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Discourses on Religion and Identity in Norway: Right-Wing Radicalism and Anti-Immigration Parties

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For the last twenty years, Europe has witnessed the birth of new extreme right-wing movements fighting for a stronger national identity, supporting islamophobic theses and sharing a strong dislike of immigration figures and policies. Little by little, anti-immigration parties have become leading forces in many countries and are now duly represented in numerous Parliaments (in Sweden, Denmark, Norway Finland, as well as in France, Greece, the Netherlands and so on). Vincent Legrand's work (see also in this book) depicts some of these new movements, including such organizations as 'Stop Islamization Of Europe' in Denmark, which share transnational networks and a common ideological foundation: they often quote Samuel P. Huntington, the creator of the clash of civilizations postulate; they frown upon cultural Marxism and fear the end of Europe as we know it – as a vigorous Muslim demography may threaten it as such, for instance (the latter being called the Eurabian thesis). Vincent Legrand's analysis highlights the way they give a wide berth to more 'typical' and/or older racist ideologies, all the while trying to redefine xenophobia in terms of conflicts utterly deprived of racial issues. With them, xenophobia and racism are actually evolving differently and reflect the broader mutations that are taking place in our societies. This evolution teaches us something crucial about the way European citizens understand and build their identities, as a novel social and political order gradually replaces nation states – the model formerly known to us as a means of European democratic governance – in what could be called a 'postnational constellation' (Habermas 2000). Therefore, in analysing Vincent Legrand's essay

further, I shall focus on how the Norwegian right-wing radicalism and anti-immigration parties use religion (somewhat paradoxically) as a means to redefine collective identities in our more global, multicultural and interdependent societies. Whilst Europe is becoming highly secular – we will even use 'post-secular' to designate Northern Europe countries –, these movements have actually brought religion back into politics, a fact quite likely to betray its dichotomy with the most common theories about secularization.

Fully to understand how religion is used by far right parties to depict new patterns of 'imagined communities' (if one may use Benedict Anderson's expression), this study shall be based on the analysis of *Fremskrittspartiet*'s party platforms, interviews, Anders Behring Breivik's famed manifesto *2083*, and electoral studies performed in 2001, 2005 and 2009 (courtesy of Statistics Norway). My personal hypothesis is that multiculturalism and the feeling of 'globality' (Giddens 1990) reactivate religion's collective function (Durkheim may have been close to this definition), as our societies tend to become more globalized and their identities more reflexive.

Religion and nationalism in northern Europe societies

Northern European countries are interesting, if not unique, case studies. They are constantly rated as the best places to live in the world, political and social unrest is rare, and theirs are among the healthiest economic systems in the world. Still, anti-immigration parties have become major political forces there, and they are now well represented in all northern Parliaments: the Norwegian Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet – FrP*) in the Storting, the Danish People Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*) in the Folketing, the True Finns (*Perussuomalaiset*) in the Eduskunta, or even the smaller Sweden (or Swedish) Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, admitted in the Riksdag in 2010). All are sceptical about the multiculturalism which, in their opinion, undermines or even destroys European culture and national unity. There are also much more radical organizations and people, such as the one responsible for the grim Oslo attacks of 07/22/2011: Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people, mostly young members of the Labour Party (*Arbeiderpartiet*), and planted a bomb in a car which detonated in Regjeringskvartalet, the executive government quarter of Oslo. This self-proclaimed lone wolf claimed that he wanted to take revenge on the Norwegian multicultural policies that he held the Labour Party responsible for. In his manifesto, *2083*, Breivik made it

clear that he fully despised such an intermingling of communities, Islam and its social-democratic 'cultural Marxism', relying on the 'Eurabian' thesis to support his vision of a Christian-European cohesive group at war against Islam and the Arabic world. Despite the information provided at first by the police, this man is far from being a fundamentalist Christian or 'an excessively religious man': rather – as he puts it – a 'supporter of a monocultural Christian Europe' (*2083*) who radically isolates political and cultural functions from ethical and metaphysical issues.

We may call northern European countries 'post-secular societies'; theirs are among the lowest rates of traditional religious observance in the world. Since World War II, religious ties and habits have declined. Religion has gradually been sidelined, as the separation between State and Church has asserted itself, and public institutions became more and more independent of the Church. Following high immigration waves and the development of mass pluralism, religion had to redefine its prerogatives. In Norway, the separation between State and Church (May 2012 – 2000 in Sweden) gave way to a later stage of secularization progress: multiculturalism and religious diversity are now the social norm. The institutions have expanded policies freed from denominational and/or spiritual justifications. Religion and the National Churches have lost their 'from above' prerogatives but still have a legitimate role to play as ethical and moral actors in public matters. In such a highly secular culture, religions are quite distinct from politics, since they no longer have any structural political function. Yet, paradoxically enough, the northern European peoples are still intimately linked to the cultural and 'tribal' function of their National Churches (Harry 2013; Petterson and Riis 1994; Riis 2013).

Interactions between nationalism and religion raise a lot of theoretical discussions (Brubaker 2012; Santiago 2012). The return of religious issues in politics, and especially among nationalist leaders and followers, questions the 'linear and compensatory' model, where nationalism is often viewed as a replacement for historical religions. However, even if this model may still seem relevant, the importance religion gains today in highly secular countries requires a deeper analysis of the function of religion in the political field: As elements of national collective representations, do religions assert the compensatory evolution? How do religions help to elaborate collective and fictitious identities in the midst of societies becoming more and more globalized and interconnected?

The memorialization of religion

The 16th century Lutheran Reformation in Scandinavia (and even more so throughout the 17th century), based on the principle of *cujus regio ejus religio* ('Whose realm, his religion'), led to confessionalization (or 'confession-building') through the erection of religious states and involved the "fusion of politics and religion through the emergence of territorial churches subordinated to secular political control" (Brubaker 2012). Churches had a territorial and identitarian function and constructed their legitimacy in terms of collective identities acting as symbols of national unity. In this context, being a member of these Churches meant belonging to the national community they partly organized and ritualized (Aagedal 2000). Still, the de-territorialization which occurred during the 19th and 20th centuries gradually sapped the historical links between religion, citizenship and ethnicity.

More recently, throughout the second part of the 20th century, Norway obviously turned into an attractive place to live: the number of immigrants grew steadily during the late nineties and after 2004, reaching 13.1% of the Norwegian population in 2012 (Statistics Norway). This led to a more extensive religious plurality and the development of faiths that were quite unknown before. Consequently, this situation radically changed the notions of multiculturalism, religious diversity and, last but not least, the conception of citizenship and identity. Today's angles may seem paradoxical, though: despite very high rates of secularization and quite affirmative multicultural policies, most Norwegians still belong to the Lutheran Church of Norway (77% of the population in 2012, Statistics Norway). Religion still has a national and collective symbolic function, as the high rates of baptisms, religious wedding ceremonies, etc. attest to. The Church of Norway still owns cultural preemption over life and death rituals and assumes "cognitive, ideological, normative, commemorative and dramaturgical functions" (Riis 2010). Thus, Norway is a good example of a "belonging without believing" society (Davie 1994). Yet, in spite of wide secularization and an outward acceptance of diversity and religious pluralism, examinations demonstrate that religious pluralism and ethnic diversity can create suspicion. By and large, Norwegians consider immigration to be a positive aspect of society's growth, but contacts between natives and migrants have never increased in numbers over the last ten years (from 2001 to 2010, marriages between those two categories are even fewer – Statistics Norway: 2012). Meanwhile, the Progress Party (*FrP*), allied to the Conservative Party (*Høyre*, meaning "Right" – [H]),

became a major political formation and may even rise to power after the next election, on Sept. 9, 2013.

In this period, the *FrP* leaders' speeches and platforms have increasingly been marked by religious references, evolving from a very critical position to a clear acknowledgement of Christianity as democracy and individual freedom's cultural matrix, as well as the Norwegian and Western cultures' matrix. Now, the *FrP* is a "party for the people [whose] values are that of the Norwegian constitution, of the Norwegian and Western traditions: A cultural legacy inspired both by Christian and humanistic values". Later, they clarified their views, stating that "Christian culture and ethics [are the] fundamental values of the Norwegian society" (*FrP* party platform: 2005-2009). Yet, during the seventies and eighties, the *FrP* was very critical, even sceptical, of Christianity and the Church Of Norway: In order to fight for more individual freedom from the traditional social order, the party wanted to ban catechism in public schools, wanted to reduce the Church's income and, last but not least, separate Church from State. The dominant denomination was seen as a threat to individuality and liberal freedom. But in 2008, as the debate about school law was becoming fact, the *FrP* made it clear that school teachings should be based upon humanist and Christian traditions and legacies (Harry 2006).

Nevertheless, *FrP* supporters are among the less religious voters in Norway. Two accurate studies made about Norwegian voters after the parliamentary elections of 2001 and 2009 (Aardal, Valen, Karlsen and Normann 2001; Berglund, Reymert and Aardal 2009) show that they widely disapproved of the policies typically supported by Christian Norwegian parties in 2001 (i.e. restrictive alcohol and smoking policies). To boot, 43% of the *FrP* voters favoured abortion in cases when the infant might end up sick or disabled – the latter figure being the highest among all Norwegian parties. In 2009, 65% of the *FrP* voters considered themselves as being 'religiously passive' (61% in 1997 and 2001, 66% in 2005), the next highest score after that of the Socialist Left Party (*Sosialistisk Venstreparti* – 74%). *FrP* supporters have no distinct religious behaviours and are among the most secular and passive. On the other hand, the range of *FrP* advocates considered as 'religiously active' (the latter classification being based upon active membership of any given religious community) rose from 7% to 14% over ten years (2001-2009). This fact may be viewed as coherent with the result of some studies concluding that xenophobic types pay more attention to religious affiliation as an obligation and an attachment to a certain form of moral spirituality, while the more tolerant view religion as a personal choice

and preference, open to other religious traditions (Riis 2010). In other words, *FrP* voters are still among the less religious types, but they are more attracted to religious identity, and religious affiliates in their midst are growing in numbers. The clear discrepancy between traditional religious and moral values and the use of a vague religious identity are quite consistent with the view that former leader (1978-2006) Carl I. Hagen expressed in 2004: It is more important to promote fundamental Christian values in society than that everyone turns into a faithful Christian. Yet, despite the gap between traditional Norwegian values and the opinions supported by most *FrP* voters, the party has now seized and polarized the general debate about religious identities in Norway. It is setting the tone and reinterpreting Christianity as a symbolic matrix for nationality and democracy, leading to secular humanism, gender equality and democratic values. Nothing new under the sun, the function attributed to religion focuses here on the role played by the legacy of identities due to the process of nation-building.

From this perspective, the memorial identity function in the *FrP*'s speeches and platforms – and more generally in right-wing populism – is not on a par with a return of religion. Rather, it is a process of memorialization, as the notion of civil religion, a from-above structuring institution, departs more and more from the public sphere. It is more likely that this evolution is highlighting the final – or at least one further – step on the secularization process, where the national-memorial function works as a reminder of the past. All the same, it would be too simplistic to focus only on the memorial function as a reminder *per se*. It also plays a very discriminatory role when it separates the national/cultural community from supposedly allogeneic ones in a multipolar world.

The essentialization of religion

The globalization of economic, political (Norway is not part of the European Union but does belong to the Schengen and European Economic Areas), social and cultural relationships has important consequences on our perceptions of the world and its communities. Globalization and the greater accessibility of the media and of new means of communication challenge historical borders and traditional identities. The current multipolar situation and the European follow-up construction further challenge the supremacy of nation states. The "disembedding of social systems" – characterized by the dissociation between social relationships and local contexts of interaction –, as well as the development

of a new interactivity in a dislocated time-and-space pattern (Giddens 1990) modify the definition of our identities as individuals and community members. The point here is not to discuss the way global mutations can concretely be measured, but merely to stress how we *feel* or *perceive* them. The sense of belonging is based not only upon definite rational and well recognizable frameworks, but also on the perceptions, beliefs and subjectivities which explain and organize (the cognitive function) and possess an affective and social function. The *feeling* of community happens to be both local and global, as the *perception* of being a part of a multi-layered, networked and geographically flexible world grows in intensity. Therefore, affections, feelings and emotions are "active ingredients" when it comes to defining new identities, even more so since the de-territorialization of religions in Europe has led to multicultural and reciprocal societies – shaped by constellated religious and ethnic communities. In this context, our rational understanding of electoral and political behaviours as well as platform narratives must then be reinforced by taking into account emotionality and subjectivity – so as to comprehend and rebuild the subjective and imagined constellations we live in.

The *FrP*'s speeches and platforms and, even more importantly, Breivik's manifesto view ethnic and religious identities as parts of an open and global world where religious identities are constellated into vague territorial entities. Here, religion is used to redefine borders, be it inside or outside national communities. Christianity serves as a transnational cultural segment destined to create a feeling of global sameness, allowing the exclusion of others in spite of a world open to all. There is no trace of theological or metaphysical to be found in those theories, just the self-same postulate according to which secular Christianity created a *habitus* of democracy, equality and liberalism. They evidently target Islam, the essence of which becomes viewed as irreconcilable with European culture – since Christianity is, in their opinion, the matrix in which the idea of Europe has its roots – and state an intrinsic impossibility for Islam and Muslims to promote democracy, gender equality and human rights. *Per se*, Islam is allogeneic to Norway and Europe. To illustrate this notion, let us quote former *FrP* leader Carl I. Hagen: In 2004, while visiting a Charismatic Parish in Norway, he publicly declaimed that the prophet Muhammad may never have said: "Let the little children come to me" (Matt. 19:14) unless, he added, he intended to use them to become soldiers for the Jihad. If one puts his political strategy aside, and considers that right-wing radicals and anti-immigration parties teach us something about the transformation of religious identities, the essentialist understanding of

religious consciousness in politics highlights a phenomenon some believed would disappear with modernity: religion rears its head as a collective identity marker even among non-religious people, so as to redefine borders in this new 'post-national constellation' (Habermas 2000). It defines groups according to their religious identities and presents them as homogenous entities. In actuality, it is a mirror-like process based on the perception that Muslims form a homogenous cultural community. Consequently, it leads to the perception of a European Christian common and harmonious identity, although euroscepticism rates high among *FrP* supporters.

Conclusion

Is the presence of religion in right-wing Norwegian politics no more than a cultural anachronism, or – quite the contrary – is this proximity the dawn of a larger swing? The "memorialization" of religion seemingly rests upon the national function formerly allotted to the Church. Yet, strikingly enough, this memorialization process occurs when the *historical* role of the Church dwindles. On the contrary, the 'essentialization' of religion seems to be a highly *actual* process. Communities are reduced to essentialist features as they become more and more dislocated from time and space, while religious identities are reduced to simplistic cultural codes and goods to support the thesis stating that the differences between Christianity and Islam as cultural and political matrices are insuperable. Breivik's manifesto seems much more radical than the *FrP*'s platform or speeches, but is very close when he claims for "a European cultural conservative hegemony in Europe" and a "Church leadership who supports a future Crusade with the intention of liberating the Balkans, Anatolia and creating three Christian states in the Middle East" (*in 2083*), matching the perception according to which groups do exist throughout pluralized and globalized societies. Hence, the ethnic dimension of religion in right-wing politics seems to be progressively complemented by an essentialist/discriminative function more adeptly conform to the growing feeling of globality and the development of a non-racist transnational xenophobia. Ethno-differentialist narratives replace the racialist thesis by considering secularized Christianity as the matrix of the *habitus* of democracy, gender equality and freedom versus the fantasized *habitus* of dictatorship, inequality and totalitarism that Islam is held responsible for – emphasizing consequently the importance of religious identities even in highly secular times.

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