Defining a Secular Identity in an Increasingly Religious World? Foreign Policy from a Transatlantic Perspective

Anne Jenichen (University of Bremen, jenichen@uni-bremen.de)

Paper prepared for the ECPR General Conference, Montreal, 26-29 August 2015

Abstract

This paper explores the secular identities of the EU and the US from a comparative perspective and the question of how these identities are constructed and projected in their foreign relations. It primarily aims at understanding how the EU and the US interpret the role of religion in their foreign policies and whether and how their interpretations resemble or differ from each other. Against the background of the literature on varieties of secularism and based on a discursive approach, the paper analyzes official documents produced by EU and US foreign policy institutions in their relationship with three Sub-Saharan African states. Unlike expected by the transatlantic comparative literature, the results suggest a relatively similar relevance of religion in EU and US foreign policy but differences in how issues of religion are framed. Whereas for the EU, religion more often is a human rights as well as a security issue, which often contributes to political problems, the US primarily securitizes religion but also sees it more frequently as a resource for solving problems. In addition to religious differences, however, domestic dynamics in the target states also facilitate how the EU and the US deal with issues of religion in their relationships with them.
1. Introduction

Religion has become a ‘hot topic’ in international politics: terrorists invoking religion, conflict parties mobilizing religious difference, extremists persecuting religious minorities and authoritarian leaders bolstering their power through alliances with conservative religious institutions have roiled parts of the world. Even though it is contested whether the world has become more religious, we certainly witness a politicization of religion in world affairs (Berger 1999; Duffy Toft, Philpott and Shah 2011; Fox 2008; Norris and Inglehart 2011). “Religion becomes the voice of protest” (Barnett 2015: 25) against secularist modernization processes and secular nationalisms (Berger 1999; Juergensmeyer 2011). How have international actors of the secular ‘West’, such as the United States and the European Union, reacted to these dynamics? And what does that tell us about the role of religion in their international identities? Has it been easier for the United States, where religion is socially and politically more salient (Norris and Inglehart 2011), to deal with religious issues in its foreign policies than for the European Union with its more secular character (Bruce 2002; Davie 2002)?

Religion has often been perceived as a dividing line between Europe and the United States. As Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (2013: 319) pointed out: “Recent scholarship and public media seem to support the view that the transatlantic religious divide has significantly widened since the 1980s.” The supposed division between “religious America” and “secular Europe”, or more polemical, between “God’s Chosen Nation” and the “Dark Continent of Secularism”, however, is also often overstated, nurturing stereotypes where in fact more overlap exists (Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008; Waldschmidt-Nelson 2013). This article puts the presumption of a transatlantic religious divide to a test by asking whether and how the varying social and political importance of religion and differing understandings of secularism
on both sides of the Atlantic affect how the European Union (EU) and the US deal with issues of religion abroad.

The analysis shows that religious issues are similarly prominent in EU and US foreign policies, and that differences do not consist in the relevance but in the framing of religion, e.g. as security (US) vs. human rights issue (EU), and in the appreciation of religion as a resource as opposed to viewing it primarily as problem (greater appreciation by the US than the EU).

The analysis primarily draws on Elizabeth Shakman Hurd’s (2008) understanding of secularism as a discursive tradition and a political authority, which shapes the formation of identities, interests and political decision-making, and which comes in a variety of different forms. These “varieties of secularism” differ in the arrangements that states and societies have historically found to both bound and integrate religion (Cady and Hurd 2010; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008). “To fail to acknowledge the politics of secularism is to miss out on a powerful set of assumptions and dispositions that animate contemporary politics, including foreign policy” (Hurd 2007: 347).

The comparison focuses on the European Union (EU) as an international actor rather than on single EU member states in order to allow for a broader transatlantic comparison. The EU represents its member states in many regards. The scope of its external policies for quite a while “now equals or exceeds that of any single national foreign policy, including the US” (White 2001: 15).¹ Even though the EU is not a state like the US, both entities can be understood, and thus compared, as international actors, whose polities follow similar institutional logics (both are outcomes of the aggregation of distinct and separated territorial units and their citizens), even though they differ in their degree of ‘actorness’ and the degree of centralization of foreign policy decision-making (Brattberg and Rhinard 2013; Fabbrini and

---

¹ Foreign policy here is broadly defined as the formal policies of states and organizations which affect various military, economic, humanitarian, social, and cultural dimensions of its relations with other international actors (Warner and Walker 2011: 114). It thus does not only include the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy but also its development and external trade policies.
Sicurelli 2008). In order to address the ‘secular Europe-religious America’ cliché, it therefore seems to be more appropriate to focus on the EU as an organization instead of on only one or a few member states. However, due to the cultural diversity among EU member states, it is not possible to generalize from the results on the EU to the foreign policies of single member states, and vice versa.

I argue that the EU, just like the US, has its own secular identity whose identification is an empirical question which in its own right will contribute to the still scarce research on religion in EU external relations.\(^2\) But also in the literature on religion in US foreign policy one can find quite some disagreement on the question of how relevant religion in US foreign policy actually is. While some argue that religion has been more influential than often thought (e.g. Byrnes 2011; Inboden 2010; Preston 2012), others complain about the failure of the US foreign policy administration to take religion into account (e.g. Chaplin and Joustra 2010; Johnston 2011). The comparative perspective taken here is not only useful for understanding differences and similarities in the interpretation of religion in Europe and the US, it also helps to assess the relevance of religion in EU and US foreign policy due to the fact that relevance is always an empirical question of degree. The question is not whether in US foreign policy, for instance, religion is relevant and in EU policy it is not. Rather, the question is whether religion is more relevant in US than in EU foreign policy. The transatlantic comparison furthermore helps to understand whether Europe and the US have really grown that much apart, which could become an obstacle to jointly tackling the above mentioned international challenges.

\(^2\) One exception to this research gap is the quite extensive literature on religion in the EU accession of Turkey (e.g. Amiraux 2007; Boomgaarden and Wüst 2012; Hurd 2006; Jung and Raudvere 2008; Minkenberg 2012) which illustrates the EU’s unease with issues of both political religion and Islam.
Religions and secularisms are ideas that represent values. The theoretical background of this article, which will be described in the next section, is therefore formed by the constructivist International Relations (IR) literature on the identity of states and international organizations. The review of the literature on religious and foreign policy differences between the EU and the US is then cast in presumptions about European and American interpretations of religion in order to later empirically assess and compare whether and how they constitute ingredients of the EU’s and the US’s international identities. Since identity is not directly observable, the analysis is based on a discursive approach, which will be explained in the subsequent section. The text basis for the quantitative and qualitative content-analysis is constituted by official EU and US documents which describe and govern the EU’s and the US’s relations with a number of selected African and Asian states, in which Christianity and Islam represent the largest religions and whose populations are comparatively religious but which differ in their religious composition and in the mobilization of religion for violence and exclusion. The last two sections present the empirical findings and discuss their implications for future research.

2. A transatlantic perspective on religion and secularism in foreign policy

The role of religion in foreign policies of states and supranational organizations is relatively unexplored. There are several ways through which religion can affect foreign policy, including through religious attitudes in public opinion, the influence of religious interest groups, and the personal religiosity of foreign policy decision-makers (Warner and Walker 2011). Another way to approach this question, which this article draws upon, is to regard religion as one aspect of the specific culture which shapes the identity of a state. “The religion

---

3 It is impossible to exhaustively define what religion actually is (Bruce; Harrison). Since the objective of this article is to explore how the EU and the US interpret issues of religion, it is not necessary to exogenously define the phenomenon beforehand.
embedded in a country’s national identity, which shaped its institutions, would be expected to shape how that country defines its foreign policy interests” (Warner and Walker 2011: 120). This, however, does not simply mean that the predominating religious faith (Christianity in the case of Europe and the US) determines the orientation of foreign policy. It rather means that ideas about how (particular) religions and politics should relate to each other affect their formulation. In the West, such as in the US and in Europe, these are also secular ideas, coming under varying forms, about the separation of religion and politics rather than the projection of religious values in the international arena (Hurd 2008). Such a view on the role of religion in foreign policy, thus, draws on the constructivist literature on identity in International Relations.

2.1 Identity in International Relations

In International Relations (IR), identity is defined as “the images of individuality and distinctiveness (‘self-hood’) held and projected by an actor and formed (and modified over time), through relations with significant ‘others’” (Jeppersen, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996: 59). The concept of identity actually stems from social psychology and applies to individuals. Many IR, foreign policy and EU scholars, however, have argued that “states – and organizations composed of states – also seek to project distinctive identities in the international arena” (Smith 2014: 14). Identity can also be understood as the foreign policy role conception of a state. It is therefore also referred to as “role identity” (Aggestam 2000), which affects how states define their foreign policy interests and how they act abroad (Wendt 1994). This, however, does not mean that these role conceptions are not domestically contested (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012).

Not only states, also “international institutions – and among them regional organizations – need to possess a distinct identity in order to obtain the necessary support and
legitimacy from their members, and to interact effectively and gain relevance in the regional and international arena” (Oelsner 2013: 116). Beyond distinguishing the organization from others, its identity-constituting features also represent the source of internal institutional cohesion. “They are, in a sense, those central and enduring attributes that make states want to be and stay members of that institution rather than another one, however similar it may be” (Oelsner 2013: 119).

Identities are always constructed in relation to an ‘other’. Since foreign policy is about the interaction with ‘other’ states and organizations, it is a medium for the expression of identity (Katzenstein 1996; Wendt 1999). At the same time, it is a discursive practice through which identity is constructed (Ashley 1987; Aydin-Düzgit 2012). The analysis of foreign policy documents, therefore, allows an empirical assessment of the ideas on religion and secularism projected and held by an international actor.

2.2 Varieties of secularism on both sides of the Atlantic

In the sociological debate about secularization in Europe and America, the US for a long time was regarded as the exception to the norm that with modernization the social importance of religion would decrease worldwide. This notion became challenged when the long-standing sociological paradigm of the secularization theory and, thus, the belief in a worldwide secularization process was swept away by empirical evidence. Scholars started to consider secularized – and still secularizing – Europe to be the actual exception from a continuously religious world (Davie 2002). Regardless of whether American or European exceptionalism, this debate implies a major difference between the US and Europe with respect to religion.

The contrasting between Europe and the US usually starts with the observation that, despite similar levels of modernization, individual religiosity in – at least Western – Europe has decreased while in the US it has persisted. Americans tend to be more religious than most
Europeans, even though there are geographical (Northeast and West coast) and social pockets (academia, the media, and the law) in American society which are similarly secularized, and even though just recently the share of the religiously unaffiliated in the US has started to rise (Pew). In Europe, there are countries whose populations are similarly religious as those of the US, such as Poland, Romania and Ireland (Pickel). Overall, however, there are more people in the US who believe in God, who consider themselves to be religious, and who attend religious services and pray more frequently than in Europe (Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008; Norris and Inglehart 2011: 83ff). This undeniable difference in religious vitality on both sides of the Atlantic is the consequence of an interplay of varying institutional, historical, and cultural forces, including the stricter separation of religion and the state in the US than in most countries in Europe (with a few exceptions such as France) and the stronger pluralist competition between denominations in the US, making them more efficient than in Europe, where the churches, whether established or not, still hold a relative monopoly (Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008; Pfaff 2008). The greater socio-economic security in Europe compared with the US, rendering religion less important for coping with grievances, provides another – rather functional – explanation (Norris and Inglehart 2011).

One could, consequently, assume that religion is more prominent in US than in EU foreign policy. Mass attitudes and opinion, as well as interest groups, are among the main mechanisms through which religious values and ideas are transmitted and channeled into foreign policies (Warner and Walker 2011). If there are more people in a democratic society for whom religion is important, it is likely that policy-makers are also more responsive to these views of a large part of their constituencies. It is furthermore likely that there are also more policy-makers who themselves are religious and might, therefore, be more prone to act

---

4 See also the data of the World Values Surveys (available at [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)).
accordingly. More religious vitality might also mean that there are more religious interest groups advocating their values.

Another difference sometimes stated refers to distinct types of secularism in Europe and the US. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2008), for instance, on the basis of the analysis of academic and public discourses, identifies two trajectories of secularism in both Europe and the US. On the one hand, a laicist tradition, which is based on a separationist narrative in which religion is expelled from politics. “With its origin in the French term laïcité, the objective of laicism is to create a neutral public space in which religious beliefs, practices, and institutions have lost their political significance, fallen below the threshold of political contestation, or been pushed into the private sphere” (Hurd 2008: 5). The second tradition rests on a more accommodationist narrative with Christianity and Judaism as unique bases of secular democracy. “For in this second trajectory of secularism, Euro-American secular public life is securely grounded in a larger Christian, and later Judeo-Christian, civilization” (Hurd 2008: 6). She argues that, even though both understandings exist on both sides of the Atlantic, the EU tends more towards the laicist trajectory, the US more towards the Judeo-Christian one (Hurd 2007).  

The differing understandings of secularism in Europe and the US, according to some observers, have political implications. One major consequence often stressed is that the public expression of religiosity in the US is more protected than in many parts of Europe, where controversies about religious practices and symbols (Muslim and Christian) have more often been solved in favor of a secular ejection of religion from official public spheres, including courts, state schools, and often also private work places (Pew Research Center 2012). “Regardless of the church-state model, European secularization has imposed certain rules of

---

5 Similar distinctions and attributions are made by Berger, Davie and Fokas (2008: 126) who distinguish between a “hard” and a “soft” version of separation, and by Wilfred McClay (2007) who distinguishes between a “positive” and a “negative” understanding of secularism.
the game on religious believers. These rules add up to a straightforward bargain: ‘You are completely free to live by your religion in private, but keep it out of the public sphere’” (Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008: 130). As a consequence, religion in the US is often “seen as a resource (the means by which to resolve secular as well as religious dilemmas); in Europe, it is part of the problem – the more so, whether fairly or not, with reference to Islam” (Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008: 126). One could therefore expect that religion is more often perceived as a resource in US foreign policy and as a problem in EU foreign policy, particularly if Islam is concerned. On the other hand, even though many agree that Islam is constructed as the ‘other’ of both Europe and the US (Bettiza 2013; Challand 2009; Diez 2004; Hurd 2008; Smith 2009), there are some, like Hurd (2007), who suggest that it actually is the US which is more critical towards Islam than Europeans. In her view, “(f)or laicists, Muslim-majority societies can be ‘modernized’ if, like Turkey, they follow in the footsteps of their secular Western role models and enforce the exclusion of religion from politics” (Hurd 2007: 357). For many Judeo-Christian secularists, by contrast, Islam would be incompatible with democracy and any separation between religion and politics. From this presumption the expectation would follow that the US is more critical towards Islam and Muslims outside of its borders and more protective towards Christians (and Jews) than the EU.

Before turning to foreign policy differences, two problems of much of the transatlantic literature on religion on both sides of the Atlantic have to be emphasized: For one, many representations of the European model use the French concept of laïcité as a proxy in order to construct a convincing contrast to the American model, thus glossing over the varieties of secularism that exist within Europe. They, furthermore, often underplay that ideas on religion and politics, and secular identities, are contested. I argue, by contrast, that they are outcomes of internal disputes and political struggles and therefore a consequence of domestic politics.

---

6 Smith (2009) speaks of the foreign policy “triangle” of the EU, the US and the Islamic world.
On the first point: Europe is culturally and religiously diverse. Each member state of the EU has its specific church-state regime and its own way of dealing with religion (Fox 2008: chapters 5 and 6). Consequently, it is not possible to generalize from one member state, e.g. France, on the EU as an international organization, which has found its own secular arrangements. Jean-Paul Willaime (2009), accordingly, has pointed out that the laicist model of the EU should not be conflated with the French practice of this political concept. He instead calls the EU model a “laïcité of recognition” (Willaime 2009: 31). It is true that the EU followed a strictly secularist model up to the mid-1970s until when religion was completely absent from the EU’s polity and policies. The Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997 was the first basic document of the EU which mentioned religion (once, in the context of banning discrimination of any type). Since then a growing body of substantive norms on religion followed. The Treaty of Lisbon (in effect since 2009) now represents the foundational and functional legal instruments of the Union regarding religion (Challand 2009; Doe 2009). Since then, even though it still also uses separationist language, the EU primarily shares characteristics of a cooperationist model of church-state relations which, on the basis of separation between political and religious systems, recognizes the role of religion in the public sphere (Doe 2009: 157; Willaime 2009).

Secondly, the public role of religion in European and American identity has been contested. Much of the debate on European identity, for example, implies a pivotal role of religion in concepts of the EU (Byrnes and Katzenstein 2006), even though this is a rather recent narrative that emerged after the Cold War (Challand 2009). There exist different public opinions in Europe about what the EU actually is, whether, for instance, it is a modern secular and political community of liberal values or whether it is a cultural community rooted in Christianity (Risse 2010). These contending views became particularly visible in the debate about an EU constitution in 2004, in which one controversial point was the question of
whether to include an explicit reference to the EU’s Christian heritage or even to God into the preamble (Schlesinger and Foret 2006). In the end, the more secular voices prevailed, reaching a “secular compromise” (Willaime 2009: 31), which, by avoiding the term Christian(ity), allows also non-Christian religions to be taken into account. It furthermore underscores the role played by secular cultural and humanist ideas and movements.7

Similarly in the US, there have been controversies about the question of whether America is a ‘Christian nation’, with Islam as its main internal ‘other’, or whether it is a ‘nation of believers’ which is neutral towards different religious faiths, with atheists as its main internal ‘other’ (Barb 2011; Williams 2013).8 A popular narrative sees America as the ‘Chosen Nation’, i.e. chosen by God, rendering “American exceptionalism (…) a normative concept, in which politicians must assert that the United States is the greatest nation on earth, now and in history” (Williams 2013: 251-2). Opposing conceptions to this “religious nationalism” emphasize a civil religion which balances religion and politics and which is more inclusive than religious nationalism but, according to the view of this group, also a better basis for solidarity than, what a third group advocates, liberal secularism (Gorski 2011). These conflicting conceptions of American identity have – often quite fiercely – been negotiated in debates about immigration, abortion and same-sex marriage, Obama’s presidential candidacy, as well as the meaning of the First Amendment of the US Constitution (Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008; Hunter 1991; McClay 2007; Williams 2013).

These remarks complicate the presumptions on religion in EU and US foreign policy made so far. The EU, if we do not take the French concept of laïcité but recognition as a basis

---

7 The constitution was never adopted due to its rejection in 2005 by the French and Dutch national referenda. Much of its content, though, found its way into the Treaty of Lisbon (in effect since 2009), which now draws “inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law”.

8 Atheists are historically perceived as outsiders both to the ‘Christian’ society as well as the society of ‘believers’. Until today, they constitute the only (ir)religious group which regularly gathers a majority of negative opinions in surveys, i.e. even more than Muslims (Barb 2011).
of its secular identity, might be more appreciative of religion also outside of its borders than expected. The result could be more convergence between EU and US foreign policy in this regard than expected by much of the literature. An additional question to assess is whether religion has gained in relevance in EU foreign policy since the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 was adopted.

The contested nature of secular identities, moreover, might lead to a situation in which the relevance and ideas on religion and politics differ according to political administration. One could, for example, expect that religion and a pro-Christian and anti-Muslim bias was more prominent under the Bush Jr. administration than the Obama administration.

2.3 Foreign policy differences between the EU and the US

Another oft-cited transatlantic gap concerns the nature of foreign policy. Americans, for example, are more inclined than most Western Europeans to say that it is sometimes necessary to use military force to maintain order in the world, yet they are less inclined than Western Europeans, with the exception of the French, “to help other nations” (Pew Research Center 2011). This difference is also reflected in foreign policy objectives on both sides of the Atlantic. An extensive literature on the EU’s international role conceptions has ascertained the inclination of EU foreign policy towards civilian/non-violent measures and the promotion of human rights and the rule of law, development and environmental protection (Aggestam 2008; Bretherton and Vogler 2006; Duchêne 1972; Kirste and Maull 1996; Manners 2002; Smith 2014: 204-205). The US regularly serves as a – mostly negative – point of reference in these debates on EU identity (Bretherton and Vogler 2006). Respective differences between EU and US foreign policies have been explained by power differentials (Kagan), institutional differences (Fabbrini and Sicurelli 2008) and cultural divergence (Hampton 2013).
It is possible that these differences also affect the interpretation of religion in EU and US foreign policies. One could expect that religion is primarily represented as a security issue in US foreign policy, as a human rights and development issue in EU foreign policy. The latter assumption is further supported by Henrik Larsen’s (2014) analysis of the debates on defamation of religion and freedom of religion in the UN Human Rights Council. He argues that the EU in this multilateral context primarily emphasizes individual freedom of thought, conscience and belief and discrimination based on religious beliefs, which it sees as a human rights violation not confined to any one religion or belief. He explains these emphases with the EU’s Western secularist discourse in which “(…) the influence of religion at the political level is kept in check by the importance placed on individual human rights” (Larsen 2014: 427). According to him, human rights have assumed the status of the ‘sacred’ in the EU. Religions are only welcomed into the political sphere if they adopt the language of human rights (and interfaith dialogue).

To sum up, the following presumptions will be empirically assessed in order to draw conclusions on the EU’s and the US’s secular identities:

(1) Religion is more prominent in US than in EU foreign policies.

(2) The EU regards political and public religion more as a problem than the US. The US, by contrast, more often perceives religion as a resource.

(3) The EU is more critical towards Islam and Muslims than the US; or alternatively, the US is more protective of Christian groups and more critical towards Islam than the EU.

(4) The EU frames issues of religion primarily as human rights issue, whereas the US favors their interpretation in the context of security.

(5) Relevance and appreciation of religion in EU foreign policy has increased since the Treaty of Lisbon.
(6) Religion was more relevant and appreciated, and Islam was more strongly criticized during the Bush Jr. than the Obama administration.

3. Methodology

Identity and its attributes are not directly observable, but “(...) their effects can be seen in an institution’s unique pattern of binding commitments, organizational choices, and identity-revealing discourse” (Oelsner 2013: 119). The analysis therefore is based on a discursive approach in order to assess whether “(t)he accumulation of EU decisions and activities distinguishes the EU (…) from other international actors” (Smith 2014: 14), notably the US. Organizations and states are formed and maintained by individuals representing varying factions of society. At different points in time they negotiate and take decisions, which materialize in official written documents and oral declarations. These sorts of text therefore constitute the main source for the empirical analysis below.

In order to limit the amount of documents to be analyzed and to make the text corpus comparable, I focus on documents which were produced in the relationship of the EU and the US with three Sub-Saharan African states: Nigeria, Tanzania, and the Central African Republic (CAR). (In a later stage of the project, I intend to also include documents on Indonesia, the Philippines, and Lebanon.) The three states were selected for several reasons: The two largest religions are Islam and Christianity, with varying compositions, and they differ in the degrees to which religion is mobilized for violence (table 1).
Table 1  Religious composition and religious mobilization in the country cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nigeria</th>
<th>Tanzania</th>
<th>CAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious composition</td>
<td>50% Muslims 40% Christians</td>
<td>Mainland: 35% Muslims 30% Christians Zanzibar: more than 99% Muslims</td>
<td>50% Christians 15% Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social hostilities involving religion *</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>moderate (high in 2013, otherwise low-mod.)</td>
<td>moderate (high since 2013)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Seven-year averages of the Pew Social Hostilities Index (0-3.3: low; 3.4-6.6: moderate, 6.7-10.0: high).


These cases, on the one hand, allow an assessment of whether the EU and the US deal differently with issues of religion depending on the religious majority and whether differing levels of religious mobilization have an impact on how they interpret religion in these contexts. On the other hand, it avoids biased findings which would emanate, for example, from the analysis exclusively of countries in which (a particular) religion is highly politicized.

I retrieved the material analyzed here from websites of the EU (EUR-Lex, Council of the European Union, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the European Commission’s press database and site on international development and cooperation, as well as the European Parliament), and the US (websites of the White House, the Department of State and the US Congress). I first selected all documents between 2001 and 2014 with one of the three country names in the title, or which dealt exclusively with one of these countries. I only included documents representing an institutional position to avoid a distortion due to individual opinions.9 The time frame allows the comparisons between the Bush Jr. (2001-2008) and the Obama administration (2009-2016, cut-off date: 31 Dec 2014),

9 Due to this criterion, parliamentary questions, as well as their responses, were excluded. Documents simply announcing upcoming events, visits and press availabilities were not included, documents reporting on these were. Statements by EU Delegations, US Embassies, the US Mission to the UN, and executive agencies such as USAid, were only included if posted on the mentioned websites of EU and US institutions. Their websites were excluded for practical reasons because they did not provide access to older, archived documents.
and the time before and after the Treaty of Lisbon came into force in 2009. In total, these were 577 documents (EU: 317, US: 260).

One main distinction of the US is that the Department of State has a comprehensive reporting system, including reports on investment climate, terrorism, trafficking in persons, human rights and democracy, and also international religious freedom. The obligation to annually report on the situation of religious freedom in the world was introduced by the US Congress, which in 1998 adopted the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), making annual reporting to Congress mandatory for the US Department of State. Religious freedom, therefore, has become an important factor in US Foreign Policy. Compared to the EU, which does not have such a wide reporting system, one could always argue that religion is more relevant in US than in EU Foreign Policy. However, many observers argue that international religious freedom issues have been largely shunted off to the relatively small and marginalized Office of International Religious Freedom within the State Department, but have not considerably impacted the rest of the foreign policy activities of the US (Farr; Hertzke).

As one insider pointed out to me at a workshop in Washington, DC, US Congress imposed this system on the Department of State and it would be questionable whether the latter would otherwise put any resources into this. The EU, moreover, with the introduction of the Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief (Council of the European Union 2013) in 2013 also started to oblige its Delegations to regularly report on issues of freedom of religion or belief. These reports are not public, though. Nevertheless, the EU does not have a wide reporting system as the US. It only publishes – shorter – annual reports on human rights and democracy in the world since 2009. That is why I excluded all annual reports, both by the US and the EU, from the analysis to avoid a distortion of the comparison. The question rather is whether the – reported – awareness of religious issues in

---

10 A meaningful comparison pre- and post-9/11 was unfortunately not possible due to the scarceness of accessible US documents from previous administrations.
the world find expression also in official documents which describe and govern the EU’s and the US’s relations with the three countries.

Table 2  Operationalization of the hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Operationalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Religion is more prominent in US than in EU foreign policies</td>
<td>Share of documents, which included references to religion, calculated against the total number of documents on each country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) The EU regards political and public religion more as a problem than the US. The US, by contrast, more often perceives religion as a resource.</td>
<td>Share of documents which contained more ‘negative’ than ‘positive’, as well as more ‘positive’ than ‘negative’, references to religion; ratio of total number of ‘negative’ to ‘positive’ references to religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) The EU is more critical towards Islam and Muslims than the US (or vice versa).</td>
<td>Number of ‘negative’ (e.g. perpetrators) and ‘positive’ (e.g. victims) references to Islam/ Muslims and Christianity/ Christians in relation to number of documents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) The EU frames issues of religion primarily as human rights issue, whereas the US favors their interpretation in the context of security.</td>
<td>Ranking of issues according to the number of appearances in the documents (only once per document, i.e. if there were several references to human rights in a document, this counted as one appearance).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Relevance and appreciation of religion in EU foreign policy has increased since the Treaty of Lisbon.</td>
<td>As on hypotheses 1 and 2, separate by time periods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Religion was more relevant and appreciated, and Islam was more strongly criticized during the Bush Jr. than the Obama administration.</td>
<td>As on hypotheses 1-3, separate by time periods.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After collecting the documents on the three countries, I, in a next step, identified those documents referring to issues of religion (based on a list of 26 key words) for further analysis. In a first quantitative step, the share of documents including references to religion was calculated in order to obtain information on the relevance of religion in EU and US foreign policy, separate by institution and time period (in total, 139 documents). The qualitative content-analysis of these remaining documents (also always separate by institution and time period) focused on the question of whether religion is considered as contributing to a problem or as a resource for solving problems, and on the identification of the ways in which the texts
refer to different faiths and their affiliates, as well as of the contexts, in which religion is referred to (broadly differentiated between the fields of security, human rights, development, and others, e.g. democratization) (on the operationalization see table 2).

4. Empirical findings

This section deals with the hypotheses one by one. The results demonstrate that there are only a few clear differences between how the EU and the US interpret religion in their foreign policies.

4.1 The transatlantic comparison

Regarding the relevance of religion in foreign policy, the figures in table 3 demonstrate that it is relatively similar in EU and US Foreign Policy. Differences, though, vary according to country. Whereas in the case of Tanzania, the proportion of documents containing references to religion is almost the same, religion is more prominent in EU than in US documents on Nigeria, and vice versa in the case of the Central African Republic (CAR). The hypothesis that religion is more prominent in US than EU foreign policy, therefore, cannot be confirmed. Rather than by religious differences, relevance seems to be mediated by other factors in the EU and US relationships to the target states.

Table 3, moreover, illustrates that in the EU, it is the European Parliament which is particularly interested in issues of religion. In the US, this is only the case in Nigeria, whereas in Tanzania and CAR, the White House as well as local (US Embassy in Tanzania) and international (US Mission to the UN on CAR) are more interested in these issues than the other institutions.
The second hypothesis assumes that the EU more often tends to perceive religion as a problem, whereas in US foreign policy, it is also more often than in the EU seen as a resource for solving problems. This is the only hypothesis that is clearly confirmed by the results for all three country cases (table 4). In the EU, particularly the European Parliament and the European Commission tend to be negative about religion, at least in contexts of the violent politicization of religion (Nigeria, CAR). The Council and the High Representatives, by contrast, seek to be more balanced in their representation of religion. In the US, no such pattern is discernible. The figures, moreover, illustrate that also the EU does certainly not perceive religion only as a problem. This becomes particularly clear in the case of Tanzania where the share of EU documents which contain more ‘positive’ (resource) than ‘negative’ (problem) references to religion is even higher than the share of such documents by the US. Differences between the country cases clearly reflect the varying degrees of politicization of religion, which is particularly high in Nigeria and, therefore, is seen as more problematic by both the EU and the US than in Tanzania, where there is hardly any mobilization of religion for violence.

---

Table 3  Share of documents with references to religion (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>European Union</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council of the EU</td>
<td>43.48</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Representative</td>
<td>28.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Commission</td>
<td>30.56</td>
<td>7.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Parliament</td>
<td>86.67</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delegation</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political and Security Committee</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court of Justice</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In total</td>
<td>40.38</td>
<td>9.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Own calculations based on official documents from the websites of the European Union and the United States.
### Table 4  Framing of religion as problem or resource

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nigeria</th>
<th>Tanzania</th>
<th>CAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem*</td>
<td>66.67</td>
<td>38.71</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource*</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>35.48</td>
<td>83.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral*</td>
<td>19.05</td>
<td>25.81</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(problem/resource)</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * Share of documents (in %) which more often frame religion as problem and as resource, respectively, or which include no or the same number of framing references. ** The higher the figure, the more framing as problem; the value 0.00 means religion is framed exclusively as resource.

Both, the EU and the US, perceive religion as problem primarily in the context of violence and tensions, and in the case of Nigeria since the end of the 2000s additionally in the context of terrorism. The EU in Nigeria, furthermore, often stresses religion, primarily radical Islam and Sharia law, as a problem for human rights, particularly in the context of harsh punishments, such as the death penalty and corporal punishments, as well as for the rights of women and girls.

As a resource, both stress primarily the role and potential of religious leaders and groups in promoting interreligious dialogue and cooperation, development, peace and reconciliation, as well as democratization. They furthermore emphasize religious diversity as a particular strength for religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence of different religions.

Regarding the images that the EU and the US project of different denominations, the results suggest that the US is a bit less biased against Islam than the EU, but a bit more protective towards Christianity. Overall, however, the differences are relatively small (table 5).
Table 5  Attitudes towards Islam and Christianity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nigeria</th>
<th></th>
<th>Tanzania</th>
<th></th>
<th>CAR</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam positive</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam negative</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity positive</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity negative</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Average number of negative and positive references to Islam/Muslims and Christianity/Christians, respectively, per document.

In the case of Nigeria, legislatures (EP and Congress) are clearly more critical of Islam (on average, 4.46 and 2.33 negative references, respectively) and more protective of Christians (on average, 1.23 and 1.33 positive references, respectively) than the other institutions. This pattern, however, does not repeat itself in the other two countries. The differences between the countries, furthermore, reflect again the differing situations with regards to religious faiths, with the violent Islamic organization Boko Haram in Nigeria, where both EU and US documents contain more critical references to Islam than documents on CAR, where Muslims are a minority and were persecuted by Christians during the recent escalation of the conflict.

Regarding the contexts in which the EU and the US primarily interpret religion, the differences again are not as clear as expected in the literature on foreign policy differences. Official documents on Nigeria confirm the expected difference that the EU primarily interprets religion as an issue of human rights (and only secondarily as an issue of security), whereas the US understands religion almost exclusively as a security issue. On CAR, however, official documents of both the EU and the US represent religion almost exclusively as an issue of security, which certainly is a consequence of the recent escalation of the violent conflict. On Tanzania, where not such a violent mobilization of religion exists, both the EU and the US deal with religion primarily in the context of development. Only then there is more emphasis on human rights by the EU than the US. When including the reporting
systems, however, the proportion also of US documents addressing religion also as a human rights issue increases due to the human rights and the international religious freedom reports. However, these reports also interpret religion as a security issue and the reports on, for example, terrorism again add to the security perspective so that, despite some convergence, the difference, that the US tends to interpret religion primarily in the context of security and the EU in the context of human rights, remains. That the reports’ human rights issues are only marginally presented in the analyzed US documents, moreover, demonstrates the mentioned compartmentalization of US foreign policy and the marginalization of these issues in actual foreign policy behavior.

4.2 Intra-organizational comparison

The literature on religion in the EU assumes that the relevance and appreciation of religion has increased since the Treaty of Lisbon (hypothesis 5).

### Table 6 Temporal changes in relevance and appreciation in EU External Relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nigeria 2001-08</th>
<th>Nigeria 2009-14</th>
<th>Tanzania 2001-08</th>
<th>Tanzania 2009-14</th>
<th>CAR 2001-08</th>
<th>CAR 2009-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance*</td>
<td>47.22</td>
<td>36.76</td>
<td>10.81</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>24.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem**</td>
<td>76.47</td>
<td>60.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>55.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource**</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>66.67</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>25.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio***</td>
<td>7.86</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * Share of documents with references to religion in relation to total number of documents; ** share of documents which more often frame religion as problem and as resource, respectively; *** the higher the figure, the more framing as problem; the value 0.00 means religion is framed exclusively as resource.

Regarding relevance, this only holds true in the case of CAR due to the recent escalation of sectarian tensions. Otherwise, the prominence has decreased since 2009 (table 6). Increased appreciation can only be detected in EU documents on Nigeria, the contrary can be seen in the
documents on Tanzania, which is a consequence of recent religious tensions in the context of attacks on religious leaders (e.g. Delegation of the European Union to the United Republic of Tanzania 2013).

The sixth hypothesis on the US assumes that religion was more relevant and appreciated and Islam more strongly criticized during the Bush Jr. than the Obama administration. Overall, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed due to variation between the countries: As table 7 demonstrates, relevance only decreased in the case of Tanzania, but not of Nigeria and CAR; appreciation only decreased in the case of CAR, but not for Nigeria and Tanzania; and negative views on Islam only decreased in the case of Nigeria, but stayed the same in Tanzania and slightly increased in the case of CAR. Here again domestic differences in the target countries explain differences better than religious differences between the Bush Jr. and the Obama administration. Intensifying sectarian violence, for instance, facilitates an increase in the prominence of religion in foreign policy (Nigeria, CAR). Yet, under the Bush Jr. administration, due to Bush’s proximity to the Religious Right, conservative values were emphasized in foreign policy, such as “abstinence until marriage” education to prevent HIV/Aids (Saunders 2004). This also explains the decreasing relevance of religion in US-Tanzania relations since Tanzania was an important part in the “President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief” (PEPFAR), in which under Bush Jr. religious organizations functioned as important partners in promoting abstinence before and faithfulness in marriage. Under Obama, by contrast, religion itself has gained in importance as a policy issue. This is not only suggested by the evidence presented here but also by his recent moves to establish a second office on religion in the Department of State (on Religion and Global Affairs), to appoint a Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs, and to devise a US Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement.11

11 [http://www.state.gov/s/rga/strategy/] (last access: 02.03.15)
### Table 7  Temporal changes in relevance, appreciation and views on Islam in US foreign policy documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nigeria 2001-08</th>
<th>Tanzania 2001-08</th>
<th>Nigeria 2009-14</th>
<th>Tanzania 2009-14</th>
<th>CAR 2001-08</th>
<th>CAR 2009-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance*</td>
<td>19.35</td>
<td>23.33</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>36.07</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>36.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem**</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>27.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource**</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>57.14</td>
<td>66.67</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio***</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam negative****</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * Share of documents with references to religion in relation to total number of documents; ** share of documents which more often frame religion as problem and as resource, respectively; *** the higher the figure, the more framing as problem; the value 0.00 means religion is framed exclusively as resource; **** average number of negative references on Islam/Muslims per document.

### 5. Conclusions

The analysis in this paper suggests that the secular identities of the EU and the US are built on different premises. In US foreign policy, religion, or more precisely, religious freedom, due to the reporting mechanism, is more prominent than in EU foreign policy. However, this particular policy issue is quite marginalized in the Department of State. If excluded from the analysis, issues of religion are similarly relevant in EU and US foreign policy, with varying degrees, i.e. sometimes religion is more prominent in EU than in US foreign policy (Nigeria), sometimes vice versa (CAR).

The main difference, however, is that also in their foreign relations the EU tends to define religion as a problem, the US much more than the EU also as a resource for solving problems. Regarding contexts, the results demonstrate that the EU tends to frame religion both as a security issue and as a human rights issue, whereas in the US, issues of religion tend to be securitized, reflecting general differences in EU and US foreign policy. In combination, one could posit that the EU tends to interpret religion as a problem for human rights and security. The US, by contrast, tends to interpret religion both as a problem and resource in the
context of security. However, here again there is variation between the countries. The EU too securitizes religion in contexts where there is a sudden escalation of violent conflict in which the EU and its member states interfere (CAR). In countries, in which there is hardly any religious mobilization for violence, such as Tanzania, development for both, the EU and the US, occupy center stage, and religion is also less perceived as a problem.

Views on different faiths do not differ considerably, and changes over time are also not consistent.

Still, the analysis also demonstrates that the EU and the US do not project their secular identities in a consistent way. The projection often differs between target states. The analysis here therefore suggests that the differences in how the EU and the US relate to issues of religion also depend on domestic dynamics in the target states, such as the degree of violent politicization of religion, and the composition of different faiths. Whether and how these and other factors precisely affect how the EU and the US deal with issues of religion in their foreign relations is a topic for further research.

References


Aydin-Düzgit, Senem (2012), Constructions of European Identity: Debates and Discourses on Turkey and the EU, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.


Bruce, Steve (2002),


Davie, Grace (2002), …


Diez, Thomas (2005), Constructing the self and changing the others: Reconsidering ‘Normative Power Europe’. In: Millennium, 33:3, 613-636.


Duchêne 1972...


Kirste and Maull 1996…


Smith, Karen E. (2014),


Tocci, Nathalie / Manners, Ian (2008), Comparing Normativity in Foreign Policy: China, India, the EU, the US and Russia. In: Tocci, Nathalie (ed.), Who is a Normative Foreign Policy Actor? The European Union and its Global Partners, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, 300-329.


White, Brian (2001), Understanding European Foreign Policy, Hampshire, New York: Palgrave.
