The Two Worlds of Morality Politics

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Introduction

Besides topics like welfare state reforms, deteriorating environmental conditions or the current financial crisis, there is an ever-growing interest in a set of atypical issues known as “morality issues” that often get on political agendas across post-industrial countries. Issues such as same-sex marriages, euthanasia, stem cells research, reproductive technologies, and - in Southern European countries - abortion are increasingly attracting political attention.

Scholarly interest in such morality issues has existed in a US-context for some time (e.g. Meier 1994; Mooney 2001; Tatalovich & Daynes 1998), whereas a comparative literature has only been emerging during the past few years with a strong focus on explaining variation in policy choices on such issues (e.g. Monpetit et al. 2007; Fink 2008; Green-Pedersen 2007; Schiffino et al. 2009; Engeli 2009; Banchoff 2005; Bleikle et al. 2004; Smith and Tatalovich 2003). Part of what characterizes this growing comparative literature is a struggle about how to approach morality issues theoretically. This has led to a growing focus on the specific nature of morality issues and especially on the role of religion in shaping the politics around them (Fink 2008, 2009; Green-Pedersen 2007; Minkenberg 2002; Schiffino et al. 2009). However, the literature is still struggling with how to understand the role of religion, religious actors and religious arguments in shaping the politics of morality issues. Also, there is a broader literature that investigates the policy implications of religion and politics, but it has mainly been interested in the welfare state and more or less ignored morality issues (cf. van Kersbergen and Manow 2009).

The aim of this paper is thus to outline a comparative theory of the politics of morality issues focused on how it is shaped by religion. The politics of morality issues refers to the conflict definitions around these issues, i.e. questions like how do actors position themselves on value-loaded issues, how religious actors mobilized on moral issues, how salient are moral issues on nowadays political agendas? The reason for focusing on the politics of morality issues is a double one. First, it offers an understanding of why morality issues sometimes, but far from always, become heavily politicized, for example if they become central topics in electoral campaigns or in the formation of government coalitions. Second, it offers a theoretical perspective on the specific character of the policy process around morality issues and how the politics of morality issues can help to explain variation in policy outputs. Are countries with a religious influence in politics more likely to develop restrictive policies on morality issues?

To develop a theory of comparative differences in the politics of morality issues, the paper draws on two literatures: One is agenda-setting theory that originates in Schattschneider’s
(1960) idea of conflict expansion later developed into policy agenda-setting theory (Baumgartner & Jones 1993). This literature has highlighted the importance of conflict definitions and offers the theoretical tools for studying it. The other literature is the existing literature on religion and politics in Western Europe (van Kesbergen & Manow 2009). Despite its almost complete ignorance of morality issues (for an exception see Minkenberg 2003), this literature offers substantial insights into how religion affects politics. At the same time, this paper also offers a contribution to this general literature on religion and politics in Western Europe. Studying morality issues is a central way to understand when and how religion and secularization affects contemporary Western European politics.

Based on these two literatures, the paper argues that morality politics can be understood by comparing specific countries with two opposing ideal types of morality politics, here described as the two “worlds” of morality politics. The key factor determining to which world different countries belong is party political, namely the presence of a conflict between secular and confessional parties.

One “world”, which we name the religious world, is characterized by a presence of a conflict between secular and religious/confessional parties - or parties with a confessional appeal – in their political system. The conflict between religious and secular forces shapes morality politics and provides actors with a clear divide to position themselves for or against. In addition, the conflict will most likely increase the political salience of morality issues, which is essential because morality issues are traditionally seen as being highly salient (Mooney 2001). In the religious world, morality issues are likely to become test cases for the broader struggle over the role of religion in society and the political system. In the other “world”, which we term the secular world, there is no significant conflict between religious and secular actors in the political system and religious based actors are more or less absent from the party system. In these countries, morality issues fall outside of the essential conflict structure and thus defined as ethical or non-political. In contrast with the conventional view of morality politics, these are usually display low salience in the secular world and will often provoke free votes in parliament if they ever reach the agenda.

The paper proceeds in five steps. First, it offers a definition of morality issues. Second it offers a review of the existing literature on morality issues. Third, the paper presents the theoretical tools of the paper, namely policy-agenda-setting theory and studies of partisan conflicts in West European party systems. Fourth, the paper outlines “the two worlds of morality politics”
and explains the historical pathways that lead different parties or countries to end up in one of these worlds. Fifth, the paper presents the empirical research strategy of the further work.

**What are morality issues?**

At first sight, issues like abortion, stem-cells research and same-sex marriages do not seem to constitute a coherent cluster of political issues and they do not fit smoothly in classic categorizations. What is the link between political debates on euthanasia with those on same-sex marriages? How can the liberalization of abortion be related to stem cells research? The answer lies not so much in the substance of what social actions the issues concern, but rather in their similar structure with respect to politics. Morality issues differ quite substantially from classic policy conflicts and share a set of common characteristics to which political science has, so far, not been paying enough attention. Going beyond economic concerns, morality issues address fundamental values regarding life, death and the traditional construction of the nuclear family (Banchoff, 2005; Mooney, 2001; Tatalovich and Daynes, 1998; Mooney and Lee, 1995). Morality issues thus question ultimate principles of societal organization: Does one have the right to choose one’s own time of death? Should same-sex couples be entitled to the same rights and duties as opposite-sex couples are? Should they raise children? Should society protect the beginning of life at all cost or should it attribute greater reproductive autonomy to women? Will human embryonic stem cells violate the sanctity of life even if it leads to new opportunities for medical treatment?

One could raise the question whether the fact that morality issues address fundamental moral values and first principles is sufficient to make them so fundamentally distinct from classic political issues? The short answer is: yes, it does make a great difference, simply because morality issues imply a re-distribution of societal and religious values which are often indivisible, i.e. they cannot be proven true or false with reference to new facts. If a person considers abortion to be murder, he or she will be very unlikely to support the reproductive autonomy of women or any compromise in between. If one believes that only God can take life, it is very unlikely that one will accept the principle of euthanasia. As Mooney (1999: 675) emphasizes “moral policies are not less than the legal sanction of what is right and wrong”. Morality policies legitimate a particular set of ultimate values and by doing so they invalidate other sets of competing values.

Precisely because morality issues fundamental moral values of right and wrong, they are intimately linked to religion and religious arguments or values in particular. Religious values are precisely about what separates right from wrong and thus about the fundamental values of society.
As such, they are of natural importance to political actors with a religious or confessional base who may also use them to set the scene for dramatic political conflicts that are able reach a much broader audience in public opinion or interest groups than the religious denominations themselves. However, it is important to stress that these defining characteristics of morality do not predetermine the political conflicts around them. It is exactly the purpose of this paper to explore the comparative variation in political conflicts that emerge around morality issues. The characteristics that define morality issues and make them distinct from other political issues also imply a certain spectrum of likely political conflicts, but is does not predetermine these conflicts nor the specific policy outputs they lead to. For example, whether or not a broad audience among the public take an interest in morality issues is a matter of conflict definition, but not a predetermined outcome of morality politics.

Which issues should then be counted as morality issues and which should not? The literature provides a long list of possible morality issues (Studlar 2001). Based on the definition above, whether or not an issue becomes a morality issue is basically a matter of conflict definition, which can change substantially over time. Being defined as a morality issue is more likely for certain issues than others, however, because the conflicts that emerge around for instance abortion or euthanasia are easy to connect to fundamental moral values such as the sanctity of life. Other issues like smoking, prostitution or animal rights can be considered borderline cases. They do not touch necessarily concern the ultimate values of human life or death, but they do touch upon questions like the individual’s right to self-determination (smoking and prostitution) or how to treat animals. Thus, even though smoking may be seen as a health issue and prostitution as a social rather than moral problem, they both also involve aspects that can be articulated as a morality issue for some of the involved parties, which is then likely to shape the political conflicts surrounding the issues.

The study of morality politics

The existing literature on morality issues is more or less split between a literature that is primarily oriented towards the US context and a comparative oriented literature focused on explaining cross-national differences in policy choices.

The literature on morality politics in the US is of course strongly colored by how the political conflicts over morality issues play out in an American context: Two aspects stand out: First, the US literature has highlighted the role of elite or party conflict for the emergence of a
“cultural” conflict lines among the US electorate centered around attitudes towards morality issues like abortion or same-sex marriages (Layman & Carsey 2002). Second, the US literature has explored the consequences of the US political system with its many institutional arenas for policy choices around morality issues. This involves questions about the court system, the state-level vs. the federal level etc. (Mooney & Lee 1995; Haider-Markel & Meier 1996). Thus, the strength of the US based literature is how it links morality issues to broader questions like electoral behavior and explores how conflict definition around morality issues has been shaped by the specific nature of the US political system. From a comparative perspective, the singular focus on the US case obviously constitutes a limitation. This makes it difficult to distinguish between what characterizes morality politics and what are mostly effects of specific traits in the American political system or society. For example, high saliency is often said to be a defining characteristic of morality issues, which is clearly based on US experience (Haider-Markel Meier 1996, 333; Mooney 2000, 8). On the other hand, comparative studies have found morality issues like euthanasia to be clearly non-salient in some countries, albeit still clearly falling into the category of morality politics (Green-Pedersen 2007).

In line with the increasing political attention given to morality issues in West-European countries, a growing comparative literature on morality issues has started to emerge. This literature has mainly focused on explaining cross national differences in policy choices, i.e. whether countries choose to allow or restrict such practices as same-sex marriages, abortion or assisted reproduction. However, the picture emerging from this literature is rather fuzzy. Most studies emphasize the complex interaction between multiple factors while covering only a single issue (mainly abortion or reproductive technologies). As a result, the conclusions tend to be, at least partially, in contradiction with each other and sometimes to lack parsimony. This is clear with regard to two of the “usual suspects” within policy theory, namely political institutions and left-wing governments.

Regarding institutional impact, the results tend to broadly converge on the conclusion that - unlike the US experience - institutional configurations do not exert any direct impact on policy content and thus cannot alone account for divergences, at least, in policies on abortion, reproductive technologies and stem cells research (Montpetit et al., 2007; Fink 2009; Rothmayr et al., 2004; Stetson, 2001; Varone et al., 2006). Rothmayr et al. (2004), Stetson (2001) and Fink (2009) systematically review the impact of institutional settings and veto points according to the classical typologies of political systems (consensus versus majoritarian democracies, federalist
versus unitary systems, parliamentary versus presidential systems) but fail to identify clear patterns that could explain the divergences and the convergences in the regulation of assisted reproduction.

Turning to the explanatory power of political parties, comparative studies so far present very contradictory results. Left-wing parties are often presented as being more permissive on morality issues than right-wing parties in various single-case studies. However, the comparative research on abortion, reproductive technologies policy and stem cells research does not confirm any such systematic trend according to the strength of the Left (Banchoff 2005; Blofield, 2006; Mazur, 2002; Rothmayr et al., 2004; Stetson, 2001). Thus, focusing on some of the “usual suspects” of policy theory does not seem to have increased the understanding of morality issues much.

Therefore, the comparative literature on morality issues has increasingly become interested in Christian Democratic parties and religious based actors like the Roman Catholic Church, but with mixed findings. Rothmayr et al. (2004) do not identify any systematic effect on policy outputs that can be attributed to the presence or absence of Christian Democrats in the party system. Minkenberg (2002; see also Outshoorn, 1996) comes to similar conclusions for the case of abortion. Dutch, Belgian, and Swiss abortion policies are, ultimately, as permissive as the French and British ones. On the contrary, Fink (2009) argues that in the case of stem cells research, Christian Democrats have played a significant role in relation to the Catholic Church whose influence has been neglected so far in the literature (but see Fink 2009; Blofield 2006). Fink argues that the Catholic Church acts as “societal veto player” as long as it benefits from strong political support and a strong mobilization capacity. The recent Italian restrictive reform on the regulation of new reproductive technologies constitutes a striking example of the potential power of the Church (Schiffino et al. 2009; Fink 2009; Ramjoué and Klöti 2004). These results tend to be corroborated by the studies of Minkenberg (2002, 2003) on abortion, which point to the importance of the state-church cultural relation for explaining the variation in abortion policies. In the same line, the quantitative analysis of Jelen et al. (1999) shows that there is a strong correlation between the proportion of Catholics and the restrictiveness of abortion policy in the Western World. This increased interest in the role of religion is also linked to a greater interest in the politics behind the policy choices. Thus, studies like Schiffion et al. (2009) and Green-Pedersen point to the central role of religious based actors in defining political conflicts around morality issues.

In sum, the comparative literature has increasingly pointed its attention to the role of religious based actors both with regard to policy choices and the underlying political conflicts. Still, the understanding of the role of religious based actors is still quite limited. Further, with the
exception of Minkenberg (2003), the literature on morality issues has been completely separated from the more general literature on religion and politics in Western Europe. The following will outline a theoretical framework for how to explain morality politics - i.e. conflict definition around morality issues – by referring to the conflicts surrounding the role of religion in politics.

**Theoretical framework**
To develop a model of comparative differences in morality politics, this paper draws on both policy agenda-setting theory and early work on religion and politics in Western Europe, which has been focused on the emergence of conflict between confessional and secular parties in West European party systems.

**Policy agenda-setting theory**
In many ways, Schattschneider’s (1960) “The Semi-Sovereign People” has formed the basis of policy agenda-setting theory. Schattschneider’s view of politics as a question of how political elites construct and define political conflicts around issues became the starting point for this tradition. The key question emerging from Schattschneider is the question of what becomes the center of conflict in a society, or as it was originally coined, “the conflict of conflicts”. How are political conflicts defined around issues by political elites in terms of their scope, the actors involved, etc.? In short, politics is about defining conflicts just as much as it is about taking part in the conflicts themselves.

The work of Baumgartner and Jones (1993) turned Schattschneider’s argument about the “conflict of conflicts” into an empirical research program that became the cornerstone of the policy agenda-setting literature (Baumgartner et al. 2006). Both their theoretical development of Schattschneider and the datasets they developed point to a number of factors that are central in conflict definition. According to Baumgartner & Jones (1993), issues are often dominated by “policy monopolies”. Such a monopoly implies a limited group of actors who share what Baumgartner and Jones describe as a “policy image”. This is a common understanding of an issue in terms of causal factors as well as positive or negative views on the issues. Further, a policy monopoly is often tied to a certain institutional venue like a specific congress subcommittee. A key political dynamic according to Baumgartner and Jones is what they label “a Schattschneider mobilization” (pp. 83-102.). Issues can be expanded beyond the existing policy monopoly and into a broader political conflict and the broader scope of the conflict may involve new actors, new policy images, and new institutional venues.
Baumgartner and Jones’ development of Schattschneider’s idea thus leads to a number of factors which can be used to describe how conflicts around a particular policy issue like abortion or euthanasia are likely to be defined:

1) The first factor is the actor constellation around an issue. Baumgartner and Jones’ idea of a policy monopoly is developed out of the idea of “subsystem” politics. Issues can be characterized by a limited group of actors who are specialized in the issue. On the other hand, issues can be characterized by involvement of actors like Presidents, PMs, party leaders etc. whose limited attention is devoted to exactly the issues that are strongly politicized and play a role for instance in elections campaigns.

2) The second factor is attention. Schattschneider’s (1960) focus on conflict expansion was exactly about whether political conflicts are fought with a major audience or with a limited scope where only the actors directly involved in the conflict take notice. Conflict expansion is about politicization or about increasing attention to issues. Thus the level of political attention and its development over time is a key factor in understanding conflict definition. Is the issue one that gets a high level of attention from both the political system and from the surroundings like the media and the public or is it one that is at the bottom of everyone’s agenda?

3) The third factor is the question of policy image, which is close to what other studies call problem definition or framing. Issues are always discussed from a certain perspective and this perspective is an important part of conflict definition. Is abortion a question of women’s rights or the right of the unborn fetus?

4) Issue variation and issue characteristics: Policy agendas theory has developed a strong focus on how conflict definition is shaped by the nature of the political issues (Cobb and Elder 1983; Baumgartner & Jones 1993, 150-171). Especially such characteristics as technical complexity and the nature of the interests tied to an issue will affect conflict definition. By implication, morality issues are not just morality issues, they are each specific policy issues with various characteristics. Thus an underlying question is how much and under which circumstances, the general characteristic of being a morality issue determine conflict definition vs. more issue specific factors.

5) Institutional venue: Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 31-35) showed how policy monopolies were often linked to specific institutional venues. As Schattschneider noticed, “institutions are the mobilization of bias” (1960 pp. 71) and the institutional structure in which a conflict is fought is thus an important aspect of conflict definition. Fighting conflicts over abortion
in the court room is very different from fighting in a parliament, or an expert committee. Actors may deliberatively try to move issues into a different venue – what Baumgartner and Jones (1993, xx) calls venue shopping – in order to destabilize the existing equilibrium and create policy change. Further, the question of institutional venues also ties to questions about the structure of the political system. For example, The US political system opens up a lot more institutional venues than a parliamentary system typically does (Albæk et al. 2007).

6) Policy processes: The idea of policy-monopolies and sub-system politics implies a model of the policy process that is dominated by the actors within a policy monopoly sharing the same policy image. This leads to a consensual policy process with little interference from outside the monopoly and incremental policy changes. On the other hand, conflict expansion will lead to policy process involving actors from outside the monopoly and often actors like top politicians who are not normally tied to any monopoly. Also, policy changes will often be dramatic. Thus, differences in conflict definition correspond to differences in policy processes. Conflict expansion in particular will lead to changes in the policy process and subsequently also to different policy outputs.

In sum, the policy agenda-setting tradition, which has developed out of especially Baumgartner and Jones’ (1993) development of Schattschneider’s (1960) original idea about conflict definition, provides us with 6 central factors: actors, attention, framing, issue characteristics, institutions, and policy processes, which taken together can be used to describe how conflicts are defined. However, in terms of developing a model of comparative differences of morality politics, the policy-agenda setting perspective cannot stand on its own. Conflicts are not defined out of the blue and to study the “conflict of conflicts” around morality issues, one needs to understand how conflict definitions emerge.

Not least in Western Europe, political parties play a key role in conflict definition in modern politics, although this is only to a lesser extent studied in the policy agenda-setting tradition. They are the key actors when it comes to determining the scope of conflict (Mair 1997, Schattschneider 1960). In other words, to develop an understanding of conflict definition around morality politics, it is necessary to appreciate the processes of conflict definition among political parties.

This is precisely what the so-called cleavage literature offers (See Mair 2006, Mair 1995). This literature, not least on the seminal work by Lipset & Rokkan (1967), has been centered on understanding how societal cleavages shaped West European party systems in their formative
period, mostly before 1920. However, the relevance of the cleavage tradition goes much beyond the historical question about party formation. West European party systems have shown a remarkable continuity, which implies that the conflict structure explained by the cleavage perspective is the one that still dominates West European party systems. When new political issues emerge, it is their integration into the existing structure of party conflict that defines the political conflict around them. As Mark and Wilson (2000) argue based on their study of conflict definition around European integration, understanding conflict definition around new issues means understanding “the past into the present”. How political conflicts around new issues come to be defined depend on how well they fit into the pre-existing structure of party conflict. For instance, Dalton (2009) has showed how the environmental conflict in Western Europe became integrated into the pre-existing left-right conflict.

As argue above, morality issues are about ultimate personal values and are therefore naturally tied to religion. Therefore, the literature on religion and party cleavages in Western Europe offers a natural starting point for explaining conflict definition around morality issues.

**Religion and party conflict in Western Europe**

The literature on religion and politics in Western Europe has been strongly focused on questions related to the role of Christian Democratic parties. It is through the existence or non-existence of such parties that the impact of religion on West European politics is best understood (Kalyvas & van Kersbergen 2010). A growing literature focuses on the historical development of these parties (Kalyvas 1996) and their impact on major political developments in Western Europe, especially the creation of the welfare state (van Kersbergen & van Kerbsergen 2009; van Kersbergen 1995). Within this literature, the main question is how Christian Democratic parties respond to the process of secularization because it seems clear that there is no linear relationship between secularization and the electoral success of Christian Democratic parties (van Kersbergen 2008; Kalyvas & van Kersbergen 2010). The starting point for much of the literature was when Lipset and Rokkan (1967) identified the cleavage between state and church as being essential in shaping West European party systems in their formative periods before 1920. Central to the conflict between state and church was the question of who should have control over education, the state or civil society institutions such as the church (1967, 15). The exact interplay between this societal cleavage and party system formation in Europe is rather complex and still the subject of scholarly debate. However, for the
purpose of this paper suffice to say that the state-church cleavage became central in party system formation in continental Europe and resulted in the creation of Christian Democratic parties and positioned them as key actors in the party systems and government coalitions (Ertman 2009).

The question of cleavage structure and party system formation might seem to be merely of historical significance, but it is important for contemporary morality politics, because it leads to the establishment of Christian Democratic parties as central actors in the party system. In many countries, the central role of Christian Democratic parties was in part a direct result of their strong confessional voter base. However, the success of Christian Democratic project after the Second World War in many Continental European countries was closely related the pivotal role of these parties in building welfare states based on a Christian Democratic welfare ideology, what van Kersbergen (1995) has labeled “Social Capitalism”. Thus a key element in the strategy of Christian Democratic parties was their establishment as center parties with a much broader focus than issues directly related to the state-church conflict or other religious questions. This was the key to establish a broad voter base far beyond the limited group of strict confessional voters and to reach all social classes.

With a continuous process of secularization, there has been an even more significant need for Christian Democratic parties to develop a broader appeal than what follows from being a confessional party. Secularization implies, among other things, a steadily narrowing of the confessional vote base and also an increasing tendency to question confessional ideologies (Van Kersbergen 1999). The reaction from Christian Democratic parties has in many ways been a continuation of the Post-war strategy of going beyond their confessional off-spring in order to present a new political platform inspired by religion without directly referring to it (Kalyvas and van Kersbergen 2010, 204): “Modern Christian Democratic politics is neither religious nor secular, it is “unsecular”” (op. cit.). In other words, the continuous success of Christian Democratic parties hinges upon their ability to take politics away from the confessional/secular conflict and offer an “unsecular” platform focused on broader issues like the welfare state. On the other hand, issues that reactivate the secular-confessional divide are potentially the most threatening to the survival of the “unsecular” Christian Democratic project, because it can threaten their broad appeal beyond the confessional voter base.

Combining the perspective of policy agenda setting with the literature on the state-church conflict and party system formation in Western Europe allows us to formulate two ideal
worlds of conflict definition around morality issues, which we label the religious and the secular world.

**The religious world**
The religious world is where the conflict between state and church led to the establishment of Christian Democratic parties and thereby to a reintroduction of the conflict between confessional and secular positions into the party system. Furthermore, in the religious world, the process of secularization poses a series of challenges to the central role of Christian Democratic parties, because the response of these parties to new dimensions of secular morality will be some form of modern “unsecular” party platform as explained above (Kalyvas & van Kersbergen 2010). In such countries, the historical conflict between state and church is the substantial dynamic in conflict definition around morality issues. This conflict is thus the key to understand post-war struggles around morality issues in many countries, for example on abortion (Minkenberg 2002).

For Christian Democratic parties and their “unsecular” projects, morality issues are becoming increasingly unpleasant, because they tend to threaten the broad appeal of these parties by pushing them to reaffirm a set of potentially divisive Christian moral values. Precisely because of their intimate relationship with religion, these are issues where the attempt to define an “unsecular” project becomes the most difficult for Christian Democratic parties. It is where the confessional background of these parties is most clearly visible and thus prone to become a liability for them. As a consequence, these issues are also potentially attractive for the competitors of Christian Democratic parties. Morality issues are easily and have historically also been interpreted in light of the religious-secular conflict, and consequently it is where the unsecular project of contemporary Christian Democratic parties is most easily attacked by the competitors of Christian Democratic parties. Morality issues are where Christian Democratic parties have the most difficulty in avoiding focus on their confessional background, so the most tempting strategy for Christian Democratic parties might often be to avoid these issues completely or only pay limited attention to them. In sum, in the religious world morality issues have the potential to rearticulate a long historical struggle between secular and religious positions, which may at the same time function as an opportunity or liability for various parties.

Conflict around morality issues in the religious world can be summarized in four factors relevant to conflict definition in the policy agenda-setting perspective discussed above.
First, political parties are central actors around morality issues and their positions on these issues are defined by the conflict between religious and secular positions. Secular parties like Social Democratic or Liberal parties may define their position on the basis of being secular and thus in direct opposition to confessional parties. Further, the positioning of other actors besides political parties will also tend to be shaped by the same conflict between secular and religious positions. For instance, interest groups like gay rights organizations will most likely emphasize their opposition to a confessional position on morality issues. This is partly the result of the central role of Christian Democratic parties, but also due to the fact that the historical divide between state and church provides a civil society background for controversy over morality issues. The Roman Catholic Church is particularly active in political debates and thereby offers a confessional position outside of the party system, which other social movements can then mobilize in opposition to.

Second, morality issues are likely to become politicized in the religious world and achieve substantial attention from the political parties. They can easily be interpreted as a new case of the historical struggle between secular and confessional positions. It might change over time, however, which actors have a real interest in a politicization of morality. Secularization and the need for Christian Democratic parties to formulate a modern “unsecular” project means that competing parties will often have an incentive to try to politicize morality issues in opposition to the Christian Democrats. In principle, one can imagine Christian Democratic parties being challenged on two fronts here, because smaller fundamentalist Christian parties with a more homogenous confessional voter base might also have an interest in pushing the Christian Democrats into choosing between Christian, secular or “unsecular” forms of morality.

Third, morality issues are likely to be framed as a question of the role of religion in decisions about the beginning and end of human life as well as the moral status of living beings on the borderlines of birth or death. Should man, God, the church or the state decide over life in these situations?

Fourth, countries belonging to the religious world will most likely display certain similarities in the way various morality issues like abortion, euthanasia or stem-cell research is defined, which is a consequence of the macro conflict between religious and secular positions. Actors with a more issue-specific focus, such as women’s movements, gay rights organizations or patient groups with a primary interest in one morality issue will most likely have to incorporate the conflict between religious and secular positions into in their issue-definition or at least take it into account. Often, the issue of abortion functioned as the “mother issue” driving the politicization of
other morality issues. It has been the key morality issue through which the religious-secular conflict has been re-activated in modern times. Thus new issues like stem cells research or ART are likely to repeat some of the positions and conflict patterns from the abortion struggle.

Fifth, policy processes are dominated by political parties and *party conflict*. Thus policy outcomes will be shaped by macro-political factors like a change of government color.

Sixth, party politics will be the dominant *institutional arena* for morality issues in the religious world. However, to the extent that the political system contains alternative political venues, these will especially be used by actors aspiring to a different conflict definition than the religious-secular definition coming from the party system.

In sum, the conflict definition around morality issues in the religious world will most likely lead to situations where morality issues are politicized. They may even become important issues in elections or government coalitions, etc. and are generally important issues in the countries of the religious world. Policy processes over morality issues are also likely to be dominated by partisan politics and factors such as a change in government color can significantly shape policy outputs.

In terms of specific countries, the continental European countries where Christian Democratic parties have established themselves as powerful actors belong to the religious world, such as Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy until the breakdown of the party system. These are countries where the religious world as ideal type most clearly describes how conflict definition evolves around morality issues.

The religious world ideal type is also likely to apply to countries where major Conservatives parties have adopted platforms with “unsecular” elements similar to those of the Christian Democratic parties. This is the situation in Catholic countries like Spain, Portugal, and Italy after the breakdown of the party system, which are all characterized by a more recent process of secularization. Conservative parties in these countries have often adopted “unsecular” platforms in order to attract confessional voters, i.e. a religiously inspired platform without direct references to religion or church. Traditional family values are a good example of this, because it can attract confessional voters with no confessional party to vote for, but without becoming an explicitly religious movement in the party system. In this way, the conservative parties in these countries resemble Christian Democratic parties. Increased secularization can also lead to similar dynamics as the Christian Democrats experience, because the “unsecular” strategy of the Conservative parties
increasingly becomes difficult to maintain while opponents can easily challenge them on morality issues like abortion.

The secular world

In the second group of countries, – the secular world – there is no historical conflict between state and church or this conflict may have been settled so far back that it no longer has the ability to define and shape political conflicts over morality issues. Some countries in the secular world might actually have a state church instead of a long-standing conflict between state and church. The defining characteristic of the secular world is not a specific organization of the church, but simply the absence of a significant conflict between religious and secular positions in the political system. Because there are no major religious parties, competing parties have no religious or confessional opponent to position themselves against. This means that even if many parties may in principle have secular party platforms, these are unlikely to be activated in a strong politicization of morality issues, because these issues do not refer to a significant conflict line in the party system.

In most cases, the party systems in the secular world are almost exclusively shaped by the conflict between left and right, which does not offer any straightforward way to define political conflicts around morality issues. As a result, these issues will most likely fall outside the normal party competition and perhaps be defined as “ethical questions” unfit for partisan competition. Thus, the conflict definition around morality issues looks very differently compared to the religious world, because the only common characteristic across morality issues are their perceived incompatibility with the normal play of party political competition. More substantial conflict definitions are instead seen as being tied to the specific morality issue.

The secular world can also be summarized based on the six factors describing conflict definition in the policy agenda setting literature:

First, the actor constellation is characterized by an unwillingness of most political parties to take any position on morality issues whatsoever. As a consequence, they will often allow free votes in parliament. Political parties generally try to stay away from such issues, but if forced to take positions they will try to redefine the issues into something that is more easily placeable on a left-right scale. For example, instead of discussing the moral acceptability of assisted reproduction for lesbians, the parties might prefer to discuss who should pay for whatever type of fertility treatment is allowed, because it triggers a recognizable conflict between public and private financing. This does not mean, however, that morality issues can always be transformed into
conflicts between left and right and it is even debatable whether a discussion of private versus public financing of assisted reproduction should even be characterized as morality politics. The main reason why morality issues are sometimes redefined into left-right issues is that it is more or less the only way that parties are able to take any position on these issues. Religious-based actors like churches may be active outside the party system, but this will again often be tied to particular issues rather than a general moral political agenda. Similarly, interest groups like gay rights organizations or women’s movements will obviously take a stand on the specific morality issues of their interest, but they are unlikely to put significant emphasis on having a secular position on morality issues, because there are no significant opponents to formulate this position against.

Second, because of the disinterest of political parties, the politicization of morality issues in the secular world is often very limited. None of the major partisan actors have a particular interest in drawing attention to these issues during for instance election campaigns or in public debate, since they are not really part of party competition.

Third, there are no cross-cutting master frames between the different morality issues such as a self-determination vs. a God frame.

Fourth, as a consequence of the missing master frames, the secular world is characterized by significant issue diversity. There is no macro conflict cutting across all the morality issues and whatever conflicts may arise around them will most likely be determined by very specific factors related to the individual issues. In other words, it is difficult to imagine a process of issue expansion over morality issues in the secular world, because there are no broad ledgers on which to build such an expansion.

Fifth, the policy processes around morality issues are often subsystem or even chaotic processes. Despite their disinterest in the issues, parties do have to make decisions on these issues once in a while and to the extent that they allow free votes, for example, they tend to take the issues out of the standard decision-making process based on closed party negotiations and broad agreements. On some issues, there might be subsystem policy monopolies, but most often this will not even be the case. Instead, actors like expert commissions can play or be given a decisive role. Factors such as the color of the government, which are important in the religious world, will most likely play no or an insignificant role for policy choices in the secular world.

Summing up, conflict definition in the secular world is characterized by non-politicization. Morality issues are defined as falling outside not just of the traditional conflict between left and right, but sometimes even outside the scope of politics as such and thus with little
relevance for electoral politics, coalition formation, etc. Policy processes are characterized by greater variation than normal and partisan politics generally plays a limited role. Parties of course often make the actual political decisions, but factors like government color play a limited role. Instead, policy processes tend to become dominated by expert advice or issue-specific interests.

In terms of specific countries, the Scandinavian countries and the UK are obvious cases of the secular world, since the conflict between state and church has never been a significant conflict in the political system and the party system if such a conflict even exists. In recent decades, some Christian Democratic parties have tried to establish themselves in Scandinavian party systems, but they have never attained a role comparable to their Continental counterparts and it has rarely been attractive or even necessary for the other parties to define themselves as secular in opposition to confessional parties.\footnote{Norway is the country in Scandinavia where a Christian Democratic party has had most success thus attaining the position of prime minister. However, the party has lost strength again and the conflict between religious and secular parties has not become a central in Norwegian politics either.}

**Studying the “Two Worlds of Morality Politics**

In order to study the implication of morality issues on the dynamics of today’s political conflicts and policy processes, we have selected five issues, which are becoming highly relevant on many national policy agendas and which clearly fall within our understanding of morality issues: (1) same-sex marriages, (2) abortion, (3) new reproductive technologies, (4) stem cells research and (5) euthanasia. These five issues are not the only ones to raise questions related to fundamental principles and the role of religion. We could have selected a series of other issues such as the death penalty, organ transplants or genetic screening, which would also have implied a redistribution of moral and/or religious values. Our selection strategy was driven by methodological concerns related to the generalization of our research results. We first aimed at selecting issues across various policy sectors. As our study covers four sectors (gender, health, science and technology as well as civil rights), we therefore control for explanatory factors linked directly to sectoral patterns of policy dynamics. In addition, we selected issues that are not politicized everywhere in order to increase the variation of our dependent variable: the dynamics of political conflict and policy processes.

In terms of countries, the study focuses on five countries, Denmark, UK, Spain, Netherlands, and Switzerland. This choice of countries provides with variation on the key variable namely secular/confessional party conflict. The Netherlands and Switzerland are examples of,
which Denmark and the UK are not. Spain is an example of a conflict between a parties with or without a “unsecular” Conservative profile in the form of the PP.

In terms of countries, two cases are further worth discussing in light of the “two worlds” distinction. France is interesting because of the strong conflict between state and church, but the non-existence of Christian Democratic parties distinguishes the country from other continental European countries (Ertman 2009). Further, the strong secularization of the French population implies that an “unsecular” Conservative strategy has never been pursued and France is therefore expected to belong to the secular world.

The United States is in some ways an obvious case of morality politics and the influence of religion in politics. It is also, however, very different from the European cases since the prominent position of religious arguments in American politics is coexistent with a clear separation between church and state as well as a multicultural background. While it definitely leans towards the religious world, it is not a clear-cut case, especially because there are no religious or secular political parties as such. The increasing alignment of the Republican Party with the religious right does of course push the US further in the direction of the religious world with a party with an unsecular strategy, but this polarization is also seen by some as a more or less direct consequence of morality issues like abortion since Roe (Hout 1999). The conflict between religious and secular influences in American politics mainly takes place at the level of interest groups ranging from the secular arguments of Civil Liberties Unions to the political mobilization of the Catholic Church after Roe (Fabrizio 2001). The US political system with its many institutional venue opens make it possible for such group to politicize morality issues without depending on party conflict
References


