identity marker (purely cultural, although with political consequences); and
2. cultural-political – when there is a mixture of cultural and political identity markers.

In this second case, the civilisational identity is backed by social and political views linked explicitly to religion, although not entirely in a way that the type of religious populism works, as described by Yilmaz and Morieson (2021). Central and Eastern European countries may be excellent examples of understanding these two possible variants of identitarian populism. They can add necessary empirical material to test this, such as the analysis on religiously inspired mobilisation against so-called gender ideology, LGBTQI and women's rights that are influential across the region.

In any case, the religious role in populism is more about belonging than believing (Brubaker 2017b; Roy 2016b). It shows how the role of religion in most European societies has been changing and how this change does not eliminate it but profoundly transforms religion's public role. This is theoretically captured by understanding religion as a culture. Conceptualising religion as a culture or as an essential ingredient of cultural systems has a long history in the social scientific approach to religion. The most influential of such a view has been Geertz's (1966) anthropological approach. Geertz (1966, 3) stated that culture is 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life', while religion is '(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seems uniquely realistic' (Geertz 1966, 4). Hence, culture and religion make sense of the universe and man's life, providing meaning and orientation. For the theoretical understanding of the links between populism, religion and culture, it would be good to further discuss how religion, in today's predominantly secular culture, can provide symbols in line with specific cultures.

The ongoing discussion situates this in not only secularised but also increasingly diversified Europe in various meanings: cultural, religious and ethnic. Two trends can be discerned from the literature. The first is a trend towards the cultural transformation of religious symbols, as shown by a tendency to interpret religious symbols (of the majority) as cultural, but not (only or predominantly) as religious (Beaman 2013). The second trend is connected and reflects that favouring Christianity (by reducing its symbols to a cultural marker) is parallel to portraying Islam as a culture *and* political orientation. The European Court of Human Rights' (ECtHR) jurisprudence undoubtedly demonstrates this (Roy 2019). Different treatment of Christianity and Islam is key to understanding the direction of the cultural appropriation of religion. The well-known *Lautsi* case, which has been discussed in the scholarship from different angles (e.g. Beaman 2013; Breskaya, De Stefani and Giordan 2022; Ozzano and Giorgi 2013; Zucca 2013), shows how the ECtHR's decisions are based on the fact that religion's role in the public sphere is diminishing and transforming. Interpreting religious symbols (like a crucifix in a classroom)

as passive allows for emphasising its cultural and/or national identity character. This also means deploying its religious meanings. In this sense, culture is a way of transmitting heritage and maintaining the cohesion of the majority, with a rather ambivalent religious impact. The consequences of this for religious minorities have not been thoroughly discussed in the literature, and the case of Islam complicates the scene. If Muslim symbols are not only cultural but also ideological and political – and the ECtHR and many national courts and governmental decisions confirm such a view – then the nexus between religion, culture and politics gains different features. Seeing a veil as a threat to a secular order or burqa or minaret as symbols of political fundamentalism (Joppke 2013) shows how politics (states, courts, political parties) impose a redefinition of the main features of various religions.

This leads to two final points. The mechanisms of the culturalisation of religion work quite differently in different contexts, as some recent analyses have demonstrated. Astor and Mayrl (2020) showed how the concept of culturalised religion should be further differentiated into 'constituted culture', 'pragmatic culture' and 'identity culture'. They rightly claimed that culturised religion differs from the concepts of civil and political religion. Still, my observation is that culturalised religion is a product of the same social and political processes which define some aspects of religion as (socially and politically) identitarian or some religions as being primarily fundamentalist or politicised. From the point of view of theoretical and methodological rigorousness, a detailed classification and the strict use of notions, as proposed by Astor and Mayrl (2020), is required. However, from the point of view of the scientific account of social processes and religion's role in it, this should be complemented by a broader picture of who defines the role of religion (as cultural and/or as political) and how, and how this fits the understanding of the social.

Instead of a Conclusion: A Move Forward?

This paper briefly reviews the inclusion of religion and how the religion–politics nexus is addressed in political science and sociology. Both sciences struggle with including religion in their mainstream theories and finding a balance between neglecting religion and overstating its relevance. At least, this paper demonstrates the utmost importance of continuing autoreflection in the social scientific study of religion. In this way, it can be read as a call for further reflection on three interconnected issues: role, actors and transformation. Whether religion needs to be more thoroughly incorporated into main theories about politics and social changes is, in a way, a question of its continuing ability to influence people and be a source of feelings, motives and actions. The briefly mentioned concept of 'soft power' (Nye 2004; Haynes 2021a), or remarks about the dominant description of culturally shaped but fluid modernities (Beckford 2003), point to the need to systematically address the still crucial social role of religion. This should be done in relation to the role of other social actors. The multiplication of actors at all levels, from local to global, creates a complex picture but should not be used as an excuse for neglecting the role of religion in a specific context or equalising the role of all actors. The fact that religion is increasingly regulated by various actors (and increasingly by the judiciary and political groups) is part of the state's continuing, if not increasing, role in making a difference between religions and, consequently, between members of various religions. This is a part of the transformation of political dynamics at all levels and of the political agendas of various groups. The message here is not that everything is conditioned and controlled by politics, but that religion is a part of overall social dynamics, whether it is (just?) a loose point of reference or can effectively channel people's political interests and concerns.

The relationship between populism, culture and religion is an illustrative example of such transformative dynamics and sets up a new research agenda for sociology and political science. Populism as a (thin) ideology, or populism as a communicative style, are somewhat unique ways of articulating political interests but are not an entirely new way of explaining how politics work. What may be new concerning religion is a consequence of what has already

been observed in scholarship about how religions work nowadays: shifting from orthodoxy to a kind of patchwork influence in the everyday life of the majority. Though we need more empirical material, it could be argued that the populist reference to religion reflects or emphasises the already changed (diminishing but transformed, and not simply powerless) role of religion in society. Still, in some contexts, religion can also express political concerns at the level of institutions and civil society and in new organisational forms. This is connected with the previously mentioned role of secular actors in imposing specific interpretations of various religions. As always, the main challenge is recognising 'complexity, ambiguity and changeableness' (Beckford 2003, 214), while also connecting pieces in a meaningful theoretical frame.

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