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Catholicism and the Support for European Integration: A Critique of the Methodological Underpinnings

Abstrakt: Od dawna twierdzi się, że istnieje szczególny związek między katolicyzmem a integracją europejską. Jednak naukowa dyskusja na temat jego znaczenia rzadko wykracza poza analizy statystyczne, które wykazują silne korelacje, ale nie mogą dostarczyć zrozumienia, dlaczego i kiedy u katolików przeważa przywiązanie do Unii Europejskiej nad sceptycyzmem czy obojętnością wobec niej. W artykule przedstawiono trzy argumenty filozoficzne, które wskazują na wady badań pozytywistycznych i pokazują, w jaki sposób podejście interpretatywistyczne mogłoby rzucić światło na badany temat.

Słowa kluczowe: katolicyzm, integracja europejska, Unia Europejska, pozytywizm, interpretatywizm

Abstract: It has long been argued that a special relationship between Catholicism and European integration exists. Yet, the scholarly discussion of its meaning has seldom gone beyond statistical analyses that show robust correlations, but cannot provide an understanding of why and when Catholics tend to choose commitment to European Union over skepticism or indifference to it. Three philosophical arguments are presented in the paper which indicate the flaws of positivist research and show how an interpretivist approach could shed light on the topic studied.

Keywords: Catholicism, European integration, European Union, Positivism, Interpretivism

Introduction

The results of the 2016 EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the following withdrawal of the country in 2020, also known as *Brexit,* made it clear that

public support is indispensable for the existence of the European Union. Why do some people favor integration and on what do they base positive evaluation of this supranational political project? What could reinforce or undermine their support in the future? These questions interest political elites as well as political scientists.

Four main theoretical explanations, namely utilitarian, reference, cue-taking and identity, have long dominated the field [Hobolt and Vries 2016: 413-432; Ejrnæs and Jensen 2019: 1390-1419). First, citizens from countries which most benefit from the EU economically as well as people who personally benefit from the liberalization of European trade are more supportive towards the EU. Second, individuals use national proxies to evaluate the EU: citizens who trust national political institutions are more supportive, as are citizens in more corrupt countries. Finally, if citizens support a pro-EU national party or if national media coverage on the EU is positive, they will sympathize with EU integration.

In addition to the three above-mentioned explanations, identity factors also contribute to public attitudes towards the EU, i.e. people support the EU if it is in line with their norms and values. To be more specific, particular attention has been paid to religion and even more to Catholicism for two reasons.

Firstly, because of a close connection between Catholicism and the project of European unification in historical terms. Most of the EU 'founding fathers' – Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman, Alcide De Gasperi – were practising or even devout Catholics and their faith contributed to their determination to unify Europe [Loughlin 2015: 43-56]. Consequently, Catholic social teaching impacted the main EU principles, particularly subsidiarity [Marquardt 1994: 616-640; Evans 2013: 44-60] and the Vatican has always supported European integration [Chelini-Pont 2009: 131-146; Kratochvíl, Doležal 2015].

Secondly, contradictions between religious and liberal EU worldviews constantly arise regarding the following issues: conflicts in life-and-death decisions, sexuality and reproductive matters, regulations of religious affairs in the public sphere, institutional memory in terms of the "Christian roots" concept in the failed European Constitution project and later in the Treaty of Lisbon [Foret, Schlesinger 2006: 59-81; Foret 2015; Mudrov 2015: 507-528; Mudrov 2016: 1-16). Moreover, the clergy in some of the Central and Eastern European countries have spoken publicly against the EU, identifying it as a threat to national identity and faith [Ramet 2006: 117-147; Szumigalska 2015: 342-356; Guerra 2016: 25-45].

Literature review

Scholars have repeatedly shown that Catholics are more supportive of the EU in comparison to believers affiliating with other Christian denominations and non-believers, especially in countries where Catholicism is dominant [Nelsen, Guth and Cleveland 2001: 191-217; Hagevi 2002: 759–769; Boomgaarden, Freire 2009: 1240-1265; Nelsen, Guth and Highsmith 2010: 1-26; Grötsch, Schnabel, 2012: 586-610; Hamerly 2012: 214-239; Lazić et al 2012: 167-191; Scherer 2015: 893-909; Spohn, Koenig and Knöbl 2015; Nelsen and Guth 2015; 2016; Kolpinskaya, Fox 2019: 580-598; Scherer 2020: 119-149]. According to these authors, religion is involved in questions regarding the ultimate scope and potential of the EU, what ties Europe together, who counts as "European", and how national borders and identities matter.

Nelsen et al. [2001; 2010; 2015; 2016] conducted many studies repeatedly showing that public opinions about integration in Europe are shaped by what they call "confessional cultures," meaning shared ideas, behaviors and particular institutions produced by different religious traditions, namely by Catholic and Protestant confessions. Catholics tend to support the EU more than Protestants, but the direction and strength of the influence is dependent on the national religious context (e.g. Catholic minorities in Protestant countries tend to distrust the EU and Protestants in Catholic countries tend to be warmer toward the EU). Boomgarden and Freire [2009], Sherer [2015; 2020], Spohn, Koenig and Knöbl [2015], Lazić et al [2012] also have revealed that the religious context of the country matters. As Grötsch and Schnabel [2012] put it, a higher percentage of Catholics is related to higher EU-confidence nationwide while a higher percentage of Protestants is related to a lower level of confidence. Most studies indicate the difference between observant Catholics and less committed ones, but the direction of the relationship depends on a national context [Nelsen, 2010; 2016; Kolpinskaya, Fox 2019].

The above-mentioned scholars consider religion to be an independent variable affecting support for the EU in their statistical analysis. They use various sets of quantitative data from Eurobarometer, European Social Survey, European Values Study, European Election Studies, International Social Survey Programme, Chapel Hill Expert Survey, Election Studies of particular countries. They also provide a broad overview of the developments since 1973. In addition, they observe a regular relationship between Catholicism and EU support throughout the Union as well as in separate member countries. Because of these three aspects (different data, broad time and space framework) the correlation is well-established.

Statistical methods such as multiple linear regression and factor analysis enable scholars to distinguish between micro and macro variables, and to test whether religiosity matters when other independent variables are controlled.

However, the scholarly discussion of the meaning of the relationship between Catholicism and support for the EU has seldom gone beyond the statistical analyses. The studies show robust correlations but do not provide an explanation as to why and when Catholics tend to choose commitment to the EU over skepticism or indifference to it. The most one can derive from above-mentioned research as an explanation on this topic is that Catholics are open to supranationalism because the Catholic Church historically was oriented towards internationalism [Scherer 2020: 142] Although the quantitative analyses contribute significantly to the knowledge, this paper argues that an interpretivist approach would shed more light on the topic and indicate the flaws in positivist research.

Questioning Methodological Underpinnings
1. Causality
From a positivist point of view, religiosity is a causal factor, which is external and contingent to support for the EU in the same vein as income, education, age, partisanship etc. However, religion is a system of symbols which establishes "powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such

an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" [Geertz 1973: 90]. Therefore, it can shape the ideas that people have about social reality, politics, and the EU. We should ask what the EU means to religious individuals. Do the ideas originating from religion encourage their understanding of EU in any way?

In contrast to sociologist Emile Durkheim who believed that social life should be explained by profound causes unperceived by consciousness instead of the notions that people have, philosopher Paul Winch argued that social life is an expression of people's ideas about reality. "It would be impossible," he wrote "to give more than a superficial account of those relations [with fellow monks and people outside monastery] without taking into account the religious ideas around which the monk's life revolves" [Winch 1958: 23]. In that case is it possible to study Catholics' support for the EU without considering religion as a set of ideas about reality?

Drawing on insights provided by MacIntyre [1962], Taylor [1971], McCann [1996] about causality in social science, this paper suggests that a constitutive rather than causal relationship between religion and support for the EU could be explored. It is not external and contingent but internal, conceptual and constitutive, that is to say that individuals conduct themselves in particular ways shaped by their understandings – explicit or tacit – about their worlds. The term "constitutive" expresses "a sensitivity to the ways that our actions are at once delimited and enabled by a complex mix of partial, dialectically interactive knowledge-based (or discursive) factors" [McCann 1996: 463].

In other words, being a member of a local Catholic community could render sensible attitudes on the EU that would otherwise be too complex and detached from the daily lives of most individuals. Most EU citizens do not have direct personal experience, sufficient interest or emotional attachment to it. If we want to be sure that religion shapes support for the EU, we should show that by choosing between alternatives (to support or not), individuals are using criterion related to Catholicism and "explain why the use of this criterion appears rational to those who invoke it" [MacIntyre 1962: 61].

2. Context

Causal models abstract and isolate contextual factors as variables. By reducing religion to a standard independent variable, the particularity of local religious communities are lost. Despite the fact that Catholicism is as universal a religion as one can get (Catholic doctrine and the authority of the pope apply to every Catholic), differences between countries exist in terms of historical context (how closely Catholicism intertwined with national identity), the political leanings of the clergy and issues that are perceived as challenges to one's religious and national identity etc.

Through works of religious sociology we know at least two possible ways in which religion can encourage certain political attitudes. On the one hand, religious teachings stress the importance of some ideas and values and denigrate the importance of others. On the other hand, religious communities provide cognitive structures that help to simplify and understand social reality [Wuthnow 2007: 344-350]. Individuals do not adopt separate attitudes every time they face a unique situation, but tend to rely on cultural schemas, metaphors, narratives which allow them to organize the complex and ambiguous environment into meaningful categories.

"Saul may have become Paul in the aloneness of religious ecstasy, but he could remain Paul only in the context of the Christian community" [Berger and Luckmann 1966: 158]. The community is essential because it guarantees a continuity of a conversation with significant others. That is why to abstract from the context of the communities in research means neglecting various conversations "on which the subjective realities of the world hangs" [Berger 1967: 17]. Catholics in France can have very different interactions regarding EU questions compared to what Pope Francis says or what Catholics in Poland take into account.

3. Language

Finally, the main positivist conundrum is how to operationalize and measure public support for the EU. In the above-mentioned academic literature it is usually operationalized as 1) an opinion as to whether EU membership is a good thing; 2) support for European integration; 3) consideration that the EU beneficial for oneself or one's country; 4) a positive impression of the EU; 5) trust in the EU; 6) a positive assessment of EU institutions 7) a self-identification or sense of being "European" etc.

Thus, support for the EU can be measured as evaluation, impression, trust or identity. The question is whether these different aspects of the same phenomenon are unrelated, interdependent or equivalent. Can one identify as European but not trust EU institutions or think that one's country benefited from the EU and not have a positive impression of the EU in general? Moreover, should we assume that citizens understand the concepts of "feeling European" or "being for further European unification" in the same vein as scholars do? According to Winch, concepts must be familiar to the individual, because if they are not, he or she does not associate any subjective sense with it and consequently any explanation based on such concepts is meaningless [1958: 15].

The interpretive approach could help to overcome this conundrum by studying the concepts as they are used in ordinary language. This sort of enterprise requires more open-ended attention to how people talk, use special terms, jargon, modes of reasoning, metaphors etc. J. L. Austin noticed that scholars should not expect to find simple labels for complicated cases [1970: 21]. We risk missing the connections and distinctions that do not fit in our preconceived categories by ignoring nuances involved in making ordinary claims. "[O]ur common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations," also wrote Austin [1970: 8].

This means that the study of ordinary language opens a window onto the shared culture of a particular community. We can easily tell how the EU or "Europeanness" are defined in the Lithuanian language, but a deep analysis of how everyday language functions is required to enhance shared meanings which may facilitate Lithuanian Catholics' support for European integration. By paying attention to the words that people actually use when thinking and speaking about European integration, we can grasp how they regard this project in their own terms. Subsequently we can analyze whether these shared meaning originate from their Catholic context.

Conclusion

Why do people support the EU? It has been found that apart from dominant economic and elite-centered explanations, religion also contributes to public attitudes toward the EU. There is a strand of academic literature arguing that Catholicism played a role in bolstering public support for the European project. Without putting the Catholic community in the centre of the research, we cannot understand whether this relationship is not merely contingent. As three arguments concerning the methodologies of existing academic literature revealed, positivist enterprise cannot explain the results of its own research.

The question remains as to what really shapes support for the EU – religious ideas, particular local religious communities or neither? It is necessary to put the lived experience of Catholics in the centre of the research if we want to get a sense of what the established correlation means. As Taylor puts it, "a study of the science of man is inseparable from an examination of the options between which men must choose" [1971: 51]. This kind of analysis would contribute to the academic debate on the role of religion in European integration and advance our understanding of the nature of this relationship, which for now remains obscure.

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