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Religion, national identity and foreign policy

The case of Eastern Christians and the French political imaginary

Alexis Artaud de La Ferrière

Introduction

The international system is often described as a secular space, a state of affairs usually attributed to the historical separation of religion and politics in Europe following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Accordingly, studies focusing on the topic of religion in International Relations (IR) often begin with a lament about the marginal status that religion has long held in the concerns of political scientists (Kettell 2012). However, over the past 20 years there has been renewed interest in religious phenomena across the social sciences. As part of this trend, many IR scholars have come to reconsider the relevance of religion within their own discipline.

Since the turn of the millennium, scholars have sought to critically assess why religion was overlooked by mainstream IR theory (Fox 2001), to analyze the relationship between secular frameworks and political authority (Hurd 2004), and to develop methodologies for integrating religion into the study of IR as an explanatory variable (Sandal and James 2011; Sheikh 2012). Others have sought to recover the religiously rooted conceptual frameworks and political theologies which underpin key concepts of IR theory, such as anarchy, legitimacy, interests, and just war (Philpott 2000). Much of this work builds on the insights of critical religion scholars such as Casanova (1994) and Asad (2003) who employ genealogical approaches to argue that the modern distinction between religion and the secular is a contingent construct rooted in a European Protestant outlook.

In the same vein, case study approaches have highlighted the role of transnational religious institutions and networks in influencing the conduct of international affairs (Haynes 2001). Numerous other studies have focused on the foreign policy orientations of states perceived to have maintained, despite the global advance of secularization, strong religious national identities, such as Russia (Payne 2010), Turkey (Jung 2012), Iran (Van Den Bos 2018), and Morocco (Wainscott 2018), as well as the influence of the Evangelical domestic public in the United States (Guth 2012; Chaudoin et al. 2014). Other studies have focused
on the role of states in sponsoring diasporic politics by using religious identification as a means of maintaining ties with emigrant communities abroad (Rajagopal 2000; Kinnvall and Svensson 2010).

Today, the issue of religion has become sufficiently mainstream within political science, and enough prominent scholars have incorporated religion within their lens of analysis, that the relevant critique concerning the role of religion in political studies does not concern its marginality but its relevance. It is no longer sufficient to identify and describe traces of religiosity within a socio-political field on the basis that these had been too long hidden or ignored. Research programs in this domain need to engage in ‘theoretically ambitious hypothesis generation [and] embrace puzzle-driven research’ (Bellin 2008, p. 319). Further to this aim, two interrelated questions come to the fore. What is the specificity (if any) of religion as an independent, dependent, or intermediate variable? And what can the study of religion and politics tell us about the genealogical origins and the conceptual validity which undergird our modern distinction between religion and the secular?

These two questions must be situated within a long-standing debate that goes back to the origins of the sociological study of religion. Historically, the sociology of religion developed as a field of inquiry interested in better defining religion and in explaining the relationship between religion and society (modern society in particular). Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel were all animated by the task of understanding whether religion was distinct from other spheres of society, what constituted the relationship between religion and social change, and whether modernity would give rise to social forces which would eventually supplant religion.

Corresponding to this conceptual debate, sociologists of religion have often been at odds with one another over the epistemological saliency of religion. As Malogne-Fer argues in a recent text (2018, p. 36), ‘the risk [in evoking the religious as an explanatory variable] is that the alleged specificity of the religious object ultimately means that an irreducible part of religion will always elude the scope of sociological analysis.’ This concern should not just be limited to causal explanatory schemes, but should be broadened to conceptual schemes in general. In other words, what are people actually talking about when they appeal to religion, and what do we as researchers mean when we claim to analyze religious phenomena or religious discourse? That these questions are difficult to answer is a reflection of the fact that the sociology of religion continues to revisit its founding interrogations. Indeed, it is a frustrating, yet fascinating, conceptual stumbling block for the sociology of religion that the very definition and boundaries of the field’s object of study, even within a given cultural domain, remain essentially contested.

Rather than offering a broad survey of this topic in its multiple forms, this chapter focuses on a specific case study of relevance to contemporary geopolitics. The case studied here concerns the relationship between France and Christian minorities in the Middle East and how that relationship has influenced France’s foreign policy in that region. Indeed, since at least the mid-nineteenth century, a narrative has been developed and reproduced of the French nation as protector of Eastern Christians (Peaucelle 2017; Heyberger 2018; Personnaz 2018). According to this narrative, Eastern Christians are systematically viewed as victims of historical and continuing persecution because of their faith, and as requiring external protection because of their own states’ unwillingness or inability to provide adequate safeguards. Faced with this situation, France is presented as being charged with a historical role of external protection and promotion of the interests of Eastern Christians, by virtue of its former diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire and the principle of the succession
of states. Hereon, I will refer to this narrative, along with the discursive tropes and policy statements which support it, as the persecution and protection narrative.

France is not alone amongst external nations to take a position on this question. Under the presidency of Donald Trump, the United States has also issued statements of concern for Eastern Christians (Trump 2017), as has the British government through its then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt (2018). However, along with Russia, France stands out amongst external powers by virtue of the importance that this issue has acquired within the public consciousness and within state institutions.

Yet, whereas the reasons motivating Russia in this domain are readily apparent, France’s position is more puzzling. In the case of Russia, the state’s support for Eastern Christians corresponds both to its internal political priorities and to its geopolitical strategy in the Middle East. Domestically, its support for Eastern Christians is inscribed within its broader religious strategy to revive Orthodoxy as a legitimizing locus of Russian national identity (Della Cava 1997; Payne 2010; Nalbandov 2016); prima facie, no comparable religious strategy exists in France. Externally, Russia’s support for Eastern Christians coheres with its strategic alliance with the Assad regime in Syria, which is largely backed by Syrian Christians (Pichon 2013; Valenta and Valenta 2016); France has maintained a firm opposition to Assad since 2011. Thus, France’s mobilization for Christians in the Middle East demands scrutiny because it runs counter to the dominant assumption that the conduct of foreign policy by modern states is being driven by material interests, and also because it runs counter to the dominant assumption that the French state is thoroughly secular.

In the following study, my aim is to provide a theoretically informed hypothesis to explain the saliency and influence of the persecution and protection narrative within French politics. Although religion plays a role in my analysis through the latent influence of Catholics in French society, I argue that the role of religion here cannot be disassociated from an account centered on the nation’s political imaginary and its quest for ontological security. Indeed, it shall be argued that French foreign policy with regard to Eastern Christians is driven by a constellation of representations of Eastern Christians within the French public sphere informed by internal anxieties and desires regarding the identity and ethic of the French nation. The imagined idea of Eastern Christians has come to occupy a prominent position within contemporary French politics, functioning as an intermediary between the French nation and its internally competing images of itself. Through this particular case study, this chapter seeks to address a larger question regarding the relationship between identity, religion, and IR within the context of our globalized world. What role does national identity play in the formation of foreign policy? What role does religion play in the national identity of formally secular states?

The idea of Eastern Christian and the French national identity crisis

In order to make sense of the persistence of the persecution and protection narrative in French politics, we need to consider the role of foreign policy as a discursive field of identity affirmation that is historically inscribed within a social context. As Doty analyzes, the practice of foreign policy is not just restricted to making a series of choices about state conduct in the external environment. It is also a performance of social reproduction:

[Policy makers] are also performing according to a social script which is itself part of a larger social order. By virtue of this performance they are involved in a ritual
reproduction (or repudiation) of that social order. Foreign policy thus becomes a practice that produces a social order as well as one through which individual and collective subjects themselves are produced and reproduced.

(Doty 1993, p. 301)

In this sense, Eastern Christians not only function as intermediaries in a game of influence or commercial exchange between France and the Middle East, they also function as intermediaries between France and its internally competing images of itself, revealing anxieties and emerging lines of demarcation within contemporary French politics. Thus, the way in which the issue of Eastern Christians is mobilized in French foreign policy discourse reproduces and advances socially embedded ideas about what Eastern Christians are, as well as advancing socially embedded ideas about what France is or what France should be.

Such a tendency reflects the application of Anthony Giddens’s theory of ontological security to the state, as advocated by Kinnvall (2004, 2019) and Mitzen (2006). On this view, states not only seek physical security but also seek ontological security, described as a sense of internal order and stable continuity. Mitzen argues that ontological security is principally ‘formed and sustained through relationships. Actors therefore achieve ontological security especially by routinizing their relations with significant others. Then, since continued agency requires the cognitive certainty these routines provide, actors get attached to these social relationships’ (2006, p. 342). Indeed, Mitzen holds that states will often remain attached to such relationships even if they are not conducive, or even run counter, to their physical security. Similarly, whilst the environmental context has significantly shifted for both Eastern Christians and for France, French political actors sustain the relationship with Eastern Christians because that relationship is associated with a national group identity that is both stable (because it is fixed in history) and comforting for many people (because it is fixed in a historical moment of French imperial power). The ontological security function of France’s relationship with Eastern Christians is all the more salient in the contemporary moment because the renewed chaos in the Middle East coincides with and echoes core elements of an escalating crisis in France regarding its role in the international sphere and its national self-identity in the domestic sphere.

France’s role in the international sphere

With regard to France’s role in the international sphere, the persistence of the persecution and protection narrative reproduces a sense of national tradition and diplomatic continuity, which memorializes a moment of French imperial power and privileged influence on the international stage. Such narrative responds to a diminishing public confidence in the ability of the state to project power and influence abroad: does France have the capacity to conduct itself independently as a great power in the Middle East, or at least to be a leader of a multilateral coalition to counter US hegemony (Menon 2003; Krotz 2015)?

The reality on the ground suggests that France is not capable (or at least not willing) to assume a leadership position in the Middle East, its foreign policy there being dependent upon the United States. This is seen in the conduct of its military intervention in Syria and Iraq, Operation Chammal, which is largely inscribed within the wider operational strategy of the US-led Operation Inherent Resolve, and in France’s inability to counter US sanctions against Iran, despite the direct negative impact of such sanctions on its foreign industrial strategy. In this context, the persecution and protection narrative offers an opening to
discursively project a self-identity of France’s role on the international stage which surpasses its actual capacity or willingness to act.

Actors of the identitarian and sovereigntist right have been particularly keen to mobilize the persecution and protection narrative in order to advance their vision of a more robust and unilateral foreign policy justified on the grounds of diplomatic and imperial tradition. In 2011, Alexandre Cuignache (a figure active in several far-right movements) made this connection explicitly arguing that the current plight of Eastern Christians demands that France reassume its historical role as ‘a great independent power able to federate in its wake states of lesser strength, but just as anxious to guarantee their interests autonomously.’

Charles de Meyer, President of SOS Chrétiens d’Orient and former parliamentary assistant to the sovereigntist Jacques Bompard, echoed the same vision in 2017: ‘What do Eastern Christians signify? That France is the recipient of a higher vocation. We have a duty to help Eastern Christians, which is not simply humanitarian but also civilizational.’ As previously seen elsewhere, the relationship between France and Eastern Christians in such discourses is framed in retrospective terms of memorialization and social reproduction, rather than in prospective terms of innovation and disruption. In this context, the revival of the traditional protection and promotion narrative between France and Eastern Christians serves to inscribe contemporary French foreign policy within a historical lineage of imperial power and serves as a performative demonstration of France’s preeminent role on the international stage.

The persecution and protection narrative is syntonic with a conservative political imaginary of the nation which draws on the Christian heritage of France, the continuation of diplomatic traditions that predate the Republic, the maintenance of French influence in regions of historic domination, and the projection of national prestige and power abroad. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the idea of Eastern Christians appeals to the far right, and this is one means by which the far right has criticized successive governments for failing to engage policies abroad which correspond to what they see as France’s proper historical role.

The reference to the imaginary here draws on Charles Taylor’s work on the conditions necessary for the practice of politics. For Taylor, cooperative social practices and a shared sense of legitimacy are made possible not merely through centralized forms of power but through a diffused social imaginary, which is the sum of ‘the ways that people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations’ (2007, p. 23). The social imaginary thesis does not imply that individual subjects necessarily agree on the best course of action in a given scenario, or on what normative notions they most value, but it does hold that they share a common understanding of which actions and norms are within the scope of acceptability. In this sense, a social imaginary cannot be described as a doctrine or theory, but is a shared vision of common norms and interests.

Following Taylor, the idea of Eastern Christians as framed within the persecution and protection narrative has come to constitute an important normative notion and image that underlies French self-identity and political practice. It does not constitute a prescriptive policy framework, but a shared sense of self and a shared ethic of political action. As such, the appeal of the persecution and protection narrative is not restricted to the far right in opposition; it also extends across to centrist government actors who employ it to deflect critiques and anxieties about France’s diminished influence and capacity abroad. Thus in 2019, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, a historical member of the Socialist party, stated:
[t]he question of Eastern Christians and minorities is neither a diplomatic niche nor the remnants of a bygone past. Through the fate of these populations to whom history has linked us, it is a certain idea of the Middle East and the role of France in this part of the world which are in play.

Le Drian’s statement provides an explicit case of how foreign policy discourse can constitute a space in which an idea of the other is constructed and which serves to consolidate a nation’s self-identity. As seen, the persecution and protection narrative constructs Eastern Christians as essentially vulnerable. Key to the idea of Eastern Christians within the French political imaginary is their position as religious minorities within Muslim-majority societies and under Muslim polities, a status sometimes referred to as ‘dhimmitude’. This idea of Eastern Christians is indissociable from a historically entrenched national identity claim pertaining to France’s role in the world; already in 1922, the French Foreign Ministry had employed this script:

France is a great nation. It cannot be excluded from that Asia [the Middle East] which played such a great role in antiquity . . . France must be in Syria. How? As it always was by its influence, by its genius, by the irresistible radiance of its intellectuality, by its friendships, by its alliances, by its capital.

*(cited in Chaigne-Oudin 2010)*

Today, whether it be the Foreign Minister or a fringe member of the far right, the appeal to the persecution and protection narrative continues to comfort the idea of France as a great nation, regardless of its actual capacity and efficacy in the international sphere.

**The fear of Islam**

The identity function of the persecution and protection narrative not only resonates with France’s role in the international sphere; it also reflects ongoing domestic anxieties about the constitutive elements of French national identity and, in particular, the relationship between the nation and Islam.

Indeed, a key component of the ongoing crisis of national identity in France is reflected in the universalist Republican regime’s struggle to adapt to the phenomenon of ethno-religious pluralism as a result of immigration. Since the 1980s, the growth and increasing visibility of Islam as a new religious and cultural identification within the national space has sparked waves of clashes and disputes over competing integration models for Muslims (Cesari 1994; Hervieu-Léger 2000). These disputes notably coalesced around the ‘headscarf affairs’ (in 1989, 2004, 2010), periodic clashes over the institutional organization of Islam in France, the launch of a government-sponsored grand debate on national identity under the Sarkozy government in 2009, and the 2018 Taché report commissioned by Emmanuel Macron on the integration of immigrants. In addition to being a locus of cultural-religious anxiety, Islam has more recently inspired anxieties regarding security following a succession of high-profile terrorist attacks on French soil which were inspired by Jihadi-Salafism. In many respects, these two issues (the one regarding the cultural integration of Muslims, the other regarding Islamist violence) have been conflated in the public consciousness, to the detriment of French Muslims and of France’s view of Islam in the external world.

The popularization of the persecution and protection narrative in recent years cannot be dissociated from a negative identification of Islam as both a cultural-demographic threat
and as an ideological-military threat, anxieties which span the domestic and the international. For Connolly (2002, p. 64), ‘an identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized … Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty.’ Campbell’s work (1992) draws on Connolly, analyzing foreign policy as a discursive economy in which a limited matrix of representations of otherness are available. Foreign policy action on this view is not defined by a fixed set of national interests or internally coherent identity statements. Rather, it constitutes a mobilization of one representation of otherness over another, which performatively constitutes the overarching sense of national identity (Campbell 1992). For both Connolly and Campbell, the identity function of otherness in international politics operates through a negative or pejorative representation of difference. On Connolly’s account (1991), the external other functions as a locus of evil against which an identity can define and sanctify itself. For Campbell (1994, p. 149), ‘identity can be understood as the outcome of exclusionary practices in which resistant elements to a secure identity in the “inside” are linked through a discourse of “danger,” with threats identified and located on the “outside.”’

Reflecting this analysis, Heyberger (2013, p. 9) argues that in many instances the solidarity expressed by Westerners for Eastern Christians is ‘proportional to the hatred they feel towards Islam and towards Muslims.’

Indeed, many public statements of support for Eastern Christians are concomitantly framed as condemnations or warnings against a politically militant form of Islam. In 2015, a petition published by the news weekly, Marianne, and signed by politicians from the right and the left, conveyed such a message: ‘Are Eastern Christians to disappear down to the very last one? It is no longer possible to ignore the programme of ethnic and cultural purification targeted against them, which takes the form of a generalised persecution on behalf of Islamists.’ More often, the association of sympathy for Eastern Christians and condemnation of Islamism is a theme intoned by the political right. For Saint Just (2014), a prominent member of the Rassemblement National party (formerly Front National), the protection of Eastern Christians serves to justify a ‘new political strategy aimed at reducing Islamic extremism, which is progressing in many countries and on our territory.’ Karim Ouchikh, another prominent figure in the growing constellation of the identitarian right, associates the defense of Eastern Christians with a wider imperative to:

Resist the Islamist barbarism that devastates whole regions with incredible violence, carrying everything in its path, churches, villages and human lives. Resist a totalitarian ideology that wants to abolish everything, including the cultural imprint of the past, by ransacking museums, libraries and mausoleums. Resist an enterprise of a genocidal nature that would eradicate local particularities and religious minorities, primarily Christian communities whose venerable presence between the Tigris and the Euphrates, in Kobane as in Mosul, merges with a biblical land which was nothing less than the sacred cradle of humanity. Resist to prevent Eastern Christians from leaving history permanently.

(Ouchikh 2014)

In 2019, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (National Assembly member and President of the right-wing party La France Debout) published a similarly themed message on Twitter: ‘4300 new Christian martyrs in 2018, persecuted as never because of their faith. Islamist barbarism must be fought relentlessly around the world.’ Such statements are indicative of a growing form of
ethno-religious nationalism within French conservative politics which largely coalesces around a negative identification of Islam.

In that context, the figure of the Christian martyr persecuted by Islamic radicals abroad provides a conduit for a discursive displacement of domestic anxieties about Islam. The idea of Eastern Christians, persecuted by Islamic militancy in the Middle East, both justifies and amplifies anxieties concerning the growing visibility of Islam in France and its association with domestic terrorism.

**The persistence of Catholicism**

However, the idea of Eastern Christians within the French political imaginary cannot be simply reduced to an externalized foil against the negative stereotype of Muslims. The revival of concern for Eastern Christians within the French political imaginary since the mid-2000s has occurred at a time when the saliency of Catholicism within the national identity has re-emerged. Indeed, even as Catholic religious practice continues to decline in France, the historically entrenched ambiguous identification between the French nation and Catholicism has found new breath. In this context, Eastern Christians function as an object of external identification in the French political imaginary. However, because of the secular nature of the French state, solidarity with Christians abroad, like appeals to Catholic identity domestically, cannot be made on explicitly confessional grounds but must be discursively secularized.

Thus in 2011, President Nicolas Sarkozy delivered a speech following a series of terrorist attacks against Christians in Egypt and Iraq in which he stated: ‘If I may use the word martyr here, then I would say that the martyrs of Alexandria or Baghdad are not only Coptic, Syriac, or Maronite martyrs. They are collectively our martyrs. They are the martyrs of freedom of conscience’ (Sarkozy 2011a). As Alexander Wendt (1994, p. 386) argues, identification on the international stage ‘is a continuum from negative to positive – from conceiving the other as anathema to the self to conceiving it as an extension of the self.’ Positive identification on this account is rarely complete ‘because of corporate needs for differentiation,’ yet it is strong enough to act as ‘a basis for feelings of solidarity, community, and loyalty’ (Wendt 1994). Sarkozy’s statement is indicative of such a dynamic: by conceiving of Eastern Christians as an external extension of the French self (‘they are collectively our martyrs’), it both furthers a particular national identity statement (centered on the norm of freedom of conscience) and justifies a foreign policy of solidarity.

Moreover, Sarkozy’s appeal to the theme of martyrrology in this statement is indicative of a broader fascination within the French public sphere for Eastern Christians as victims of violence (Artaud de La Ferrière 2017). In certain cases, the appeal to martyrrology serves to draw a parallel between atrocities committed in the Middle East and acts of discrimination against traditional cultural heritage in France. Thus, the far-right member of the National Assembly Jacques Bompard took to Twitter in 2019 to compare the persecution of Eastern Christians with the desecration of cemeteries in France: ‘There is the physical persecution suffered by martyrs, and I am thinking in particular of Eastern Christians. There is another, quieter and more pernicious [persecution], but equally real: #desecrations and desertions #christianophobia.’

Bompard represents a relatively marginal movement of resurging Catholic identity politics that explicitly calls for a reunification of confessional Catholicism and French national identity (Béraud and Portier 2015; Du Cleuziou 2019). In Sarkozy’s case, what is noteworthy is the appropriation of the Eastern Christian martyr within a secular national discourse, investing that

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figure with the secular Republican value of freedom of conscience. Martyrology, as a process of memorialization and sense-giving to violence, serves to consolidate a community around a project of identity construction, the martyr functioning as the embodied repository of values that the community intends to bring into being (Boumaza 2015). In Sarkozy’s speech, the secularized martyr stands in for the broader secularization of Eastern Christians within the French political imaginary, which is necessary in order to accommodate them within the strictures of French secular politics. On the basis of this secularization, it becomes possible for a Republican President to claim a national identification with Eastern Christians. Such a move is not restricted to the political right. On the radical left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon has also mobilized the idea of Eastern Christians to promote his secularist ideal of French national identity:

I wish to express my solidarity with Eastern Christians. I do this in the tradition of the ‘Enlightenment.’ For this school of thought, freedom of religion is the historical mother of freedom of conscience, the only freedom destined to overcome all borders and limits and which is the root of all other freedoms. Eastern Christians are atrociously persecuted for the sole reason of their religious convictions. The French people who did not like the wars of religion in their own country, and who invented laïcité to put an end [to such wars], cannot remain unmoved when faced with any form of religious persecution. (Mélenchon 2015)

An aphorism often attributed to Charles de Gaulle holds that ‘la République est laïque, la France est chrétienne.’ The modern secular Republic came into being in opposition to the former Catholic monarchical regime, and a core commitment of French Republicanism has been to emancipate the political sphere from a religious (specifically Catholic) normative framework (Portier 2005). Legally, such an emancipation has clearly been achieved: the separation of Church and State was codified into law in 1905, and article 1 of the 1946 Constitution (reaffirmed in 1958) defines the France state as a secular republic (république laïque). Yet, even as Catholicism lost its officially recognized status with regards to the state through the dissolution of the Concordat in 1905, and even as the population of practicing Catholics collapsed over the course of the twentieth century, secularism has not completely routed Catholicism from public life. Despite Weberian predictions that religion should cease to act as an efficacious force of social change in the context of modernity, Catholicism has maintained a capacity to influence French politics both domestically and internationally far beyond its effective constituency. Such an influence no longer occurs through formal interventions on behalf of the institutional Catholic Church (Willaime 1985). Rather, such influence results from Catholicism having persisted, and lately reemerged in force, as an identity reference (as opposed to a belief system or a ritual practice) and through a secularization of Catholic values and symbols.

In the ongoing context of the French national identity crisis, the notion of laïcité has increasingly been inflected as a national identity claim in defense of a traditional culture and an idealized vision of the past in which a reference to (if not a belief in) Catholicism is retained (Baubérot 2015). Contradictory though this may seem, a new ideology of laïcité has emerged, often glossed as catho-laïcité (Willaime 1993), which is distinct from its anti-clerical lineage in that it is exceptionally accommodating of Catholicism because its main norm is an historically and territorially rooted idea of national identity. Moreover, just as the French imaginary of Eastern Christians cannot be dissociated from a negative identification of Muslims abroad, the secularized reclaiming of a national Catholic heritage is largely to the
stigmatization of Islam domestically. As Pranchère (2011, p. 110) argues: ‘we see, here and there, the fantasy of a French identity mingling “Catholic” heritage with “secular” convictions – but a Catholic heritage emptied of its authentic substance, and secularism turned only against the Muslim religion.’ Sarkozy’s discursive secularization of Eastern Christians occurs within this broader context of re-inspiring a national identity by appealing to France’s domestic Catholic heritage and implicitly marginalizing its emerging Muslim constituency:

Peoples are like [individuals]: if they hide their past, deny all or part of their identity, they run the risk of one day resurrecting what they repressed but in a worrying form. Christendom has left us a magnificent legacy of civilization and culture. As president of a secular Republic, I can say this because it’s the truth.

(Sarkozy 2011b)

The aim here is not to assess the validity of Sarkozy’s statement, but to observe that in the context of contemporary French politics such domestic identity claims reflect, justify, and are reinforced by the revival of the persecution and protection narrative which serves an ontological security function of comforting the emerging national identity of catho-laïcité.

Conclusion

This chapter departed from the premise that religion plays an underappreciated role in the conduct of international politics, influencing national identities and orienting state foreign policies. Through the examination of the case study of the relationship between France and Eastern Christians, I have sought to demonstrate how religion can be mobilized as an explanatory variable by integrating considerations of religious identity into IR and social theory. Rooted in nineteenth-century romantic historiography and national imperialism (Heyberger 2018), the idea of Eastern Christians continues to inhabit the French political imaginary and to inform French foreign policy. In a context of national identity crisis, the persecution and protection narrative is invoked by actors across the political spectrum, in government and in opposition, to appease ontological security anxieties regarding France’s role in the international sphere and its national self-identity in the domestic sphere.

A key question that has not been addressed in the course of this chapter is whether the narrative is felicitous in appeasing such anxieties. That is to say, does it actually provide a sense of ontological security, or is it simply an externalization of the nation’s current disorientation and persisting internal contradictions? The answer to that question will presumably vary between ideological constituencies within France: the idea of Eastern Christians and France’s privileged role on the international stage sits better with some political families than with others. France is (once again) situated at a crossroads between its civic tradition of openness and its identitarian tradition of closure. Genuine solidarity for persecuted minorities is a mark of this former tradition; but the persecution and protection narrative emerges from and comforts the latter.

Notes

1 Several authors have theorized this notion. For Ringmar (2007), foreign policy action is the projection or performance of a state’s national identity motivated by a quest for recognition both domestically and internationally. For Berenskoetter (2014), the horizons of foreign policy action are largely
circumscribed by a retrospective biographical narrative of the nation. For Hopf (2002), national identities are multiple and compete with one another through a reiterative process of state-society dynamics. Foreign policy decision makers belong to the same contested topography of national identities as the domestic public; their decisions are therefore informed by their particular instantiated idea of national identity, but the outcomes of their decisions also reinforce their idea of national identity.

2 In the 1980s and 1990s Bat Ye’or coined and popularized the term ‘dhimmitude’ to analyze the condition of Christian and Jewish minorities living under Islamic rule, a condition characterized by ‘fiscal exploitation, humiliation, and inferiority in all domains’ (Ye’or 1983, 97). It is the case that since the definitive fall of the Byzantine Empire in the fifteenth century (as a result of aggression from Western Christian crusades and Eastern Muslim invasions), Christians in the Eastern Mediterranean region have lived outside the bounds of Christendom. This distinguishes them from other non-Western Christian communities such as the Russian Orthodox Church, which even if it has coexisted with Muslim populations has historically retained an ascendant position. Whilst a relation of subalternity and periodic insecurity did often characterize the historical experiences of religious minorities under Ottoman rule, Heyberger (2009) argues that the overarching concept of dhimmitude is inadequate in its universal and intemperal characterization which obfuscates from the complexity of situations in which such minorities lived over many centuries in territories stretching from the Balkans to the Maghrib. Heyberger also notes that this concept attributes too much explanatory force to the religious codification of the Koran (in particular IX, 29), to the neglect of political economy and demographic-based analyses (Heyberger 2009).

3 Importantly, such a statement is not borne out by empirical observation which suggests that although Christians were certainly subjugated under Daech, they were afforded the status of dhimmis for monotheists according to a rigorist interpretation of the chari’a, whereas Shia Muslims were afforded no formal recognition (as under Ottoman rule) and Yezidis were systematically persecuted and often enslaved (Luizard 2017).

4 Except in the numerous instances where it has not, the maintenance of the Concordatory regime in Alsace-Moselle, special religious regimes in Guiana and other overseas territories, state-salaried chaplains in the military, prisons, and hospitals, subsidies allocated for religious programming on public television and radio. In practice, the infamously strict laïcité à la française accommodates a plethora of exceptions and derogations to the separation of church and state.

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