

Religion and Illiberal Politics: Challenges and Common Patterns in Comparative Perspectives

Section "Religion, Politics, and the Public Spheres: Contesting Liberalism?"

Panel Chairs:

- Anja Hennig, European University of Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder), ahennig@europa-uni.de
- Simona Guerra, University of Leicester, gs219@leicester.ac.uk

Abstract

This Panel aims at empirically and theoretically analyzing the ideological, structural, and historical linkages between religion and illiberal and/or contested politics. In particular, the interest focuses on cases of alliances between religion and populism, radical right wing parties, Euroscepticism, nationalist rhetoric, programs, conflicts and actors. In conceptual terms this implies to include several approaches dealing with political contestation in democratic systems to the broader concept of illiberal politics. A striking example is populism as an anti-pluralistic programmatic that relies on a clear distinction between an imagined "we" as the true leaders of "the people" and "them" as a corrupt elite ruling against "the people". In their recent edited book, Mazouki, McDonnell and Roy convincingly show that more often than not populists tend to hijack religion. Whereas populists talk about identity and Churches about faith, religion bears the potential to serve populist identity politics.

At the same time, however, the role of religion itself is fundamental to examine identity, the state and institutional actors in comparative political studies. As noted by Jose Casanova (2006), the impact of secularization provides the Churches opportunities to emerge and enter the social and political discourse. And Grzymała-Busse examined in her comparative contributions on the role of the Churches to what extent they can maximize their policy influence (Grzymała-Busse 2012, 2015).

In 2015, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, addressed the contemporary struggle against extremism. In his more recent words, all the major world faith traditions shows 'a group that cannot tolerate diversity', a violent attitude, that, in his words, 'we've not seen in Christianity, since the end of the wars of Reformation... the theological narrative [seems to] fill[ing] a vacuum left by an alternative narrative.' It is this vacuum that the return to more identitarian narratives, growing perceived immigration and security threats, and the social challenges of the recent financial and economic crisis

have filled and seen the rise of an alliance between religion and illiberal politics.

Paper givers will address the following questions:

- 1) How can we conceptually approach the observed linkages between religion (theologies, values, actors) and illiberal politics in terms of populist, right-wing, Eurosceptic, nationalist rhetoric, programs, conflicts and actors?
- 2) How and why do illiberal actors use religion?
- 3) How and why do religious actors ally with illiberal actors?
- 4) From a comparative perspective: Which different pattern of religious illiberalism or the illiberal appropriation of religion can be observed? Under which conditions do illiberal religious and/or political actors cooperate?

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