

# **Comparing the Past and Present of Religious Politics: Political Catholicism and Political Islam in Comparison**

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Thanks to the influence of Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and R.H. Tawney, the sociological study of religion had a comparative-historical focus since the beginning. While most works in the recent American sociology of religion tend to have a presentist, exclusively American, and congregation-centered focus, many comparative-historical sociologists continue to produce important works following on this tradition.

In the following paper, I will focus on a large subfield in the social scientific study of religion, namely the study of religion and politics. I will first classify the different types of research design in the comparative-historical study of religion and politics under three categories. This section will identify the methodological challenges as well as distinct advantages of comparative perspectives on the subject. I will then summarize some findings from my dissertation research that is based on a comparative analysis of political Catholicism in late nineteenth / early twentieth century Germany (1870-1914) and political Islam in contemporary Turkey (1970-2008). Using this research as a background, I will conclude with a discussion of the methodological, epistemological, and normative-political implications of comparing past and present in the study of religious politics.

## **1. Comparative Perspectives in the Study of Religion and Politics**

I would like to first identify the major types of qualitative comparative-historical research on religion and politics. This three-fold classification is based on the types of research design rather than on substantive arguments advanced in these works.

The first type of studies advance general theories –of religion and democracy, religion and political violence, etc. – that are supposed to apply to all cases of the phenomenon studied. One encounters this kind of research design mostly in political science. These studies are characterized by a theory-driven agenda and brief portrayal of individual cases for purposes of illustration. A good example is the much-cited article of Daniel Philpott, “Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion” (2007). This article argues that religious-political movements’ propensity towards democracy or political violence can be explained through the constellation of two factors: differentiation of religious and political authority, and political theology. Such telescopic studies are useful in that they provide us with a general, global perspective. However, they are often based on superficial descriptions of the cases and often lose their persuasiveness when subject to more in-depth analysis of the individual cases.<sup>1</sup>

Research projects belonging to the second type juxtapose a relatively large number of cases chapter after chapter, often in edited volumes. Based on these case studies, the editors or authors seek to identify some general patterns and make suggestions towards a general explanation in introductory and/or concluding chapters. A number of authored and co-edited volumes by John Esposito (1996, 1997) on Islamic politics are good examples. The most ambitious and well-funded project of this kind is the Fundamentalism Project. Its third volume on *Fundamentalisms and the State* (1996), for example, brings together 24 experts writing on nearly 20 different cases.

These rather encyclopedic projects are commendable in their detailed case analyses in contrast to the theory-driven, telescopic level of analysis mentioned earlier. However, the large

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<sup>1</sup> The case of Turkey, to which Philpott refers multiple times in the article, for example, warrants this criticism. It would be hard for any student of Turkish politics not to strongly object to the characterization of the 1920s through 1990s as “seven decades of rule by a secular nationalist military regime” (505) even as a generality, or not to point to the factual mistake in the claim that “Welfare Party had become the first Islamic coalition partner in the history of the republic” (516). Despite periodic military interventions and the continuing role of military in politics, neither Middle East specialists nor scholars of democracy characterize the post-1946 Turkish polity as a military regime. National Salvation Party, the predecessor of Welfare, participated multiple times in coalition governments in the 1970s.

number of cases makes it impractical to move back and forth systematically between theory and empirical material, which is necessary if the explanation is to be both theoretically significant and empirically well-supported. This becomes even more difficult in edited volumes, as each scholar writing on a particular case uses her own analytical lens, even though all scholars may take a common framework as reference. As a result, attempts at synthesis in introductory or concluding chapters –or in separate volumes as in Almond, Appleby, and Sivan (2003)– contain many insights, but these often tend to be too general to make substantive contributions to the more specific sets of questions developed in the social scientific field.

The studies in the third category systematically compare a small number of cases from the perspective of a precisely formulated research puzzle. I would argue that this kind of research design combines in-depth analysis of individual cases with carefully assessed theoretical claims. These studies have made important contributions to the study of major political processes and institutions that have not been conventionally assumed to be centrally related to religion, such as state-formation (Gorski 2003), the rise of absolutism (Fulbrook 1984), or national (Young 2007) and long-distance (Stamatov, forthcoming) social movements. This kind of analysis also underlies major studies of processes that involve the direct interaction of religious and political fields, such as secularization (Martin 1979), religious nationalism (Zubrzycki 2006), and rise of religious parties (Kalyvas 1996).

Besides providing an answer to important historical puzzles, I would argue that this third category of comparative studies offers a more advantageous analytical vantage point to tackle important meta-questions that have occupied scholars of religion and politics since the beginning:

1. Are there fundamental differences among religious traditions in terms of their political characteristics? Are some religions more amenable to political activism, mobilization against political authority, theocratic ambitions, democracy, or collective violence than others?

2. If so, do the decisive differences concern doctrine, structure of religious authority, or historical trajectory?

Comparative research design based on the systematic analysis of a small number of cases offers a great tool to answer these questions. Mary Fulbrook's (1984) study, for example, takes three religious movements that are similar in their religious ideas and aspirations, but developed widely different political attitudes and entered different kinds of alliances, resulting in different effects on the prospects of absolutism in Württemberg, Prussia, and England. Based on her comparative research design, Fulbrook is able to sort out that rather than religious ideas, the structure of church-state-society relationships and the source and scope of religious tolerance played the central role in determining the political attitudes and alliances of the Puritan/Pietist movements in the three settings.

Another research strategy is to compare movements from different world religions in order to examine what kinds of an effect, if any, different religious doctrines and authority structures have on political outcomes. Stathis Kalyvas's (2000) comparative analysis of the Belgian Catholic Party in late nineteenth century and of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in late twentieth century reveals that the divergent outcomes in the two cases –successful integration into the democratic system in the former and the banning of the party and eventual civil war in the latter– did not stem from different religious doctrines but from different religious authority structures. In the Belgian case, the centralized and hierarchical church sided with the moderates, enabling them to silence the radicals in the party and strengthening their credibility in the eyes of the incumbent elites. In the absence of a strong and centralized Islamic authority structure, moderates in FIS were unable to eliminate the opposition of the radicals within the party and failed to demonstrate to the incumbent elites that they held the party's reins.

## **2. Cross-Religious Comparisons: German Political Catholicism and Turkish Political Islam in Comparison**

My own dissertation work belongs to the third category outlined above. Furthermore, like Kalyvas's article, it belongs to that relatively small subgroup of studies that involve a cross-religious comparison. In this section, I will give a summary of some of my research findings and discuss the implications of cross-religious comparisons in the study of religious politics.

My dissertation compares German political Catholicism in late 19<sup>th</sup> / early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Turkish political Islam in post-1970 Turkey. Based on these two cases, it addresses two questions: 1. how can one explain the formation of a religious-political orientation as a major political position in national politics and the rise of successful political parties based on this orientation? 2. how can one explain the incorporation of initially oppositional religious-political movements into mainstream politics?

In this section I will limit the discussion to my findings concerning the first question. I argue that both in the case of Turkish Islam and German Catholicism, the rise of successful religious-political parties occurred through a process I call "revival-reaction-politicization." In both cases, a major religious revival led to the increased public visibility of religious institutions and practices. Powerful social groups and state actors who perceived a threat in the increased power of the religious authority and increased strength of the religious identity in question responded with counter-mobilization and repressive state policies. Religious activists in turn mobilized politically to defend religion, based on the strong religious identity, wide organizational web, and powerful religious authority brought about by the revival. Where no existing political party effectively engaged in the defense of religion, this political mobilization led to the formation of a distinct religious-political position in national politics and the rise of a successful religious party based on this orientation.

While the theory of revival-reaction-politicization establishes a contingent link between religious life (revival) and political institutions (party), it suggests that politicization in the sense of successful party-formation does not stem primarily from religion-specific doctrines or

authority structure, but from the interaction of religious activism with established social elites and state power.

Cross-religious comparisons of this sort raise important problems, such as differences in core religious doctrines and religious authority structures. These differences, however, also create distinctive opportunities for addressing the meta-questions in the study of religion and politics. The differences thus need to be explicitly addressed in the course of the research rather than being seen as problems that preclude the possibility of meaningful comparison.

Let me start with differences in religious authority structures: Major scholars of religion and politics, such as Kalyvas (2003) and José Casanova (2005), have rightly pointed out that the structure of religious authority is fundamentally different in Catholicism and Islam and that this difference may have crucial implications for political outcomes. A central feature of Catholicism is its centralized and hierarchical authority structure which has crucial implications for the entire organization of religious life. In Islam, however, one cannot identify a transnational, centralized, and hierarchical religious authority. The holders of effective religious influence change across national contexts and there is often a diversity of competing actors and organizations that claim religious authority.

However, a closer look reveals that the formal authority structure in Catholicism does not exhaustively regulate all possibilities for religious action. In fact, bitter ideological divisions and generational struggles within the clergy (Weber 1973, Schulte-Umberg 2004), as well as conflicts of interest between lower clergy and bishops (Kalyvas 1996: 83-84) often result in the *de facto* fragmentation of religious authority. These fragmentations are often not captured by the formal schema of the Catholic hierarchy depicted as seamlessly flowing from Vatican down to archbishops, bishops, parish priests, and laymen, a picture that was ironically shared by the anti-Catholic polemicists of late nineteenth century (Anderson 2000, Clark 2003: 12). The picture gets especially complicated when lay activists enter the story –as was the case in Europe after mid-nineteenth century– and possibilities for the *de facto* subversion of the relationship between

higher and lower clergy on the one hand and between clergy and laymen on the other hand increase considerably (Kalyvas 1996). In the case of religious parties, both historical and social scientific analyses have indicated that party leaders exercise important degrees of autonomy vis-à-vis the clerical hierarchy, and that the relationship between them is often one of mutual struggle and accommodation rather than one of control (Kalyvas 1996).

The question of religious doctrine requires a much more extensive investigation than could be done in a brief discussion. However, let me briefly propose that cross-religious research does not only have a distinct analytical angle to make positive contributions to meta-theoretical puzzles but also negative ones. In other words, cross-religious research can demonstrate that some factors that are widely assumed to be crucially important in determining political outcomes are not that relevant. While it would be difficult to make a blanket statement on the importance of religious doctrine in determining or co-determining political outcomes, research in some important areas found that it was not a significant factor: Fulbrook (1983) in her study of the connections between Puritanism/Pietism and political attitudes towards absolutism; Kalyvas in his analysis of the rise of European Christian parties (1996) and in his analysis of the successful incorporation of the Catholic party in Belgium and the failed incorporation of the FIS in Algeria (2000, 2003); and my own research on the politicization and incorporation of German Catholicism and Turkish political Islam.

### **3. Comparing the Past and Present of Religious Politics**

The selection of the cases in my dissertation research also raises many issues concerning the historical dimensions of the comparison. The comparison of German political Catholicism and Turkish political Islam not only produces complications because of its cross-religious and cross-regional nature, but also because the two cases are approximately a century apart. This is the most relevant part of the present discussion in terms of the conference theme, “Comparing

Past and Present.” I will discuss the problems and opportunities resulting from this kind of a comparison under three headings: methodological, epistemological, and normative-political.

### 1. Methodological:

The first issue to tackle is the one raised by Charles Tilly about comparisons of cases that belong to different historical moments. As he succinctly put it, “the sequence in which similar events occur has a substantial impact on their outcomes” (Tilly 1984: 79). This concern requires one to investigate the ways in which the first event’s occurrence may have affected the conditions under which the second event took place.

In my research, this meant clarifying the connections between the rise of the Center Party in Germany and the rise of Islamic parties in Turkey. The struggle of European states with the Catholic church has no doubt played a central role in the development of secular arrangements and ideologies in Europe (Martin 1978), which in turn provided a model for Turkish secularism. Thus, one may identify a historical connection between the secularisms that play a central role in the two cases – a story of political diffusion. However, the Turkish republic adopted its model of laïcité from France (Berkes 1964, Toprak 1981), not from Germany. In fact, efforts to develop a distinct Catholic political orientation and to build a successful Catholic party have historically failed in France (Kalyvas 1996:114-166). The rise of German political Catholicism and of Center Party did not have a palpable effect on the conditions under which Turkish political Islam developed.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. Epistemological:

An important problem with the study of historical cases is our remoteness to these. In-depth research allows the analyst to familiarize herself with the world in which the historical case

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<sup>2</sup> The more relevant connection may perhaps be seen as the frequent references to Christian Democracy by supporters of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) who conceive of it as a Muslim analog (Hale 2006). While political Catholicism constitutes the roots of European Christian Democracy (Cary 1996), these references must be seen in the context of a defense of this party against accusations that religious parties as such violate Western democratic norms. Thus, these claims should be taken as part of a strategic discourse rather than as signs of an actual connection between the cases.

has taken place. However, the sense that the ways of thinking and the social and political landscape may be too different from our own to get a good grasp of the world historical actors inhabited may often persist even after such investigation. Systematic analogous thinking based on the familiar fabric of the present cultural, social, and cultural world allows the breaking of the barrier with the past both for the analyst and her readers. In more concrete terms, such comparison may help the analyst to find the right questions to ask in the past case. As long as comparative research is done in a systematic manner, the relative resistance of the historical material to the terms of the initial questions also enables one to avoid the reverse danger of non-consciously imposing to the past assumptions derived from the present.

Even more important is the perspective that one gains from analyzing past cases for the understanding of the present case. The problem with studying the present is that we are too familiar with it. Social theorists from Giddens to Bourdieu have emphasized our embeddedness in the present social world in which we ourselves have stakes. The most important problem here is the non-conscious infiltration of practical categories into our analytical categories. Indeed, when studying a current topic such as political Islam, it is very difficult to have sufficient autonomy from the terms of the public discourse on the subject when formulating the research questions. The study of past cases in a comparative perspective is a crucial resource to enable one to gain the required critical distance and approach the present issues from a fresh perspective.

I would like to give an example here from the second part of my research which examines the conditions under which oppositional religious-political movements are incorporated into mainstream polities. The most relevant literature on this topic is that on religion and democracy. While there are many different approaches scholars advocate on the subject – essentialist, historical constructionist, and institutional/pragmatist– the central question they all pose is similar: under what conditions do religious-political movements become compatible with liberal-democratic norms and thus get successfully incorporated into their mainstream polities?

My analysis of German Catholicism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century has alerted me to the problematic assumptions inherent in this question. I have discovered that the language used in many of these studies such as “taming” and “moderation” is misleading, as it presupposes that the incorporation of the religious-political movements depend on their adjustment to liberal-democratic norms. However, the consideration of religious-political movements as inherent threats to democracy is often part and parcel of the discourse used against them by their opponents. Repressive measures by state institutions are justified on the grounds that allowing these movements to assume power through the normal path of electoral politics and to exercise power without impediment would lead to the destruction of the democratic regime. These claims, however, have to be taken with a grain of salt. While this discourse constructs state actors as guardians of liberal democracy that *have to* restrain the religious-political movement, analysts must consider the possibility that these actors may in fact *want* to exclude these movements in order to maintain their own privileges and power. Assuming that a religious-political movement would be incorporated into the mainstream polity only if it would make a credible commitment to democratic rules and liberal values is to uncritically adopt the practical terms of a discourse used by one of the parties to the political struggles in question.

Familiarity with the history of the integration of German Catholicism makes one aware that the central question of the ‘religion and democracy’ literature is not a meaningful one for this case. The Center in its oppositional phase was a stabilizing force for the new electoral political system, effectively adopting modern voter mobilization methods, helping integrate marginalized groups into the new political game, leading the displacement of the politics of the notables, resisting the absolutist claims of the state, and cultivating a culture of opposition in the parliament. The relative integration of German political Catholicism into the mainstream German polity between roughly 1890 and the First World War, however, was mostly a result of its increasing support for government policies. Center leaders’ efforts in this period focused on proving the national reliability of German Catholics and the viability of the Center as a

government party. Thus, after 1890 the party consistently supported policies of militarization, Tirpitz's navy program, and the project of colonial expansion.<sup>3</sup>

The resistance of the historical record to the terms of this by now conventional question in turn led me to examine whether it was that useful in studying incorporation in the Turkish case and in the other contemporary cases widely discussed in the literature. Such examination has revealed that the gradual adoption of dominant national idioms was also a major component of incorporation for Turkish Islamic parties. I have found that in many cases discussed in this literature, relative incorporation has not been dependent on democratization, but on the adoption of the dominant signs, strategies, sanctions, and subject-positions of mainstream regimes.<sup>4</sup> In some cases these include liberal values and democratic norms; in most they do not. Indeed, many of the studies in the religion and democracy literature focus on regimes (e.g., Wickham and El-Ghobashy on Egypt, Nasr on Pakistan) in which liberal values and democratic norms do not appear as the key issues at stake for incorporation. The conflation of liberalization and incorporation results from the unreflected infiltration of practical categories into analytical categories and is difficult to detect as a result of the embeddedness of contemporary analysts in the terms of the present public discourse. Systematic comparison with a historical case provides the required distance that allows one to detect practical assumptions hidden in analytical ones.

To sum up, the comparison of past and present allows the simultaneous defamiliarization of a present that is too familiar and familiarization of a past that may otherwise remain remote. Questions derived from present cases provide an entry point into the historical case, and insights derived from historical cases allow one to gain the analytical distance that is otherwise difficult to obtain vis-à-vis a present case.

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<sup>3</sup> Center Party thus supported the navy bills of 1898 and 1890, the military bill of 1899, the military law of 1905, and the navy law of 1906 (Blackbourn 1980: 24). These were meant to signify undeniable way that Center Party and the Catholics were staunch supporters of the German national project (Morsey 1970: 51). In Blackbourn's words, "Lieber and his fellow Centre leaders were determined to appear 'two hundred percent German'" (1980: 37).

<sup>4</sup> I adopt this conceptualization of regime from Adams and Padamsee (2001).

### 3. Normative-Political

The epistemological questions of familiarization and defamiliarization raise many normative issues, especially when the past case is Catholicism in a European country and the present case is Islam in a Middle Eastern one. What are the normative-political implications of comparing the contemporary “East” and the present “West”?

In a sense, studying political Islam through the same analytical framework as past European Catholicism and identifying common patterns in the development of the two cases<sup>5</sup> has the political effect of familiarizing the present for the observer from a Western vantage point. Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser, the editors of an excellent volume on the secular-Catholic culture wars in nineteenth century Europe, suggest: “If the issues contested in late nineteenth-century Europe remain alive –albeit in different forms– at the outset of the twenty-first century, the same applies *a fortiori* to those South Asian and Middle-Eastern societies in which secular elites have come under pressure from growing religious movements ... [T]he religious conflicts still troubling so many of the world’s societies are less exotic to modern ‘western’ political culture than we are often encouraged to believe” (Clark and Kaiser 2003: 9). In other words, the presumed fundamental differences between Islam and Christianity are relativized through such a comparison.

In fact, one of the most striking similarities between the case of Catholicism in the nineteenth century and Islam today is the global discourses that have stigmatized these religions as inherently fundamentalist belief systems that are incompatible with political modernity, progress, and individual freedom (Casanova 2005). From our historical perspective we now know that most European Catholic political movements have evolved into Christian Democracy (Cary

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<sup>5</sup> As Charles Tilly observed, a convincing universalizing comparison “reduces the intellectual need to erect separate explanatory frameworks for each setting” (Tilly 1984: 145). In the case of Christianity and Islam – and Western Europe and the Middle East– this separation is often based on unquestioned cultural assumptions rather than on carefully constructed research design.

1996, Kalyvas 1996) and thus the assumed inherent incompatibility of Catholicism with political modernity was simply wrong. But perhaps more importantly, recent historians of Germany tell us that despite its mixed record, Center Party played an important role to support the democratic features of the German Empire in its first decade, in the very period when it was most intensely accused of being a reactionary political force. And this was well before Vatican II which many scholars interpret as the turning point for Catholic political currents (Philpott: 510-513). In my dissertation I deliberately refrain from making a prediction that Turkish political Islam will follow the same path as European political Catholicism. However, the explanations I arrive at on the basis of this comparative analysis minimally suggest that neither the rise of political Islam nor its current incorporation into the mainstream polity in Turkey is a function of doctrines or authority patterns specific to Islam.

While the identification of fundamental similarities in the patterns of political Catholicism and political Islam may prevent one from seeing political Islam through an exceptionalist lens (as absolutely different from the Christian-Western experience) there are many dangers involved in assuming that Middle Eastern countries dealing with religious politics are going through a phase which European societies have trodden a century ago. Middle Eastern and Muslim societies of today are not going through the European world of last century – they are living in the same present as Europe. Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that religion-state-society relations in Turkey will evolve in a similar direction as it did in Germany. Such assumptions would amount to introducing an implicit modernization theory into the comparative analysis of the present and the past. The explanatory models of politicization and incorporation I propose recognize major points of contingency and are thus rather agnostic about the future of religious politics. Assuming identical repetition across culture, space, and time would be equally erroneous as assuming an absolute difference between Christianity and Islam, Europe and Middle East, past and present.

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