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Introduction: Religion, Democracy and Civil Liberties

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Abstract

This article introduces the subject of the symposium, by outlining the main points of the debate, developed in the past two centuries, about the compatibility of religion with democratic institutions and values. The different points of view about the adaptability to democracy of specific religious traditions, and their potential for change, are also sketched.

Keywords

religion democracy democratization multi-vocality

The relation between religion, democracy and civil liberties has recently been the focus of a lively debate in several fields of the social sciences literature. However, it has been the subject of controversies and theoretical elaborations since, at least, the mid-nineteenth century, when the loyalty to American democracy of the recently immigrated Catholics was questioned by many US Protestants, while in the meantime the early democratizing and secularizing European states engaged in a fierce struggle with the Catholic Church and its privileges. Although most of the recent debate has been focused on Islam, many of the issues involved remain the same: particularly, four questions (that will be the focus of this introduction) are recurring. The main issue concerns the compatibility of the religious factor with democracy and the recognition of a universal set of human rights. The second issue holds that religion has some kind of influence on democracy, but recognizes there are different views about the modalities of this influence: while some focus on the role of religious actors, others argue that the influence of religious ideas on political culture can prove more relevant. Third, there is a widespread debate about the influence of specific religious traditions on democracy, which includes, for example, the so-called Protestant exceptionalism and Christian exceptionalism theses, as well as some negative elaborations about other religious traditions. The final issue concerns the possibility of change and internal differentiation for a religious tradition: while some scholars argue that all religious traditions are multi-vocal, and can be compatible with both democratic and anti-democratic political theologies, others are convinced that within every religion we can find some core beliefs (and an attitude towards politics) not changing in space and time.

The idea that religion is not compatible with democracy developed quite early in contemporary history. While the fledgling European democracies were slowly widening the space for political and civil liberties, positivist authors argued that religion is a regressive factor, doomed to disappear and incompatible with the advent of modernity. Most of the social sciences' founding fathers were deeply influenced by this strain of thought and produced a wide corpus of literature dealing with the subject: [August Comte \(1864\)](#) proposed his law of the three stages of society, with an idea of religion as belonging only to the theocratic and metaphysical stages, but quintessentially not compatible with the positive (modern) one; [Karl Marx \(1977: 131\)](#) spoke of religion as 'the opium of the people', 'the sigh of the oppressed creature', which gives an illusory happiness to the poor, by perpetuating, instead, the oppression of the dominant classes; [Max Weber \(1958, 1993\)](#) coined the idea of 'disenchantment of the world', as well as the concept of secularization itself; [Sigmund Freud \(1961: 53\)](#) wrote that 'religion is comparable to a childhood neurosis' that civilized individuals must pass through on their way from childhood to maturity; [Emile Durkheim \(2001\)](#) conceptualized religion as the embodiment in metaphysical terms of the organization of society. Only a handful of scholars, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Vilfredo Pareto and William James, did not share such negative points of view ([Casanova, 1994](#)).

‘The main issue concerns the compatibility of the religious factor with democracy and the recognition of a universal set of human rights’.

The idea of religion as a regressive factor, incompatible with modernity, evolved in the so-called ‘secularization paradigm’, which monopolized social sciences throughout the twentieth century. In some cases, this framework simply meant a complete exclusion of religion from the factors regarded as influencing democratization (e.g., variables such as economic development, alphabetization, urbanization and relations between social classes). In other works, religion was explicitly mentioned as essentially ‘incompatible with democracy’: according to this point of view, liberal democracy can thrive only if ‘either few people are seriously religious or the seriously religious (and their churches, sects and denominations) accept that religious imperatives be confined to the home, the family and the voluntary sector’ ([Bruce, 2006](#): 18).

Recent versions of the secularization thesis show more receptiveness towards the role of the religious factor in democratization, by taking into account the general ‘resurgence’ or ‘deprivatization’ of religion taking place since the 1970s ([Kepel, 1991](#); [Casanova, 1994](#)): some of them, for example, propose the idea that only religious authority (together with its influence on politics) is declining, while at the same time religion can still be an active force in civil society ([Herbert, 2003](#)). Nevertheless, there is the warning that despite a general pro-democratic stance of some religious institutions, their ‘acceptance of democracy will have certain limits – that is, the outcomes of the democratic process will be accepted only if they do not violate certain non-negotiable moral principles’ ([Berger, 2004](#): 148).

Among those who are convinced that religion is a relevant factor in democratization processes, there is disagreement, however, about the way in which this influence works: through the impact of religious values on political culture, or through the action of religious actors.

As for the role of values, after World War II, political culture studies represented one of the main strands of the political science literature, and some authors also focused on the ways in which religious values can influence political cultures. During the 1970s and the 1980s, such studies were eclipsed by the analyses focused on socio-economic factors, especially in the rational choice and Marxist fields ([Anderson, 2009](#)). However, in the 1990s there was a revival of studies on political culture involving religion (see, for example, some of the works included in [Larry Diamond's](#) (ed.) *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries* (1993)): many scholars indeed realized that ‘rational self-interest models must be set in a wider social context, where laws, rules, ideas, beliefs and values are given appropriate analytical weight’ ([Haynes, 1999](#): 8). The influence of religion on political culture can be particularly relevant, it was argued, when it succeeds in shaping public policies, either because of its direct influence on decision makers’ worldviews, or indirectly by being the foundation for the worldview of large segments of a population ([Fox and Sandler, 2004](#)). Another version of the idea according to which religion can influence political culture is represented by the civilizational approach started by [Huntington's](#) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1997), which reintroduced the concept of religion-based civilizations to political science.

‘The idea of religion as a regressive factor, incompatible with modernity, evolved in the so-called “secularization paradigm”’.

Another strand of literature focuses instead on the influence of religious actors (churches and comparable organizations, religiously oriented parties, religious social movements as well as religious NGOs) on democratization processes. An example of this field of analysis, previously mostly neglected, is a recent research carried out at Harvard University. This work has shown that

in more than a half of all democratization processes occurring during the last three decades of the twentieth century, religious actors have been able to exert a positive influence on the erosion of authoritarian rule, especially where they were relatively free from the influence of state power ([Philpott et al, 2011](#)). Other comparative studies highlight the variety of means through which this influence is applied: by legitimizing the drafting of a constitution and new elites; by providing welfare to the population in order to grant society a smoother transition; and in some cases by directly mobilizing the opponents to the regime ([Künkler and Leininger, 2009](#)). Such findings of course contradict the results we would expect from the secularization paradigm.

Among those who regard religion as an influential factor on democratization, there is also a lively debate about the pro- or anti-democratic role of specific religious traditions. Not surprisingly, given the Western-centred identity of twentieth century social sciences, the oldest theses were mostly focused on Christianity. First, a wide corpus of works about Protestantism developed from [Max Weber's](#) work (1958) about the connection between the Protestant ethic and the development of capitalism: an idea that later scholars applied to the development of democracy as well. Even many political scientists closer to the secularization paradigm regarded Protestantism as favourable to democracy, because of some of its features (its factionalism, which prevents any congregation from representing the majority of a population; its equilibrium between individualist and communitarian tendencies; and its promotion of alphabetization) that 'by encouraging individualism and creating religious diversity, undermined the organic and communal basis for religion' ([Bruce, 2006](#)).

Many scholars used to regard Catholicism as an undemocratic religion, because of the alleged lack of such characteristics: for example, in the United States, Catholics' loyalty to democracy had been questioned since the mid-nineteenth century. However, after World War II, there was a new appreciation of the role of Christian democratic parties in promoting democratization in Southern Europe. Moreover, several scholars highlighted the positive influence of the Church, after Vatican Council II, on the democratization of Latin America and other developing areas ([Philpott, 2007](#)). A new 'Christian exceptionalism' thesis had thus the upper hand on the previous 'Protestant exceptionalism' one ([Huntington, 1991, 1997](#)).

The last decades of the twentieth century also witnessed more significant attempts to take into account the role played by non-Christian religious traditions in democratization. For instance, an interesting debate developed between a scholarly tradition interpreting Buddhism as encouraging quietism, and another dealing with the so-called 'engaged Buddhism', which highlighted the role of Buddhist actors in defying autocratic rule in several South East Asian countries ([Harris, 1999; Queen and King, 1996](#)). Similar conflicting points of view were also put forward with respect to the compatibility with democracy of Orthodox Christianity ([Prodromou, 2004](#)) and Confucianism ([Fukuyama, 1995](#)), while it was suggested that some features of Hinduism could be connected to the unexpected emergence and stability of democracy in India ([Anderson, 2009](#)).

Most of the recent debate, especially after 9/11, has however been focused on Islam, which is seen by many as unfavourable to democracy because of its allegedly insufficient (or, according to some, inexistent) separation between the religious and the political realm. Moreover, some scholars highlight the still widespread belief in God's sovereignty, preventing the delegation of power to the people, and depriving the legitimacy of democratically elected secular rulers ([Badie, 1986; Lewis, 1991](#)). This 'Islamic negative exceptionalism' school of thought also produced empirical studies, suggesting a negative correlation between the presence of a Muslim majority (and even a strong Muslim minority) in a country, and the development of democracy ([Lakoff, 2004; Anckar, 2011](#)). On the other hand, works supporting Islam's compatibility with democracy often rely on the presence in the Islamic tradition of concepts such as *shura* (consultation) and *ijma* (consensus), that some political philosophers have adopted as the basis for a full-fledged Islamic theory of democracy

([Moussalli, 2003](#); [Campanini, 1999](#); [Sachedina, 2001](#)). On the empirical side, some studies show support for the idea that the lack of democracy in the Middle East is a consequence of social and economic processes, and not the effect of religious influence ([Stepan and Robertson, 2004](#); [Halliday, 1996](#)). It is likely, however, that the currently undergoing 'Arab spring', leading several MENA countries towards a regime transition, will start a new phase in this discussion.

The debate about the compatibility of specific religious traditions with democracy is often connected to the discussion between 'essentialist' and 'multi-vocal' conceptions of religion. The idea at the foundation of the former position is that religious traditions can be regarded as fundamentally monolithic, or at least that each of them, although not entirely homogeneous, comprises some 'core beliefs' that don't change in space and time ([Bruce, 2003](#)). Even some of the works that don't regard religious traditions as monolithic concede that 'religions are indeed multi-vocal but that at any point in time there may be a dominant discourse and practice that renders them more or less supportive of certain patterns of political development' ([Anderson, 2009](#): 202). An essentialist point of view can be found especially in works following civilizational approaches ([Huntington, 1997](#); [Tibi, 1997](#)), according to which the identity of the world civilizations (each showing distinguishing features and a peculiar approach to democracy) is mostly defined in religious terms.

'... "multi-vocality": the idea that in every religious tradition it is possible to find different kinds of messages and values'

On the other hand, in recent years, an influential strand of literature has developed around the concept of 'multi-vocality': the idea that in every religious tradition it is possible to find different kinds of messages and values (and, therefore, it is not possible to label unequivocally a religion as pro- or anti-democratic). According to the different interpretations and meanings attributed to it, a religious tradition's message can be seen as either favourable or hostile towards democracy ([Stepan, 2000](#); [Bromley, 1997](#)). Religious traditions, according to this perspective, are therefore complex entities, which we cannot regard as a single whole, by neglecting the substantial differences and contrasts within them ([Norris and Inglehart, 2004](#)). A theoretical elaboration based on the idea of multi-vocality is the concept of 'political theology': 'a set of ideas that a religious body holds about legitimate political authority' ([Philpott, 2007](#): 507–508). According to those who adopt this concept, political theologies do not necessarily belong to a whole religious community, and they can be shared by only some parts of it; moreover, they can evolve, as a consequence of the influence of historical developments, socio-economic conditions and ideologies.

This symposium will address some of these issues and their empirical ramifications, by collecting the materials presented at the ECPR Capital Lecture, held in Rome (at the School of Government of the LUISS Guido Carli University) on 21 January 2011. Jeffrey Haynes (London Metropolitan University) will first address the implications and the empirical ramifications of some of the above-sketched theoretical debates. His essay will start with some considerations regarding democratization processes and their different phases, to take into account the nature of the relation between religion, democracy and democratization. The second part of his essay will provide a deeper analysis of the issue of religious influence on civil liberties, by addressing the case of blasphemy, as conceived in European as well as in Middle Eastern societies.

Tariq Ramadan (Oxford University) will then assess the role of Muslim immigrants in democratic European societies. He will put forward a proposal opposing both assimilation (requiring immigrants to embrace the local culture as a whole) and multi-cultural positions (prospecting societies that include different separate groups, each one preserving its original culture). According to Ramadan, it is instead necessary for European Muslims to retain their religious legacy, while

creating a new cultural synthesis, which can integrate their traditional worldviews with the cultural heritage of their new homelands. At the same time, mutual fears and doubts between immigrants and indigenous populations must be answered by a revolution of self-confidence and mutual trust, in which the role of both political institutions and the media will be crucial.

Pasquale Ferrara (European University Institute) will conclude the symposium by taking into account some international, transnational and global implications of religion's influence on democracy. The author counters the traditional view – influenced by the secularization paradigm – of a post-Westfalian order granting peaceful relations between states by excluding religion from international affairs. He proposes instead a new view of international relations, in which both religious values and religious actors can play a relevant role in promoting the creation of a more equitable international society, not marked by anarchy, but by a new kind of international democratic governance.

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