Introduction: do “religious parties” exist?

The role of religion in the party politics of contemporary democracies is not a new phenomenon: indeed, it is rooted in the very early stages of development of representative systems. This is true in the case of Europe, where the first Christian parties (such as the German Zentrum) were created already in the last decades of the nineteenth century (Kalyvas, 1996), but also in relation to the developing world, where religiously oriented parties and movements have often played a crucial role, even in polities initially founded on strictly secular bases.

However, the literature and the systematization of the research on religion and political parties are still underdeveloped. As explained by Ozzano and Cavatorta (2013b), in the first place this is a consequence of the predominance of the so-called “secularization paradigm” in twentieth-century social sciences, assuming that religion would gradually disappear or become an utterly private factor in modernized societies (Swatos and Christiano, 1999). This also engendered a normative bias towards the role of religion in party politics, since mainstream political theory regarded parties with a religious orientation as “not real parties [. . .] opportunistic and not committed to electoral democracy [. . .] intransigently ideological, uncompromising, militant, extremist [. . .] aiming at conforming public policy to the imperatives of a single faith [. . .] authoritarian in their organization and goals [. . .] culturally conservative, even anti-modern [. . .] resisting progressive social policies necessary for democratic stability” (Rosenblum, 2003, p. 42). For this reason, the concept of “religious party” itself endures a negative stigma, being often used as synonymous for “extremist” or “intolerant”, in the conviction that “politics based on the sacred” is “antithetical to liberal democracy” (Tepe, 2008, p. 1).

As a consequence, the concept of “religious party” itself is “both loose and controversial” (Ozzano and Cavatorta, 2013b, p. 800), and for this reason a number of scholars even reject the concept, preferring labels such as “religious nationalist”, “communalist”, etc. The main problem posed by the use of this concept is probably, however, its binary nature, implying that a party can be either secular or religious, with no room in between, and no possible nuances. Ozzano and Cavatorta (2013b, p. 800) have tried to overcome this problem by adopting the concept of “religiously oriented party”: “a party that can be explicitly religious or formally secular, where religious values in its manifesto are clearly identifiable, where explicit appeals
to religious constituencies are made and/or where significant religious factions exist within the party”.

It is however useful to briefly analyze the literature on religious parties, to review the features commonly associated by scholars to this type of party.

A point frequently stressed by the literature is the presence of an “associational nexus” at the roots of many parties with an explicit religious orientation. This latter is a very strong tie with some kind of religious institution, association or network, whose organization and basin of militants was crucial for the emergence and growth of the party. In some cases, such as Christian democratic parties, it is a full-fledged church; however, it can also be represented by a religious brotherhood, as in the case of Turkish political Islam; or even a media network (as in the case of the US “televangelists” TV channels, crucial for the success of the Christian Right faction within the Republican Party) (Kalyvas, 1996; Rosenblum, 2003; Yavuz, 2003; Wilcox, Larson and Robinson, 2006). In some cases, especially where religion is heavily mixed with nationalist feelings, as in the case of India, this role can be performed by a grassroots religious nationalist movement (Jaffrelot, 1996).

Many scholars warn, however, that religious political parties cannot be regarded simply as a “political arm” of religious organizations and groups: this is shown particularly by the fact that in the latter phases of their development, these parties often tend (or at least try) to become autonomous from religious networks, especially by developing their own base of political militants, and sometimes (as in the case of Turkey) even getting at odds with their former religious patrons. This is also visible in terms of leadership, with the emergence of secular leaders that sometimes even compete with religious authorities to define what a good believer actually is. With this mainstreaming process (which, in organizational terms, can coincide with the passage from the mass to the catch-all model), their platforms can also tend to become wider, to include non-strictly religious or ethical issues (Yavuz, 2003; Mohseni and Wilcox, 2009).

In terms of cleavages (see following for a more thorough review of this literature) these parties are often seen as a consequence of the secular versus religious cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) engendered by the creation of modern national states. However, as explained later, this point of view has been challenged in the latest decades by the success of new political parties with a religious orientation that do not fit in Lipset and Rokkan’s model of the four “traditional” cleavages.

Religious political parties are often recognizable because their religious identity is made explicit by their name (e.g. Christian Democracy, Islamic Salvation Front, Hezbollah, etc.); however, in some cases it is not, either because the parties want to stress their support for state secularism and their independence from churches (as in the case of Italy’s Popular Party in the early twentieth century), or because some kind of state regulation explicitly forbids religious parties: this is the case of Turkey, where parties’ names, and their symbols, refer to abstract concepts such as justice, truth, welfare; and in parties’ platforms religion is often disguised in terms of identity, tradition, and celebration of history (Yavuz, 2003; Galli, 2004).

For many of the previously mentioned reasons, it is often difficult to single out a “religious party” from a conservative or nationalist party focused on the defense of some type of religious values. This is also why this chapter adopts the concept of “religiously oriented party”, that allows the researcher to consider more nuanced and changing phenomena that cannot be subsumed into the binary dichotomy of “secular vs. religious”.

Considering the social science bias engendered by the predominance of the “secularization paradigm”, and the methodological problems highlighted in relation to the concept of “religious party”, it is probably no surprise that the comparative literature on religion and political parties is underdeveloped, especially when comparisons across regions and cultures are involved.
To begin with, mainstream political science was at first reluctant to properly assess and categorize parties with a religious orientation. The first author to include this type of party in a comprehensive typology of political parties probably was Otto Kirchheimer, who elaborated a classification of four types of political parties which also includes the category of “mass-denominational party”: a model of mass party which has managed to achieve integration not on the basis of class (as in the case of Socialist and Communist parties) but of religious identity. A factor which, however, someway undermines, according to Kirchheimer, its growth potential by engendering a “fortress-type character” (Kirchheimer, 1966, p. 183). This idea was later further developed and refined by Richard Gunther and Larry Diamond in their extensive multidimensional classification of 15 types of political parties. According to the authors, the mass-denominational party, as a loyal and democratic party, must be set apart from another category: the “mass-fundamentalist party”, which is an anti-system party, trying to “reorganize state and society around a strict reading of religious doctrinal principles”, willing to erase separation between religion and state, and to impose its view of religious norms on all citizens, notwithstanding their private religious beliefs (Gunther and Diamond, 2001, pp. 21–22).

Within the political science field, the comparative literature specifically focused on parties with a religious orientation (with the partial exception of specific discussions, such as those about the ‘religious cleavage’ and the ‘inclusion-moderation thesis’, both analyzed below in separate paragraphs) is also still scarce. The existing works prefer to work on national cases, or at most, they engage in comparisons involving single regions and/or religious traditions, such as Christian democratic parties (Irving, 1979; Mainwaring, 2003; Kalyvas and van Kersbergen, 2010), and Islamist parties (Roy, 1992; Noyon, 2003; Salih, 2009). They rarely engage in comparisons across cultures, and when they do, they usually focus on a limited number of cases (Tepe, 2008) or lack elaborated theoretical insights (Ozzano and Cavatorta, 2014).

So far, the only comprehensive classification has been elaborated by Luca Ozzano (2013, 2020), with his typology of five types of religiously oriented parties (fundamentalist, conservative, progressive, nationalist and camp) that are adopted in the following paragraphs of this chapter.

The religious cleavage and its evolution

Before addressing the different types of religious identity a party can show, and their evolution, it is necessary however to mention a notable exception to the previously mentioned neglect of the role of religion in comparative works about political parties: the literature about the “cleavage thesis”, elaborated by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). According to their research, largely based on Europe, the European party systems of the late twentieth century were the consequence of long-term social divides, in turn engendered by traumatic historical events, such as the industrial revolution and the creation of the national state. The four main cleavages, according to Lipset and Rokkan, were “subject versus dominant culture” (also referred to as “centre versus periphery”), “churches versus government”, “primary versus secondary economy” and “workers versus employers”. Particularly, the “churches versus government” cleavage was the result of the creation of the national state, and more specifically of “the conflict between the central nation-building culture and the increasing resistance of the ethnically, linguistically, or religiously distinct subject populations in the provinces and the peripheries”: a struggle that “was one of morals, of the control of community norms”, whose “fundamental issue” was “the control of education” (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967, pp. 14–15).

Although the conflict between religion and secularism was thus regarded by the authors as one of the main forces shaping European party politics, it was however debated how influent
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this factor really was. While of course liberal and Marxist scholars often gave priority to class
cleavages or other divides, further research supported a central role of the religious cleavage: for
example, Richard Rose and Derek Urwin affirmed in 1969 that “religious divisions, not class,
are the main social basis of parties in the Western world today”: a feature that, according to the
authors, was particularly true in Catholic majority countries, because “the Catholic Church
stands for a distinctive form of social integration” (Rose and Urwin, 1969, pp. 12–21). Others
contended that, although many political issues were more or less loosely connected to reli-
gion, “only a small number of political issues clearly follow the religious/secular conflict line”
(Knutsen, 2004, p. 44). More broadly, a significant literature highlighted a decline of the role
of this cleavage (Bellucci and Heath, 2012), in the context of a broader process of “unfreezing”
of European party politics and decline of the role of “traditional” cleavages started in the 1980s
(Lane and Ersson, 1999).

In the same period, scholars started to notice the rise of new parties that did not fit in
the cleavages typology drafted by Lipset and Rokkan: particularly, the ecologist parties (and,
more broadly, the new left and the constellation of movements often prioritizing civil rights
over social ones) (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005) and the new, “extreme” or “populist” right-
wing parties (Kitschelt and McGann, 1997; Ignazi, 2003; Kriesi et al., 2008). These latter
proved particularly puzzling for scholars of religion and politics, because they often referred
to religious values, and, particularly, religious identity, in discourses that could not be under-
standable simply in terms of “religious versus secular”. Indeed, their reference to religion was
more a matter of belonging than a matter of believing: an identity-driven and civilizational
idea of religion where this latter is a marker of identity that allegedly unifies the local com-
munity while setting some groups (often migrants and Muslims) as “threatening others”,
incompatible with the Western culture and civilization (Arato and Cohen, 2017; Brubaker,
2017; Haynes, 2020). In this context, marked according to Simon Bornschier by a new cleav-
age “between libertarian-universalistic and traditionalist-communitarian values” (Bornschier,
2010, p. 434), right-wing populists fiercely oppose “the elites who disregard the importance
of the people’s religious heritage, and the ‘others’ who seek to impose their religious values
and laws upon the native population” (Marzouki and McDonnell, 2016). Another interesting,
and novel, feature of this new party type is the fact that it does not necessarily respect the
authority of religious institutions, when their positions are at odds with the populist creed,
especially in terms of migration and multiculturalism (Ozzano, 2019).

Broadly speaking, the cleavages thesis, and the role of religion in it, have been the subject of
relevant methodological discussions among scholars, which often revolved around the applica-
Bility of this thesis to non-European societies (also in the context of the broader debate about
the “decolonization” of social sciences). Critics contend, particularly, the fact that the idea of
“church versus government” is not applicable to religions such as Islam or Hinduism where the
idea of church itself is often not applicable. As a consequence the most recent wave of studies
about cleavages tends to refer to a broader “religious versus secular” cleavage, utterly dropping
the role of churches; or, especially in the US context, they also describe a “values cleavage”, as
more applicable to a religious pluralist context (Kriesi, 2010; Ozzano, 2020).

For the sake of God: fundamentalist parties

As already mentioned, fundamentalist parties aim at reorganizing state and society around a
strict reading of a religious tradition and erasing any separation between religion and politics.
Therefore, they can be considered, according to Neumann’s model, parties of total integration
with “ambiguous goals of seizing power and radically transform societies, demanding the full commitment and unquestioning obedience of members” (Neumann, 1956; Gunther and Diamond, 2003, p. 169). As a consequence, they have at best an ambiguous attitude towards democracy (and pluralism), with a tactical attitude towards it (Brumberg, 1997) rather than a full commitment to its values and institutions: the fact that they maintain their anti-system attitude even when involved in democratic systems can give rise to the so-called “paradox of democracy” (Sartori, 1976; Schwedler, 1998). As shown later, there is a wide literature on the possibility that democracy can have, or not have, a moderating influence on them, turning them into parties of the conservative type.

In organizational terms, according to Gunther and Diamond,

> [g]iven the far-reaching objectives of these parties (which may verge on the totalitarian), the organizational development of these parties and the scope of their activities are extensive. Member involvement and identification is substantial and even intense, and ancillary organizations establish a presence at the local level throughout society. [. . .] authority relations within the party are hierarchical, undemocratic and even absolutist, and members are disciplined and devoted. Religious fundamentalist parties mobilize support not only by invoking religious doctrine and identity, and by proposing policies derived from those principles, but also through selective incentives; they often perform a wide range of social welfare functions which aid in recruiting and solidifying the loyalty of members. This web of organized activities and services encapsulates members within a distinct subculture.

(Gunther and Diamond, 2003, p. 183)

When analyzing this type of parties, a number of defining features come to the fore. First of all, they often have a particularly strong associational nexus with some kind of religious organization and/or social movement (whose grassroots activity and influence on the party can make even more difficult the moderation of the party) (Ozzano and Cavatorta, 2013a). Their leadership is often charismatic, with the leader as a quasi-religious authority competing with official religious institutions for the interpretation of religious law; the loss of the leader is often a defining moment in the life of the party (especially whether no succession or routinization of charisma mechanism is in place) and can result in schisms and disarray (Sprinzak, 1991; Almond, Appleby and Sivan, 2003). Their social base, and their militants, can usually be found among the poor and frustrated lower classes (often living in rural areas and urban shantytowns), which also benefit from the welfare activities these parties often carry out; however, examples of highly ideologized members of the middle class are not rare, especially in leading positions.

As a consequence of their anti-system and sometimes openly violent attitude, these parties are frequently banned from either democratic and partly democratic/hybrid political systems. In this case, they can be forced to exist only underground and have to choose between political activity and a violent option (Cavatorta and Merone, 2013). In some cases, however, they can be tolerated insofar they remain small “testimony parties”, especially in the context of low-threshold proportional electoral systems. Although examples from the Middle East (especially in relation to the transnational Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi networks) usually come to mind when thinking of this party type (Pargeter, 2013; Cavatorta and Merone, 2017), it is not at all a preserve of Islam, as shown by examples such as Kach in Israel (Sprinzak, 1986) and the Political Reformed Party in the Netherlands (Vollaard, 2013).
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From the margins to the centre: the conservative type

This category includes political parties that have come to fully accept, ideologically and behaviourally, the values and rules of democracy as the only game in town and, organizationally, have developed from the mass-party model to show at least some features of the catch-all one, with the choice of “appealing to all voters, except convinced anti-clericals” (Krouwel, 2006, p. 258; Kirchheimer, 1966). Although their ideology is focused on the preservation of some religious values, and “the passionate affirmation of the value of existing institutions” (Huntington, 1957, p. 455), they have also widened the spectrum of the issues they deal with, to include also non-specifically religious or ethical issues. Coherently with the catch-all model, they engage with different types of interest groups and social groups, although they often maintain privileged relations with religiously oriented associationism and/or trade-unionism (La Palombara, 1964; Thomas, 2001). They are also quite pragmatic and flexible in terms of political alliances, when coalition politics is involved, accepting both centre-right and centre-left partners, insofar they are not openly anti-religious. This is also true at the supranational level, where they not rarely support cooperation and supranational integration agendas (Yavuz, 2003; Kaiser, 2007). They still usually enjoy good relations with religious institutions and communities (which, in some cases, were at the very roots of the parties’ creation), that often support them, but in most cases they have developed an autonomous organization of political militants rather than simply relying on religious networks for campaigns and electoral support (Kalyvas, 1996; Yavuz, 2003). They also rely on a wide and heterogeneous basin of voters, usually ranging from the lower to the middle and upper middle classes, although they are usually stronger in rural areas and small/medium towns rather than big cities. This wide constituency can also explain their pragmatic social and economic agenda, which often balances pro-free-trade policies with some kind of aspiration to social justice and promotion of welfare, in accordance with religious values (Shankland, 1999; Kersbergen, 2003). This wide outlook is also mirrored by the internal composition of the parties, which not rarely include very heterogeneous factions, ranging from social democracy to the far right, and have sometimes been likened to a “microcosm” of society (Lyon, 1967). The downside of this situation can be on the one hand the development of a fierce factionalism (Belloni and Beller, 1978; Boucek, 2009), and, on the other, the tendency to occupy the centre, that can result in stagnation and corruption phenomena (Sartori, 1976).

When we look at the specific party families that refer to this party type, we must mention first of all Christian democracy, a wide strain of conservative and centrist parties born in Europe since the last decades of the nineteenth century as a reaction to the creation of the new secular states or, according to Kalyvas (1996), as the unintended consequence of the Catholic Church’s involvement in civil society. While in Europe, after the Second World War, they have often played a crucial role both in the democratization of formerly authoritarian and totalitarian countries like Italy and Germany, as well as in the creation of the European Union (Gerard and Hecke, 2004; Kaiser, 2007), they have later spread to other parts of the world, with a particular success in Latin America (Gill, 1998; Mainwaring, 2003). During the twentieth century, this huge family was joined by religiously oriented conservative and centrist parties with more heterogeneous roots: in some cases, such as the US Republican Party, they are even former secular parties that have developed some degree of religious outlook (Oldfield, 1996). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this party type has also been increasingly represented in the Muslim world, often as a consequence of the moderation of formerly extremist parties (as
the cases of Ennahda in Tunisia and the early Justice and Development Party in Turkey show) 
(Yavuz, 2003; Cavatorta and Merone, 2013).

From religious nationalism to right-wing populism

Another relevant group of parties, often neglected by the “traditional” literature on religious 
parties, proposes an ideology which blends the desire to widen the role of religion in the public 
sphere with nationalist/nativist feelings. This usually implies a strong focus on the opposition 
against other (ethno-)religious communities, perceived as incompatible with the local culture 
and, often, as illegitimate aliens or invaders. This worldview shows, very commonly, through 
some kind of sacralization of the homeland and its boundaries: thus, holy places shared with 
other communities can easily become a bone of contention, sometimes leading the opposing 
movements and parties to outright violence (as the cases of the Babri Masjid mosque in India 
and the Temple Mount/Dome of the Rock in Israel have sadly demonstrated) (Jaffrelot, 1996; 
Gorenberg, 2001). More broadly, especially in democratic polities, this opposition takes the 
shape of a ‘culture war’ against specific religious or cultural traditions that are portrayed as alien 
or even threatening for the local cultural landscape, and a struggle to bend the secular state 
towards privileging the native local culture and religion (Bhargava, 2009).

Parties adopting this kind of stance stand out not only for their nativist and often xenopho-
bic ideology, but also for their organizational traits: although they are commonly organized as 
mass-based parties, with a wide participation of militants (especially among groups of displaced 
people or among middle-class citizens who feel threatened by other communities), and some-
times even show features of the catch-all model, not rarely they also develop a parallel militia 
organization, someway similar to the organizational model described by Duverger (1966) in 
relation to twentieth-century fascist parties. Sometimes, as in the case of the Bharatiya Janata 
Party in India, the militias are part of a formally structured and powerful movement, the Rash-
triya Swayamsevak Sangh and its affiliates (Andersen and Damle, 1987); otherwise, they can be 
more voluntarist in nature, as the case of the settlers’ patrols in the Occupied Territories under 
the control of Israel shows (Sprinzak, 1991); finally, they can be a mainly symbolic phenomen-
on, as in the case of the Northern League’s “green shirts” in 1990s Italy (Guolo, 2000). This 
double layer of organization can usher into ambiguity between party and movement roles, and 
engender significant tension between the grassroots base and the institutional political repre-
sentatives, sometimes even preventing – as shown later – attempts at moderation of political 
parties (Ozzano and Cavatorta, 2013a).

Until the 1980s, this type of parties could be found mostly in some deeply divided societies 
in areas of the world such as the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East; on the contrary, 
nationalist parties with a religious orientation were a rarity elsewhere, both in the liberal west 
and the communist east. This situation abruptly changed at the turn of the century: partly 
because of the change of international paradigm brought about by the demise of the Commu-
nist bloc (Huntington, 1996; Kaldor, 1999) but also because of the globalization and migration 
processes making regions such as Europe and North America much more inhomogeneous and 
hybridized in ethnic, religious and cultural terms (Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2008). This 
changing situation gave rise to a new wave of “extreme” or “populist” right-wing parties which 
showed different features in comparison to the early twentieth-century right-wing political 
groups, and primarily focused on the defense of a (real or imagined) local community against 
alien intruders (Betz, 1994; Ignazi, 2003). Among them, the most successful were the Northern 
League (later simply “League”) in Italy, the National Front (later renamed “National Rally”) 
in France, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the Party of Freedom in Austria, the Law
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and Justice Party in Poland, and Fidesz in Hungary. However, especially since the 2010s, the new right-wing populist wave seems to have become a global phenomenon, with the adoption of a populist style by leaders such as Putin in Russia, Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Erdoğan in Turkey. Quite interestingly, even the leaders of ‘old’ nationalist parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party in India and the Likud in Israel have recently shown a remarkable convergence with European populists in terms of rhetoric and policy proposals (McDonnell and Cabrera, 2019; Ozzano, 2020; Ozzano and Bolzonar, 2020; Ben-Porat et al., 2021).

As shown earlier, this party type adopts a culturalized and identity-driven idea of religion which is often at odds with the “traditional” religious cleavage, and sometimes with institutional religious authorities (Ozzano, 2019). Hence, there are the ideas that right-wing populists “hijack” religion for other purposes (Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy, 2016), or that they use religion simply as “a mask” for their nationalist feelings (Ozzano, 2020). The degree of culturalization of religion varies however significantly among the different cases, in accordance to both local and party traditions: it is very strong in some cases, such as the gay-friendly and pro-abortion Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and, partly, France’s National Rally; while it is much less prominent in parties imbued with “traditional” religiosity such as Poland’s Law and Justice Party and some other right-wing populist parties, especially in central/eastern Europe (Brubaker, 2017; Haynes, 2020).

The (disappearing?) religious left

It is not a surprise that religiously oriented parties with some kind of progressive orientation (either as the consequence of a blending between religion and some type of Socialist doctrine or because of the adoption of a socially oriented religious plank, such as the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church) are quite rare today. Indeed, the fact that religious identity is commonly associated to a conservative platform can be the source of both internal and external tensions for parties willing to affirm “progressive” social and civil rights while at the same time defending religious values. There are, however, notable exceptions, where the local cultural context can be more favorable to such ideological experiences. This is the case, particularly, of Latin America, where the legacy of the Liberation Theology movement has made possible the creation of wide Christian democratic parties with a mild progressive orientation (Luna, Monestier and Rosenblatt, 2013); and Southeast Asia, with significant experiences of “Buddhist Socialism” (Harris, 2007). Another partial exception is Italy, where left-wing Christian factions were a sizeable force within the Christian Democracy party; and, after its demise, have played a role of power broker in the centre-left coalition (Galli, 2004; Baccetti, 2007). In other cases, such as Israel (with a left-wing religious-Zionist faction, which in the 1980s created its own party, Meimad) and the US (with a religious left tradition which was largely a heritage of the civil rights movement), interesting past experiences seem to have withered in recent decades, with only small factions still active within the mainstream parties of the centre-left field (Ozzano, 2020). This seems indeed to be the fate of most cases belonging to this type, where external constraints and internal tensions make the existence of an independent party too costly.

Negotiating the position of religious communities in a pluralistic context

A last group of religiously oriented parties includes political groups representing a specific (ethno-)religious community which, unlike nationalist ones, chooses to bargain this latter’s position vis-à-vis the secular state (and, sometimes, its separation) in a pluralistic environment,
rather than adopting a conflict-oriented stance. Their identity, thus, blends those of a proper political party and a non-associational interest group (Almond, 1958), and their role closely resembles that of the “ethnic parties” active in many racially diverse societies (Ishiyama and Breuning, 2011). These parties, labelled as belonging to the “camp” type (Cohen, 2007; Ozzano, 2013), are “typified by the fact that a particularly large majority of those affiliated with the ‘camp’ vote for that camp’s party”, and “by the lack of political competition over its adherents via the establishment of significant political alternatives” (Cohen, 2007, p. 328). As a consequence of this strong identification, they get most of their votes from the community they represent, with an interclass attitude. These parties tend to be very pragmatic, in terms of policies and alliances, insofar they manage to promote the interests of their community, which can contribute to mitigate their dogmatism. On the other hand, their activity rarely leads to a real integration of their communities into the mainstream society.

The prototype of this family of religiously oriented parties are the haredi parties representing the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Israel, willing to preserve the separation and the privileges granted to their community by the “status quo” system (Greilsammer, 1991; Ben-Porat, 2013). Quite interestingly, while in the early decades of the state of Israel, a single party, Agudat Yisrael, represented the whole community, it later split into several parties and factions, representing distinct ethnoreligious communities. Among them, the most successful was Shas, representing the Sephardi (with origins in the Middle East) Ultra-Orthodox community (Filc, 2010; Ben-Porat et al., 2021). Other examples can be found in India (such as the Sikh party Shiromani Akali Dal, and some local Muslim parties), among the Tamil community of Sri Lanka, and in Northern Ireland; according to some, even the Shia Muslim party Hezbollah in Lebanon shows traits of this type (Jaffrelot, 1996; O’Malley and Walsh, 2013; Norton, 2014).

**Dynamics of religiously oriented parties**

Political parties are complex organizations, especially if they are big and adopting a catch-all stance. They can show tensions between the leadership and the militants (especially if they are organized in strong grassroots movements) and can include a plurality of different factions and groups. This makes the previous categories ideal, rather than water-tight, types. Indeed, several examples previously reviewed (such as for example the Justice and Development Party in Turkey and the Bharatiya Janata Party in India – both showing a tension between their moderate and radical souls) show a hybridized identity, referring to different of the previously mentioned types. In several cases, however, there are clear trajectories of change, with the predominant identity of a party evolving from one type to another. In the most extreme cases they can even either secularize (as in the case of the Motherland Party in Turkey in the early 1990s) or “religionize” (as in the case of the Republican Party in the US). Even when they retain their religious orientation, the modalities and intensity of this latter can change, as a consequence of strategic choices of the leadership (or outright leadership change), grassroots pressures and external constraints (Brocker and Künkler, 2013; Ozzano and Cavatorta, 2013a; Ozzano, 2020).

Although there are examples of trajectories of radicalization from a conservative stance towards a fundamentalist or nationalist identity, the most significant literature has focused on the possibility that an extremist and anti-system religious party can moderate, by accepting both the procedures and the values of democracy, and rejecting intolerant and violent stances. The internal and external factors that can affect the moderation of a party according to the literature are indeed numerous (for a review, see Broker and Künkler [2013]).

A huge debate (with a particular focus, since the 1990s, on Islamist parties in the Middle East, also in the context of the broader debate on the compatibility between Islam and democracy)
has however focused on the so-called “moderation by inclusion” thesis: that is, the possibility that the inclusion in a democratic system can have a moderating effect on an extremist party. This thesis seemed to be supported by the cases of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey (at least until the early 2010s), and, a contrario, by radicalization processes following phenomena of exclusion (as the case of Algeria in the 1990s shows) (Clark, 2006; Schwedler, 2011; Kirdiş, 2018). However, especially since the 2010s, this idea was put into question by several contributions, showing a reversion of the previous moderation paths (as in the cases of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey and the Bharatiya Janata Party in India), and cases of moderation in absence of inclusion (as shown by the Ennahda party in Tunisia); not to mention the “perils of polarization” endured by political systems including extremist parties (Cavatorta and Merone, 2013; Jaffrelot, 2013; Tepe, 2013; Öztürk, 2019). This conundrum is difficult to solve also because the debate on this issue, at least in the broader, non-academic field, is highly ideologized, and sometimes based on non-scientific points, such as the allegations that Islamist parties can harbor a “double agenda”, and that they can “fake” moderation, adopting a stance defined by Brumberg (1997) as “tactical moderation” (with a purely opportunistic acceptance of democracy, with the sole aim of taking power).

To sum up, the understanding of the processes of change in the identity of religiously oriented parties is still a work in progress, which is made more difficult by the absence of a method to measure the religious orientation of a party and its change: which forces scholars engaging on the subject to remain on qualitative grounds (Ozzano and Cavatorta, 2013a); and, in turn, contributes to the broader underdevelopment of the literature on religion and political parties that was described earlier. The agenda for future research therefore surely includes the development of more refined analytical tools, concepts, and methodologies, which can allow the analysis of religiously oriented political parties to further develop and to more effectively include quantitative methodologies.

References

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