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 2010), whereas a comparative literature has been growing 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. The literature is for instance struggling how to understand the role of religion, religious actors and religious arguments in shaping political conflicts and policy choices on morality issues (Fink 2008, 2009; Green-Pedersen 2007; Minkenberg 2002; Schiffino et al. 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 or not 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, 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). 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.

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 increase the political salience of morality issues. 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.

The paper proceeds in four steps. First, it offers a review of the existing literature on morality issues, second a definition of 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 provides examples of how the framework explains the dynamics of morality issues in countries belonging to this world. The conclusion also discusses the US case.

**Theoretical approaches to morality issues**

Morality issues have never been among the most studied policy issues. Nevertheless, two strands of literature on morality issues exist. One is a long-standing tradition of studying morality issues and morality politics in a US-context (e.g. Meier 1994; Mooney 2001; Tatalovich & Daynes 2010). The other stand is a comparative literature has been growing during the past few years with a strong focus on explaining cross-national variation in policy choices on morality issues (e.g. Montpetit et al. 2007; Fink 2008; Schiffino et al. 2009; Engeli 2009; Banchoff 2005; Bleikle et al. 2004). The findings of these two strands of literatures, especially on the politics of morality issues, provide a
natural starting point for developing a theory of morality issues, including the idea of “the two worlds of morality politics”.

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 (for an overview see Tatalovich & Daynes 2010): 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 political conflicts around morality issues has been shaped by the institutional structure of the political system, for instance the importance of Supreme Court rulings. From a comparative perspective, the singular focus on the US case, however, also constitutes a major limitation. This makes it difficult to distinguish between what characterizes the politics of morality issues in general and what are mostly effects of specific traits of the American political system or society.

The first attempts at looking at morality issues comparatively focused on understanding the special nature of morality issues compared to other policy issues (Cf. Studlar 2001 for an overview). More recently this focus on the specific nature of morality issues has been followed by Smith and Tatolivich (2003), who have outlined a comparative theory of morality politics built around the notion of “status identity. The question of what separates morality issues from other issues is of course a central one, see below. However, the weakness of focusing intensively on this question is that comparative variation in the politics around morality issues has received much too little attention.

In line with the increasing political attention given to morality issues in West-European countries, a new strand of 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 in terms of the causes of variation in policy choices 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 party color.

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).

Turning to the explanatory power of political parties, comparative studies so far also 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 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).

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. 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. 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.

The recent comparative literature has thus generally focused much less on the politics around morality issues and has instead focused on mapping and explaining policy choices on morality issues. However, in order to explain such policy patterns, this 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 quite limited. Further, with the exception of Minkenberg (2003), the literature on morality issues has been separated from the more general literature on religion and politics in Western Europe. Thus, what
this comparative literature has to offer is in the first place mainly its increasing focus on the role of religion in relation to morality issues. Religion seems to be central to the politics of morality issues, but the comparative literature leaves an unclear picture of how religion actually affects the politics of morality issues.

In sum, existing studies of morality issues have either struggled to explain comparative differences in the politics of morality issues or has focused much more on what separates morality issues from other issues. The latter question about what constitutes morality issues deserves some initial attention.

**What are morality issues?**

The literature has offered several attempts to define morality issues. One prominent example is Mooney’s (2001, 7-9) definition of morality issues. Focusing on the “political relevant characteristics”, Mooney defined morality issues as issues involving “clashes of first principles on technically simple and salient public policy with high citizen participation” (op. cit, 8).

This definition points to both substantial aspects of these issues – being about first principles on technically simple issues – and aspects of the politics surrounding them - being salient with high citizen participation. In the following, we attempt to define morality issues by their substance instead of the politics surrounding them. The reason for this is straightforward, namely that politics around these vary considerably. Defining morality issues by high salience and high citizen involvement, as Mooney (op.cit.) does, mainly reflects the US context, but not morality issues in general. As the following will show, they can just as well be very low salient with very limited citizen participation. Further, along the same line, one should be careful not to define morality issues as “ethical” or “conscience issues” where politicians act on their own personal beliefs (cf. Albæk 2003). As will be argued below, this is also a characteristic of the policy process around morality issues in some specific countries rather than a general definition.

Instead, we focus our definition of morality issues on their substance. Going beyond economic concerns, morality issues address political decisions on fundamental values regarding life, death, reproduction and the construction of the nuclear family (Banchoff, 2005; Mooney, 2001; Tatalovich and Daynes, 1998; Mooney and Lee, 1995). Morality issues thus relate to ultimate principles of societal organization: Who has the right to make decisions about the beginning and end of life: The government, the individual or no one besides God? Does one have the right to choose one’s own time of death?
What falls into these categories is of course, as argued by Mooney (2001, 4), a matter of perception. Other policy issues such as health care or warfare could also be said to somehow involve decisions about life or death, but they are normally perceived as being about something else. Thus, the argument here is that the defining aspect of morality issues – i.e. being about fundamental decisions related to life, death, marriage and reproduction - is basically how people normally perceive these issues and thus the politics surrounding them. Morality issues imply a re-distribution of fundamental values that are often indivisible, i.e. they are difficult if not impossible to compromise on and 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, “morality policy is (...) no less than the legal sanction of 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 involve fundamental values of right and wrong, they are intimately linked to religion and religious arguments or values in particular. Religious values often codify basic moral values about what separates right from wrong and thereby make claims to what constitutes the fundamental values of society. As such, they are obviously important for political actors with a religious or confessional base. These actors may also use religiously based moral values to set the scene for dramatic political conflicts that can reach a much broader audience in public opinion or interest groups than the strict, religious denomination itself can.

While religious values may be a common source of morality conflicts, it is important to add that morality politics is not determined or defined by religion. Not only because fundamental moral values do not always stem from religious dogma, but because neither of the defining characteristics of morality issues predetermine what political conflicts develop around them. The defining characteristic of morality issues - and what separates them from other political issues – is the nature of the political conflicts that are likely to emerge from them. As we argue below, the character of these issues means that they are often hard to integrate into the dominant political conflicts, which are mainly about economic and distributional questions. This implies that a certain, limited spectrum of political conflicts are likely to emerge, but neither the conflicts nor the resulting policy outputs are predetermined. For example, whether or not a broad audience among the public
take an interest in morality issues is a matter of conflict definition, not a predetermined outcome of moral values.

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, certain issues like abortion or euthanasia are obviously morality issues because they relate to fundamental question of life and death and the same for same-sex marriages and the right to divorce because they relate to a fundamental choice in life, namely whom to marry. Another obvious example is capital punishment.

Theoretical framework
In order to develop a theoretical framework of the politics of morality issues, we draw on two types of literature: one is policy agenda-setting theory and the other is the literature on party conflicts and cleavages in West European party systems, especially work which has been focused on the emergence of conflicts between confessional and secular parties in West European party systems.

Policy agenda-setting theory
The policy agenda-setting research tradition goes back to Schattschneider’s (1960) “The Semi-Sovereign People”. 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 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).

Based on Baumgartner and Jones’ development of Schattschneider’s idea, it is possible to identify a number of dimensions which can be used to describe conflict definition around a particular policy issue like abortion or euthanasia:

1) The first 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.

2) The second 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 the issues that are strongly politicized and play a role for instance in election
campaigns. Further, a crucial aspect is what policy position is taken by the actors involved.

These two elements – attention and actors – can be used to describe conflict definition
around particular issues like abortion, euthanasia or same sex marriages. The way to describe the
politics of morality issues is thus to analyze morality issues on the basis of these three factors. This
raises two questions with regard to policy agenda-setting theory, namely what causes variation in
conflict definition and what policy effects result from the different conflict definitions.

The policy agenda-setting tradition has been more pre-occupied with the latter than
the former question. Differences in conflict definition lead to differences in policy processes. The
idea of policy monopolies and sub-system politics implies a model of the policy process that is
dominated by the actors in a policy monopoly who share 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, a conflict expansion will lead to a policy process involving actors from
outside the monopoly such as top politicians who are not normally tied to any particular monopoly,
which can lead to dramatic policy changes. 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 two essential factors: attention and actors. Taken together,
these factors can be used to describe how conflicts are defined around an issue. The tradition also
points to how variation in conflict definitions shapes the policy process and thereby policy outputs.

In terms of developing a model of comparative differences of morality politics, the
policy-agenda setting perspective cannot stand on its own. As pointed above, the tradition has
never been focused on the causes of variation in conflict definition. To develop an understanding of
causes of variation in conflict definition, once needs take into account that not least in Western
Europe, political parties play a key role in conflict definition, although this has only to a lesser
extent been studied in the policy agenda-setting tradition. Political parties are the key actors when it
comes to determining the scope of conflict (Mair 1997, Schattschneider 1960). In other words, to
explain variation in conflict definition around morality politics, it is necessary to appreciate the specific processes of conflict definition among political parties.

This is precisely what the so-called cleavage literature offers (See Mair 2006, Mair 1995). West European party systems have shown a remarkable continuity, which means that the conflict structure described in the cleavage literature still dominates West European party systems. When new political issues emerge, the political conflicts around them are largely determined by whether or not they can be integrated into the existing structure of party conflict. As Mark and Wilson (2000) argue based on their study of conflict definition around European integration, to understand conflict definitions around new issues basically means to understand “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 (Green-Pedersen 2010). For instance, Dalton (2009) has showed how the environmental conflict in Western Europe became integrated into the pre-existing left-right conflict.

The question then is whether morality issues can be integrated into an existing political conflict or cleavage. As argue above, morality issues are about ultimate social values and therefore often – although not exclusively – interact with religious values. Therefore, a natural starting point for explaining conflict definition around morality issues is to look at the emerging literature on religion and politics and especially on the impact of religion on party cleavages in Western Europe.

**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 thus 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 & Manow 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 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 in some countries 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. After the Second World War, however, the success of the Christian Democratic project in Continental Europe was closely related to 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”. A key element in the strategy of Christian Democratic parties was to establish themselves as center parties with a much broader focus than issues directly related to religious questions or the relationship between state and church. This was the key to establish a broad voter base far beyond the limited group of strict confessional voters and thereby 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 voter 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 re activates 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.

Summing up, the literature on religion, politics and party cleavages in Western Europe first of all points to considerable cross-national variation in whether religion in the form of Christian Democratic parties has been integrated into party politics. This is the case in some mainly continental European countries, but clearly not the case in other countries like the UK and in Scandinavia. Based on this, a central argument of this paper is that the major cause of variation in
conflict definitions around morality issues is whether or not there exists a conflict in the party system between religious and secular parties.

The choice to link conflict definition to the existence or non-existence of a religious-secular party conflict of course raises the question of whether morality issues could also be linked to other party conflicts, especially the left-right conflict. The left-right conflict may provide a “hook” for morality issues in countries where the “right” mainly consists of Conservative and not liberal parties. Such Conservative parties may develop a profile very similar to the “unsecular” strategy of Christian Democratic parties, for instance by emphasizing traditional family values. However, the right is likely to be divided on these issues because liberal parties or liberal fractions of right-wing parties are likely to take more permissive positions on morality issues. Also, it may also be risky for left-wing parties to emphasize a very permissive position given the material basis of the left and some groups of old left voters.

The left-right conflict is thus unlikely to serve as the foundation for an intense political conflict or politicization of morality issues, unless the right develops a very traditional conservative profile, which the left can then define itself in opposition to. However, such a right-wing profile is not very likely as liberal actors on the right will possibly disagree. Because of the dominant position of left-right conflicts in the structure of all party systems, it is likely to function as a conflict of last resort in terms of defining party positions, but not as the foundation for politicization on morality issues.

Combining these insights with the insights of policy agenda-setting theory allows us to formulate two ideal typical “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 historical conflict between state and church has led to the establishment of Christian Democratic parties and thereby to the establishment of a conflict between confessional and secular positions in the party system. The notion “religious world” has been chosen to underline that these are countries where religion has historically been present in the party system due to Christian Democratic parties. It does not indicate, however, whether the populations in these countries are very religious nor does it concern the formal relationship between state and church. It is primarily a term for the presence of a religious-secular conflict in the political system, typically in the form of Christian Democratic parties. 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 still to some extent 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 and membership of these parties is most clearly visible and thus prone to become a liability for them. As a consequence, it may be appealing for competitors of Christian Democratic parties to try to gather attention around morality issues. These 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 the 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 definition around morality issues in the religious world can be summarized through the two factors identified in the policy agenda-setting perspective 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 Christian Democratic 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.
Second, morality issues are likely to become *politcized* 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. Which actors have the most interest in politicizing morality issues may change over time. 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.

In terms of policy processes in the religious world, two expectations are worth pointing out: First, countries belonging to the religious world will most likely display certain similarities in the way conflicts are defined around morality issues like abortion, euthanasia or same-sex marriages, 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 with a primary interest in one particular 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 has 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.

Second, policy processes will be dominated by political parties and *party conflict* and policy outcomes consequently shaped by macro-political factors like a change of government color. Thus, whether or not Christian democratic parties are in government is likely to be an important factor for the policy positions on morality issues, although the policy process will of course also be affected by the nature of political system.

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 we expect the ideal type religious world to describe conflict definition around morality issues most clearly.

The development of morality issues in the Netherlands provides a clear example of the dynamics of religious world. The conflict between religious and secular parties has a long tradition
in the Netherlands, and Christian Democratic parties have played a pivotal role in modern Dutch politics, being continuously in government until 1994. However, from the 1960s secularization has challenged the vote basis of Christian Democratic parties, which led to the formation of one Christian Democratic party in the mid 1970s (Andeweg & Irwin 2000). This party, the CDA, has pursued what above was labeled and “unsecular” strategy with a focus on a centrist left-right position (van Kersbergen 1998). For the secular parties, morality issues were perfect cases for challenging this unsecular strategy. Thus, the secular opposition especially the small liberal D66 has tried to politicize morality issues by demanding more permissive policies. This was the case with abortion, which was settled with permissive legislation in 1981, and later on with euthanasia which was central issue in Dutch politics in the 1980s (Green-Pedersen 2007). In 1994, the first Dutch government without Christian Democratic participation since 1918 took office and introduced a number of permissive legislation on euthanasia and same-sex marriages. Back in office in 2002, the CDA continued to avoid morality issues and has not pushed for less permissive policies.

In sum, the Dutch case is a perfect example of the religious world. Secularization has increasingly challenged the historical position of the CDA in the Dutch party system, and secular parties have successfully tried to politicize morality issues as a way to challenge the pivotal position of the CDA in Dutch politics. Morality issues have thus become a well-established party of Dutch party competition. In terms of policy, the CDA long resisted more permissive and besides abortion the party was successful until it was out of government in 1994. With a government of secular parties only, the Netherlands then witnessed a wave of more permissive policies, most prominently the legalization of euthanasia. Today, the Netherlands is thus among the worlds most permissive countries in terms of policies on morality issues.

The ideal type religious world is also likely to apply to countries where major Conservatives parties have traditionally had strong ties with religious actors and have adopted platforms with pronounced “unsecular” elements similar to those of the Christian Democratic parties. This can be expected to be the case in Catholic countries like Spain, Portugal, and Italy after the breakdown of the traditional 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, but without using direct references to religion or church. Appealing to 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 become “functional equivalents” to Christian Democratic parties. Further, 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.

Spain is a good example of this dynamic. In Spain the Conservative party, PP, has served as a “functional equivalent” of a Christian Democratic party due to its strong ties with the Catholic Church. Thus as secularization of the Spanish society has gained momentum in recent decades, the Spanish Socialist parties has found it increasingly attractive to politicize morality issues as part of its competition with the Conservative party. The Conservative Party, also challenged by internal disagreements between its liberal and conservative parts, has tried to avoid the issues and have blocked more permissive policies when in government. Thus, Spain has seen a recent move towards permissive policies especially with regard to abortion under the present socialist government.

The secular world
In the second group of countries, – the secular world – there is no significant 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. The term secular world does not mean that these countries are necessarily more secularized than in the religious world although they have usually seen a relatively early process of secularization. Also, it does not mean that these societies will be devoid of religion altogether, because the term concerns what role religion, religious actors and arguments play in the political system. Hence, the defining characteristic of the secular world is the absence of a significant conflict between religious and secular positions in the party system, typically in the sense that none of the major political parties have religious ties and that questions of religion play next to no role in party politics.

Some countries in the secular world might actually have a state church instead of a long-standing conflict between state and church, because the establishment of a state church may have ended the power struggle between secular and ecclesiastical institutions in favor of the former. How the church is organized in a particular country in the secular world is less important here, because it does not refer to a persistent conflict between religious and secular positions in the political system. Because there are no major religious parties in the secular world, 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, they are unlikely to mobilize around a strongly secular strategy, since party competition is always about something else. As a consequence, none of the major parties in the secular world have a strong interest in politicizing morality issues, because these issues simply 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 only offers limited possibilities of defining 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 different compared to the religious world, because the only common characteristic across morality issues is the perception that this is somehow incompatible with the normal play of party politics. More substantial conflict definitions are instead seen as being tied to the specific qualities of each individual morality issue rather than being part of a well-structured agenda across the various issues.

The secular world can also be summarized based on the two 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 a position on morality issues. As a consequence, they will often if not always allow free votes in parliament, which is a rare exception in countries that often have a quite strong party discipline. 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 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 the public debate, since they are not really considered to be part of politics as such, or at least not part of party political competition.

With regard to the policy process, the above leads to several expectations for the secular world: First, the secular world is characterized by significant issue diversity because there is no macro conflict on 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.

Second, the policy processes around morality issues are often subsystem specific 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 is otherwise important in the religious world, will most likely play no or an insignificant role for policy choices in the secular world.

With regard to policy outputs, secularization does not produce any significant dynamic over time, because the process itself will not undermine the voter base of any of the major political parties. Over time, value changes in the population may lead to more support for permissive policies like the introduction of same-sex marriages, but countries in the secular world are not expected to experience the same strong tendency towards more permissive policies as in the religious 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 systems and the party systems. In both countries, party competition is almost exclusively left-right competition focused on economic issues. In the UK, morality issues are not politicized in the sense of being part of the competition between the major parties. These parties for instance completely neglect during election campaigns (Cowley 2001). To the extent morality issues get any attention in British parliamentary politics, it is through attention from back-benchers of the Conservative party. In terms of the specific issues, each issue has seen its own decision making logic disconnected from British party competition. Abortion was made relatively permissive in the late 1960s without becoming much of a party issue (Stetson 2001). Same-sex marriages were introduced in 2005, again without much party attention, whereas there has been no move to legalize euthanasia.

As an example of a Scandinavian country, Denmark resembles the UK in the sense that morality issues play no role in Danish party competition. They are generally considered ethical, non-political issues (Albæk 2003). Denmark like the UK witnessed an early move – 1972 – towards a permissive abortion legislation but without much party conflict. Same-sex marriages were introduced in 1980s but again without being part of Danish party competition during for instance election campaigns (Albæk 2003). Like in the UK, legalizing euthanasia has never been considered and the euthanasia is hardly debated in Danish politics (Green-Pedersen 2007).

Denmark and the UK are thus both exemplify the secular world. Morality issues are not part of party competition and hardly get party attention during for instance election campaigns. The reason is that they cannot be integrated into the left-right conflict which dominates these countries. The fact morality issues are not linked to any dominant party conflicts means that there is little similarity across them in terms of policy process and policy outputs. Thus whereas in the secular world, the conflicts around euthanasia resembles that around abortion as the Dutch examples shows, this is not at all the case in Denmark and the UK. The abortion issues was settled with relatively premised policies many decades ago and without much party attention and conflict, whereas legalizing euthanasia is hardly discussed in the two countries. Thus, secularization does not have much impact on morality issues in these two countries.
**Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to outline a comparative theory of morality politics, i.e. what are the political conflicts around morality and how do they shape policy decisions. The argument of the paper is that the politics of morality issues must understood on the basis of the distinction between the religious and secular world. In countries belonging to the religious world, morality issues become part of a well-established conflict in the party system between religious and secular political parties. This leads to a politicization of the issues driven by secular parties. As secularization has gain pace in these countries, morality issues have become attractive issues for secular parties in terms of challenging Christian Democratic parties - or Conservative parties with confessional link like the Spanish Conservatives. In the secular world, secularization thus pushes policies in a more permissive direction, a process which has advanced the most in the Netherlands.

In the secular world, morality issues are outside of normal – mainly left-right – party competition. Thus there is no general trend in terms of policy outputs in these countries. They have become more permissive on issues like abortion and same sex marriages, but not euthanasia.

Understanding the politics of morality politics in terms of the difference between the religious and secular worlds provides several contributions to the existing literature on morality issues. To the extent that morality issues have been studies in a comparative perspective, focus has either been on extracting what differentiates morality issues from other issues or on explaining cross national policy difference at a particular time. Focusing on understanding how morality issues differ from other issues is obviously important, but focusing on this question has lead to the neglect of a focus on the huge cross-national differences in the politics around morality issues. The argument about the two worlds of morality politics highlights and explains these cross-national differences.

Further, it also offers a dynamic perspective on cross-national policy differences. The existing literature has focused and struggled to explain cross-national policy differences at a particular time. In terms of the differences between the religious and secular world, this distinction highlights that the policy dynamics differ radically across the two worlds. In the religious world, how permissive policies have become is mainly a matter of the degree of secularization. In countries where secularization has been ongoing for decades, one finds the most permissive pattern of policies across different policy issues. The Netherlands is the best example of this development and Belgium offers another example. Policies in a late secularized country like Spain still look quite different. Spain has only recently moved in a permissive direction on abortion. Focusing on the current policy-differences between Spain and the Netherlands caused by different degree of
secularization thus makes one overlook the underlying similarities in policy dynamics. With regard to the secular world, countries are characterized by great variation across issues and whether or not they are permissive dependence on policy dynamics related to the specific issue.

It is important to stress that what places countries in the religious and secular worlds is whether or not a conflict between secular and religious parties – or conservatives parties with a strong confessional profile - is established in the party system. It is not variables like state-church relationship or whether the country is dominated by Catholics which is decisive. Especially, the latter deserves to be highlighted. The Netherlands is for instance is not a country dominated by Catholics and still belongs to the religious world. On the other hand, catholic countries like France and Ireland also belong to the secular world because the religious and secular conflict is not present in their party system. A comparison between Spain and Ireland – both late secularizing, catholic countries is illustrative here. In Spain, the integration of morality issues into Spanish party competition has caused a significant move in a permissive direction, whereas in the Irish case, the issue has mainly been fought trough the court system and with much more limited moves in a permissive direction (Mahon 2001).

Finally, the US case deserves attention. The literature on morality issues in the US is large (cf. Tatalovich & Daynes 2010) but is rarely comparative. Placing the US in a comparative context is thus worthwhile. What characterizes the US case is an increasing integration of morality issues into the conflict between democrats and republicans structuring American party politics. The US has thus seen a politicization of morality issues like countries in the religious world. However, the underlying mechanism is very different from countries in Western Europe belonging to the religious world. Here the historical conflict between religious and secular parties has together with ongoing secularization made it attractive for secular parties to politicize morality issues. The US has no historical conflict between religious and secular parties, but has also not witnessed a secularization like Western Europe. Thus in the US case religious forces within the Republican party has played a decisive role in politicizing morality issues. At the same time, the US political system means that many morality issues are often decided at the state level causing considerable variation across state and often fought through the court system. Thus the politicization of morality issues at the federal level has not lead to a clear policy move in either a permissive or restrictive direction.
References


