



The Palgrave Handbook of Dissensus over Liberal Democracy in Europe

Edited by

Ramona Coman · Claudia Bădulescu

Thomas Christiansen · Marta Simoncini

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Ramona Coman 
Centre d'Étude de la Vie Politique
(CEVIPOL), Institut d'études
européennes (IEE)
Université libre de Bruxelles
Brussels, Belgium

Thomas Christiansen
Department of Political Sciences
Luiss University
Rome, Italy

Claudia Bădulescu 
Centre for European and Eurasian
Studies
Maynooth University
Maynooth, Ireland

Marta Simoncini 
Department of Political Sciences
Luiss University
Rome, Italy



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Religion and Dissensus over Liberal Democracy

Kristina Stoeckl and Andrew Bunnell

I INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracy in Europe has long been underpinned by a tacit consensus on a shared historical experience around the traumas of the two world wars, and shared cultural roots to be found in the productive tension between Enlightenment and Christianity. The post-war European integration project itself was shaped by Christian Democratic leaders who championed human dignity, solidarity, and peace as moral foundations of a new, democratic political order. In this sense, religion served as a reservoir of ethical legitimacy and a source of societal cohesion that helped stabilise the liberal-democratic consensus.

Today, however, this relationship between religion and European liberal democracy is increasingly marked by contestation. Processes of secularisation and religious pluralisation have weakened the institutional power of the traditional churches, and shifting societal norms around gender equality, sexuality (see Guerrina and Sloomaeckers in this Handbook), and minority rights (see Krajewski in this Handbook) have turned the once binding message of Christian social teaching into a minority position. In this context, religion

K. Stoeckl (✉)
Luiss University, Rome, Italy
e-mail: kstoeckl@luiss.it

A. Bunnell
University College London, London, UK
e-mail: a.bunnell@ucl.ac.uk

has shifted from an integrative cultural and political force into a terrain of polarisation.

This chapter contributes to understanding how religion generates dissensus over liberal democracy in Europe. Our definition of dissensus draws on recent scholarship, which understands it not as episodic disagreement, but a structured and ongoing contestation over the meaning, scope, and limits of liberal-democratic norms and institutions (Coman & Brack, 2025). Religion functions here both as a repertoire and network through which actors mobilise, and as a bridge by which disputes traverse institutional arenas. Much like Anja Hennig in her contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism* (Hennig, 2024), we decide to zoom in on Christian (i.e., Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and Orthodox) actors, who use religion as both normative legitimation and transnational connective tissue for challenges to liberal-democratic norms. Our contribution is to trace their emergence historically and transnationally and to show, empirically, how their contestation of liberal democracy plays out inside two exemplary arenas: the European Parliament (EP) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).¹

Since the end of the Cold War, three developments have transformed Christianity's public role in Europe: the resurgence of churches in formerly communist Central and Eastern Europe; the rise of transnational and interdenominational faith networks; and the politicisation of Christianity by right-wing populist parties. Together, these shifts mean that Christianity today is less and less seen as a foundational element for European integration, and increasingly mobilised to contest its core principles.

The chapter traces this evolution historically (from Christian Democracy's consensus-building role to the globalisation of culture wars), transnationally (mapping the circulation of ideas, organisations, and strategies across the Atlantic and from Russia), and institutionally through two European political institutional arenas that crystallise dissensus: the European Parliament and the European Court of Human Rights. In doing so, we show how new actors, networks, and ideas are redefining the political function of religion in Europe—turning it from a source of legitimacy within the liberal-democratic order into a symbolic arsenal deployed against it.

We have opened the chapter with an overview of the development of Christian democracy in the European institutions and politics. With its origins in the post-Second World War and Cold War East-West divide, Christian democracy was an essential part of the early fabric of the common European idea. Scholarship indicates that as Europe secularised from the 1960s onward, the Christian democratic political “tent” grew larger to absorb and perhaps even be subsumed by centrist and secular politics. While European religion declined

¹ The chapter does not include a discussion of the role of other religions, e.g., Islam and Judaism, in generating dissensus over liberal democracy. While a consistent literature on Islam and traditional Judaism and their “compatibility” with Western democratic norms exists (Cesari, 2014; Shachar, 2001), our focus on European politics warrants the limitation to Christian actors in Europe, the USA, and Russia.

at the establishment level, the proliferation of low and free church movements from the United States would eventually lead to the transnational growth of new religious groups and religious-political trends across Europe.

In the next section we discuss some of the implications of this broader transnational religious effect. The globalising power of what became known as the “culture wars” would prove particularly nimble in the post-Cold War years onwards. The religiously hued social and political battles that defined the culture wars would move far beyond their low church evangelical origins to influence traditional ancient churches including the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

In the subsequent section we analyse how this globalisation of the culture wars has formed a transnational network of actors that in the case of the European Parliament have been able to form coalitions built upon human relationships and spheres of ideological commonality across the four main party groupings that make up the EU right wing in Brussels. These spheres of unification have opened the door to the development of deeper intentional links with the American right, particularly in the Make America Great Again (MAGA) sphere of Donald Trump’s Republican Party.

In the final analytic section, we show how the development of deep ties and transnational networks have allowed a repertoire to begin to be played out in the European Union, especially with a focus on the European Court of Human Rights. It is increasingly apparent that existing global ties forged across the political and cultural right are allowing for a repetitive sort of template to be utilised in the quest for institutional control. In Europe, Russian tactics have invigorated European Conservatives while US legal partnerships and mechanisms have provided a long-proven effective strategy for political advancement via the courts.

We believe the European context is uniquely centred as the primary cultural zone of religious dissensus over liberal democracy with both Russian and American influences providing various relevant tools, human networks, ideas, and funding. The existing right-wing landscape across Europe is proving to be increasingly adept at harnessing and applying key aspects of Christian Right tactics and strategies to achieve political gains at both the national and European levels. The European Christian Right has adapted itself to the European Union bureaucracy and institutions with the goal of fundamentally changing the cultural values and social norms underpinning the common European project.

2 FROM CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY TO THE SECULAR CANOPY

Many contemporary historians agree that the foundations of European integration were laid by Christian Democratic statesmen— such as Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, and Alcide De Gasperi— whose political vision

was deeply informed by Catholic social teaching, particularly the principles of human dignity, subsidiarity, and solidarity (Kaiser, 2009; Kselman & Buttigieg, 2003). Their cooperation was motivated by opposition to the communist atheist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and by the conviction that Western Europe shared common Christian values that needed to be protected and supported (Risso, 2013). These ideas shaped the post-war consensus around peace, reconciliation, and economic cooperation, and became embedded in the early institutions of the European Communities (Warner, 2000; Leustean & Madeley, 2013). Even the Catholic Popes wholeheartedly supported the unification project and designated patron saints to Europe (Chelini-Pont, 2013).

Subsequent scholarship has taken a more critical perspective on this “Christian founding story” of the European Union, seeing the EU as a secular polity that was indeed forged by post-war Christian Democrats, yet driven in practice by market integration and secular liberalism. François Foret’s monograph *Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy* articulates this view (2015). Based on elite interviews and survey data, Foret mapped the religious identities of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in the period from 2009 to 2014, showing how religion operated more as private identity than as an overt public project. He concluded that the Union rests on a “secular canopy” and enacts a “mild secularism” that leaves room for religion in the public sphere while simultaneously acknowledging its confinement to culture (Foret, 2015, p. 285).

The debate on the institutional and policy status of religion in the EU was dominated by two themes: identity and policy. The first crystallised around the efforts by some countries to enshrine Europe’s Christian heritage in a preamble to the European Constitutional Treaty, which was in the making in the early 2000s. The constitutional project ultimately failed, but the debate about the preamble revealed deep divergences in the perceptions over Europe’s identity: was the EU a secular legal community or a civilisational project rooted in Christianity? The latter view—the EU as a Christian civilisational project—was controversial not least with a view to the possible Turkish membership, still on the agenda at the time (Challand, 2013; Weninger, 2007). These disagreements over Europe’s constitutional self-understanding foreshadowed the sharper dissensus that would later emerge over the substance of liberal-democratic norms.

The immediate outcome of the identity-debate was a policy-solution: the establishment of a formal high-level dialogue between EU institutions and “religious and philosophical communities”, institutionalised through Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. This created an official space for churches and religious organisations as recognised partners in EU governance. Article 17 TFEU (and the fact that the churches received their “own” high-level dialogue, as opposed to the dialogue forum between the EU and other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)) exemplified what Alfred Stepan has called the “twin tolerations” between church

and state (Stepan, 2001), a reciprocal autonomy and cooperation of religious and political institutions. The European churches followed suit, creating Brussels-based institutions like the Conference of European Churches (CEC), the Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), and the Committee of the Representatives of the Orthodox Churches in the European Union (CROCEU).

The integrative policy framework created by the official EU-church dialogue did not prevent a process by which debates over religious freedom, morality politics, and gender increasingly positioned religion as a site of contestation rather than cohesion. The shifting relationship between religion and European liberal democracy became starkly visible in 2004 with the controversy over Rocco Buttiglione's nomination to the European Commission. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi had put forward Buttiglione for the post of Commissioner for Justice, Freedom, and Security. During his confirmation hearing before the European Parliament, Buttiglione, a devout Catholic, stated that he considered homosexuality a sin and believed the family existed primarily so that women could have children and be protected by men. Although he stressed that these were personal convictions that would not affect his commitment to uphold anti-discrimination laws, many MEPs—especially from progressive and liberal factions—questioned whether he could genuinely safeguard the rights of women and LGBTIQ+ individuals. The Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice, and Home Affairs narrowly voted to reject his nomination, triggering intense controversy and ultimately forcing a reshuffling of the entire Commission (Euractiv, 2004). The episode thus illustrates how moral-religious positions had become triggers for overt parliamentary dissensus over liberal-democratic norms.

Zooming out from the Buttiglione case, the broader pattern becomes clear: while Christianity has profoundly shaped Europe's cultural and political heritage, today's European publics are largely secular and unchurched (Pew Research Center, 2018; Pollack & Rosta, 2015). Yet Christian churches remain influential actors in public debates, particularly on moral issues, where their teachings on gender, sexuality, and family often diverge sharply from prevailing liberal norms and policies (Grzymała-Busse, 2015). Catholic and Orthodox hierarchies, for example, oppose abortion, reject same-sex marriage, and portray "gender" as a dangerous ideology (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017), whereas some mainline Protestant churches have embraced more progressive positions.

It is therefore safe to conclude that the Christian Democratic imprint on the EU and European liberal democracy remained strong through the 1950s and 60 s, gradually receding as integration deepened and parties broadened into more secular, centrist "catch-all" platforms (Kalyvas, 1997). This gradual fading of the Christian Democratic consensus weakened the role of the "twin tolerations" between politics and the Christian churches, one of the institutional foundations on which liberal democracy in Europe had rested. On

the side of the churches, this shift coincided with intense internal theological conflicts between conservative and liberal factions within both Protestant and Catholic circles (Balbier, 2020; Hollinger, 2018; Wilde, 2007). The European churches were affected by global trends, in particular in the United States, which saw a decline of mainline and liberal Protestantism beginning in the 1960s (Lantzer, 2012). Inside the US, low church and fundamentalist movements—especially Pentecostal and evangelical missionary networks—gained influence and contributed to value polarisation between Christian conservatives and secular-liberal progressives (Iannacone, 1994). In Europe, this polarising trend started to gain traction in the 1990s.

3 THE GLOBALISATION OF CULTURE WARS AND THE RISE OF THE EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN RIGHT

The political role of Christianity in Europe today is being reshaped by two intertwined forces: the globalisation of culture wars and the rise of a European Christian Right operating across national and denominational boundaries (Lo Mascolo, 2023). Together, these dynamics have transformed Christianity's place in Europe's liberal democracies and inside the EU from a source of ethical legitimacy underpinning the democratic consensus to an arena of political contestation.

To understand how these dynamics took shape, it is necessary to trace their roots in both American and European political history. The American Christian Right, consolidated in the 1970s around opposition to abortion, feminism, and the perceived permissiveness of the civil rights era, built a powerful infrastructure of grassroots organisations, think tanks, media platforms, and wealthy donor networks (Dowland, 2015; Lassiter, 2008; Schulman & Zelizer, 2008). It pioneered the tactical repertoire of what James D. Hunter called the “culture wars” (Hunter, 1991), a moral and political cleavage that cuts across religions, dividing conservatives from progressives within all faith communities. These American networks provided both the ideological vocabulary and the organisational blueprints that would later be globalised through well-funded missionary and advocacy movements.

Western Europe had hardly any equivalent to this style of moral mobilisation until the 1990s. In the post-war decades, conservative moral norms were defended mainly through the alliance of churches with Christian Democratic parties, who negotiated with powerful Social Democratic parties to manage gradual liberalising reforms (Minkenberg, 2003). This pattern largely bypassed the confrontational style characteristic of the American culture wars and prevented for many decades the deep moral polarisation characteristic of politics in the US (Ozzano & Giorgi, 2015). Until the late twentieth century, laws and social norms across Europe reflected many of the same conservative moral assumptions. Since the 1990s, however, rapid liberalisation in law and public attitudes has made traditional Christian positions appear increasingly out of step with the mainstream (Inglehart & Norris, 2004, 2003). On

some issues, such as migration, churches align with more progressive agendas, but on questions of sexuality and family, they are now more often positioned on the conservative flank. This has brought religion into direct and recurring conflict with the EU's evolving rights agenda, intensifying the dissensus over the meaning and limits of liberal democracy.

The trajectories of religion and politics in Central and Eastern Europe were again markedly different. Under communist regimes, churches were repressed and politically marginalised. After 1989, they re-entered the public sphere in a socially conservative and nationalist register, with limited space for theological reform or the advancement of minority rights. Timothy Byrnes and Peter Katzenstein (2006) offered an early, prescient assessment: in an enlarging Europe, religion would serve not as a motor of integration but increasingly as a potential hindrance. This diagnosis anticipated later clashes over rights, equality, and pluralism at the core of Europe's liberal-democratic project.

Against this historical background, the globalisation of the culture wars and the rise of a European Christian Right have taken place from the 1990s onwards, shifting the religious-political axis from cooperation to confrontation. Culture wars repertoires were not only transmitted through ideological inspiration but via a durable institutional infrastructure that connected U.S. and European conservative actors. Already in the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S.-based Billy Graham Evangelistic Association established a global infrastructure (Balbier, 2020), and the "Lausanne Covenant" from 1974 cultivated and promoted European and global evangelical leaders. Platforms such as the World Congress of Families (WCF)—first hosted in Prague in 1997 and subsequently convened in Warsaw and other European capitals—created recurring venues for agenda-setting on family policy, reproductive rights, and opposition to LGBTIQ+ recognition (Stoeckl, 2020). The WCF brought together U.S. evangelical leaders, European Catholic and Protestant actors, Orthodox representatives from Russia, and political figures from across the right, helping to consolidate a transnational moral conservative field that would also find institutional footholds in the EU arena.

The consolidation of these networks was reinforced by the activities of advocacy and litigation groups, many originating in the United States, that established a sustained European presence. The Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) and the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) opened offices in Vienna and Strasbourg in the early 2010s, but their cooperation with European allies dates back much further, including collaborative campaigns on conscientious objection and parental rights (Mos, 2025). By embedding themselves in European legal and policy circles, such actors translated U.S.-style culture-war frames into formats adapted to European legal norms, thus providing ready-made scripts for religion-based dissensus within European parties, politics and courts.

Two additional forces have shaped this landscape over the last decades. The first is Russia's traditionalist turn under Vladimir Putin and the Russian

Orthodox Church (Stoeckl, 2017). Linkages between the transnational Christian Right and actors in Russia go back decades. In the years leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union, American Evangelical missionary organisations aggressively planned, promoted, funded, and launched “moral values” initiatives across the Soviet Union and, after its 1991 demise, across the post-Soviet space (Elliott, 1998). As the proselytisation motive of these Evangelical missionaries became clear, the Russian Orthodox Church not only reacted defensively—seeking to secure the cultural and religious centre of Russian society (Papkova, 2011)—but also absorbed and reinterpreted many of the strategic ideas and moral conservative themes introduced by these actors. In an Orthodox key, the ROC adopted the language of family values, the struggle against secularism, and the need for active cultural engagement, thereby laying the groundwork for its subsequent alliance with state power (Stoeckl & Uzlaner, 2022). As Alexander Agadjanian has argued, the unification of the church with the post-Soviet political regime in the Kremlin and their joint call for a civilisational return to Orthodox morality and traditional family values would acquire an “extraordinary international relevance” (Agadjanian, 2017, p. 39).

From the early 2010s, this alignment crystallised into official ideology: the Kremlin framed “traditional values” as a pillar of national identity and as a counter-narrative to Western liberalism, enshrined in measures such as the 2013 “gay propaganda” law. Drawing on strategies pioneered by the American Christian Right, the Russian state and Russian Orthodox Church elites engaged in transnational norm entrepreneurship (Stoeckl, 2016), appropriating the rhetoric of “family values,” “religious freedom,” and “child protection” to legitimise domestic authoritarianism and to project moral leadership abroad. Networks such as the WCF helped position Russia as a moral bastion against “gender ideology” and secularism (Stoeckl & Uzlaner, 2022; Bluhm & Brand, 2018). Today, the relevance of these Russian narratives (see also Toepfl and Mathyl in this Handbook) has found a growing foothold in EU-level politics, with this language of “traditional values” and “civilisational Christianity” adapted by MEPs and legal advocacy actors to challenge EU rights agendas in parliamentary debates and strategic litigation.

The second force is the rise of right-wing populist parties in Western and Eastern Europe that have incorporated religion into their ideological repertoire (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2015). While often secular in origin, these parties have discovered Christian heritage and symbolism as potent tools in their campaigns against migration—especially from Muslim-majority countries—and against political liberalism. In this context, religion is instrumentalised less as a matter of doctrinal commitment than as a marker of national identity and civilisational boundaries, reinforcing the broader narratives of the global culture wars (Haynes, 2020).

The convergence of these forces—the import of American culture-war repertoires, the post-communist re-entry of CEE churches, Russia’s projection

of “traditional values,” and the populist right’s instrumentalisation of Christian identity—has reshaped the political role of Christian religion in Europe. Taken together, these dynamics contributed to the rise of Europe’s Christian Right and provided the ground for religious dissensus with liberal-democratic agendas in Europe. It is important to stress that, compared to the hierarchical, confessional models of the traditional churches and the longstanding church-state cooperations that are still in place in most European countries, the transnational and cross-denominational European Christian Right is a *new* actor. Christian Right NGOs, politicians and intellectuals connect across countries and faith groups for battles against LGBTIQ+ rights, gender equality, and abortion. They target liberal and progressive politicians and NGOs and denounce their “globalist” agendas. Most of the time, they operate outside established church-structures. On the occasion of a WCF gathering in Italy in 2017, hosted by Matteo Salvini’s Lega, the Vatican even distanced itself from this new coalition between “Evangelical fundamentalist and Catholic integralists” (Spadaro & Figueroa, 2017). Theologians and religious intellectuals have likewise sounded the alarm with regard to far-right claims to Christianity (Strommen & Schmiedel, 2020; Probst et al., 2025). But these resistances notwithstanding, the European Christian Right today functions as a cultural-political network and a repertoire to contest the liberal order itself.

4 RELIGION AS A NETWORK: THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Religion in the European Parliament today functions less as a discrete policy field and more as a connective political language linking national parties, transnational advocacy groups, and external allies in the global Christian Right. The EP offers institutional space where culturally conservative and sovereignist actors coordinate, circulate shared repertoires, and amplify narratives contesting liberal-democratic norms.

The EP’s party landscape contains three main camps. First, the “old” Christian Democracy in the European People’s Party Group (EPP), once dominant in shaping European integration, has secularised into broad catch-all parties that retain symbolic religious references but largely distance themselves from confessional commitments. Second, a “new” Christian democracy is located in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), where parties such as Law and Justice (PiS) and Fratelli d’Italia foreground religion in moral and geopolitical terms, maintain close ties with church actors, and champion freedom of religion as a core foreign-policy theme (Steven, 2023). Third, further to the right, parties in Patriots for Europe (PfE) and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) (including Hungary’s Fidesz, Austria’s Freiheitliche Partei (FPÖ), and the Sweden Democrats) invoke Christian identity mainly as a civilisational boundary marker against migration, Islam, and “woke” liberalism, often rejecting key elements of the EU’s equality agenda outright (Roy, 2024).

Despite significant differences, these four groups share religion-related themes in their manifestos. All invoke some version of Judeo-Christian heritage, defend the traditional family, and frame Islam as a source of extremism. The EPP continues to couch these commitments in the language of subsidiarity, religious freedom, and gender equality, and commits to Christian values (EPP Manifesto, 2004). ECR emphasises the global protection of Christians and explicitly opposes “wokeism” (ECR Group Priorities, 2024). PfiE and ESN shift the tone decisively: their language centres on defending European identity from threats emerging from “wokeist ideologies” and “globalist forces,” with the ESN being the most explicitly illiberal, grounding its position in biblical tradition and rejecting LGBTIQ+ altogether (ESN Political Declaration, 2024; Patriots Manifesto, 2024).

The connective role of the EP in this field is reinforced by the dense interaction between parliamentary actors and extra-parliamentary networks. Catholic-led coalitions such as the *One of US Federation*, formed after a European Citizens’ Initiative on embryo protection, maintain direct channels to EPP and ECR MEPs through reporting and petitions (One of Us 2025). The *Political Network for Values*, linking Christian Right politicians across Europe and Latin America, has likewise convened meetings in Brussels to coordinate messaging on “gender ideology” and family law reform (EPP, 2017) (Stoeckl & Ayoub, 2024). These activities situate the EP not merely as a deliberative chamber but as a logistical node in transnational Christian Right mobilisation.

Findings from the ReLEP2 study confirm that, between 2019 and 2024, religion in the EP was mostly addressed in debates on values, identity, and rights. MEPs from Poland, Hungary, and Italy were the most active in invoking Christianity as a core component of European civilisation, with ECR and ESN members framing it explicitly against migration, multiculturalism, and gender equality initiatives (Foret, 2023, p. 4–10). “Freedom of religion” appeared as a recurring rhetorical device, but with sharply diverging meanings: for progressives it signified pluralism and minority protection, while for Christian Right actors it served to defend traditionalist positions on family, education, and sexuality (Foret, 2023, p. 12). Such clashes were visible, for example, in 2021–2022 debates on the EU’s external human rights reports, where ECR and ESN MEPs criticised the promotion of “gender ideology” abroad, provoking rebuttals from S&D and Greens/EFA members who stressed the universality of rights (Foret, 2023, p. 14–15).

The MEPs of the European Christian Right champion close ties with the American Christian Right. We already showed that these alignments had been developing for some time, but the 2024 U.S. presidential election marks a critical juncture that makes them more explicit. In the United States, the organised Christian Right consolidated behind Donald Trump’s MAGA movement. In Europe, references to MAGA—its narratives, organisational repertoires, and communicative style—now operate as a signalling device through which parties and activists position themselves within the wider

culture-war field. This has sharpened the cleavage between the “old” Christian Democracy associated with the EPP, generally cautious about overt identification with Trumpism, and a newer set of Christian Right actors (some within the EPP’s orbit, but more commonly in ECR and further to the right) who cultivate transatlantic ties, adopt MAGA’s mobilisational style, and import elements of its agenda on gender and sexuality, education, and migration.

The case of George Simion, leader of Romania’s Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), illustrates how these alignments operate inside the EP. Organisationally, AUR’s MEPs sit with the ECR; programmatically, Simion positions himself in continuity with the U.S. “Make America Great Again” agenda, framing sovereignty, nation, and family in civilisational Christian terms and adopting communicative repertoires familiar from the American Christian Right (France24 2025; Than & Ilie, 2025). A TikTok-video that Simion posted on his account shows him a guest at a conference organised by the National Association of Christian Lawmakers at Liberty University, an important intellectual and educational hub for the American Christian Right (Georgesimionoficial, 2025). His candidacy in Romania’s presidential elections drew endorsements from U.S. Christian Right figures, who strongly criticised the Romanian Constitutional Court’s decision to annul the first round. These narratives migrated into the EP when MEPs from PfE and ESN submitted questions to the European Commission alleging “antidemocratic meddling” in Romania’s elections and “double standards” in assessing foreign interference (EP Question, 2025a, b).

Such episodes reveal that religion in the EP is a resource for networking across and beyond Europe. By blending appeals to Christian heritage with sovereigntist and anti-“woke” rhetoric, Christian Right actors reframe the scope of rights and the nature of European integration itself, turning the EP into a visible arena of religion-based dissensus over liberal democracy. They also enact a new vision for Europe’s transatlantic and Russia relations, blending smoothly pro-Russian and pro-MAGA positions.

5 RELIGION AS A REPERTOIRE: THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The European Court of Human Rights has become a central arena in which the emerging dissensus over liberal democracy is articulated through religious repertoires. Rather than converging toward a shared European rights culture, litigation in Strasbourg increasingly reflects strategic norm contestation within the global culture wars (Annicchino, 2011; Bob, 2019; Fokas, 2020). Here, religion operates not only as the substantive focus of certain cases but also as a political-legal idiom.

A coordinated Christian Right legal complex—centred on actors such as Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) or the European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ)—has embedded itself in Strasbourg proceedings. These organisations draw on U.S.-style strategic litigation, Russian “traditional values”

discourse, and European conservative networks to challenge the normative scope of rights, particularly in the domains of family, sexuality, and education (Mos, 2025; Curanović, 2021). They mobilise religion in two ways: first, as a direct claim for exemptions or protections (e.g., against anti-discrimination laws or sexuality education); second, as a broader narrative of civilisational identity, in which Christian heritage is positioned as a bulwark against secularism, “gender ideology,” or multiculturalism.

In procedural terms, these actors use litigation as both a legal and a political process. Cases are selected for their potential to create favourable precedents or to trigger broader political debates at home. The ECtHR thus becomes not merely a judicial body applying law, but a transnational battleground in which legal argument, public communication, and political mobilisation are mutually reinforcing. Strategic litigation often involves coordinated *amicus curiae* briefs, media campaigns, and follow-up lobbying at national and EU levels—creating a feedback loop between the Strasbourg court and domestic or European parliamentary debates (Annicchino, 2011; Fokas, 2016).

The ideological cleavage visible in the European Parliament also plays out in ECtHR-related politics. Progressive governments, NGOs, and legal scholars invoke religion primarily within a pluralist framework that protects individual freedom of conscience and minority faiths. By contrast, Christian Right litigants use “freedom of religion” as a defence for limiting the scope of anti-discrimination law, rolling back LGBTIQ+ protections, or privileging certain family forms. This divergence mirrors the double meaning of “religious freedom” identified in the ReLEP2 study for the EP: a universalist, pluralist interpretation versus a traditionalist, exclusivist one.

Lautsi v. Italy illustrates this juridification of culture-war scripts. What began as a dispute over crucifixes in classrooms was reframed—via coordinated *amicus* activity and public campaigning by Vatican-aligned actors, Russian Orthodox networks, and U.S. conservative legal NGOs—as a claim about European heritage and educational autonomy. The Grand Chamber’s reliance on margin of appreciation signalled deference to national religious-cultural settlements, which then circulated back into parliamentary and media debates as validation of national religious privileges (Annicchino, 2011).

Notably, ECtHR religion-related rulings often have broader political reverberations. Fokas observes that judgments in this field feed back into national debates and, in some cases, into litigation before the European Court of Justice—effectively linking the Strasbourg arena to the EU’s own legal and political fields (Fokas, 2016). By examining the ECtHR alongside the EP, it becomes clear that religion today operates in European politics less as a doctrinal issue confined to confessional institutions, and more as a networked vehicle for structured, ongoing contestation over the limits of rights and the moral foundations of the political order. Strasbourg, like Brussels, provides an institutional stage on which transnational Christian Right actors test, circulate, and legitimise their agendas—challenging the egalitarian and pluralist norms underpinning European liberal democracy.

6 CONCLUSION

The dynamics traced in this chapter reveal why the rise of the Christian Right has turned religion into a site of dissensus over liberal democracy in Europe. Historically, Christian Democracy helped anchor Europe's post-war liberal-democratic order by translating religious values into commitments to human dignity, subsidiarity, social solidarity, and peaceful integration. Churches and confessional parties supported pluralist institutions, even as they negotiated the terms of secularisation and liberalisation.

Today, by contrast, religion is no longer primarily a source of legitimacy for liberal democracy but increasingly a focal point of structured, ongoing contestation over its meaning and scope. The European Christian Right advances an ideological project that recasts Christianity from an integrative cultural tradition into a civilisational marker deployed against liberal pluralism. This project challenges foundational principles of individual rights, equality, and institutional neutrality on moral questions. It does so not merely by defending inherited norms, but by strategically seeking to remake laws, rights regimes, and political identities along explicitly illiberal lines.

In parliamentary programs, legal advocacy, and transnational networks, the Christian Right champions a vision of Europe that is patriarchal rather than egalitarian, majoritarian rather than protective of minorities, and sovereign in ways explicitly hostile to supranational rights regimes. Their agendas frequently target legal protections for women, LGBTIQ+ persons, and religious minorities, framing them as alien impositions of "woke," globalist, or secular elites. They also aim to recalibrate church-state relations, not to maintain the cooperative "twin tolerations" that have historically underpinned European democracy, but to elevate Christianity into a privileged moral and political status that constrains pluralist freedoms.

As the analysis of the European Parliament and the ECtHR has shown, these conflicts are not confined to local or national politics but are amplified by dense transnational linkages that circulate ideas, leaders, funding, and litigation strategies across Europe and beyond. Crucially, religious dissensus operates across multiple institutional arenas simultaneously, allowing actors to reframe norms from within rather than solely confronting them from the outside.

This chapter has focused on Christianity as Europe's majority and historical religion, which is at a critical juncture: long associated with the construction of liberal democracy, it now also serves as a major site of contestation against it. Our analysis has concentrated on the Christian Right and its mobilisation across European institutions. We have not addressed the role of religious minorities, which often stand to gain from liberal democracy's protections of minority rights (as in the case of Muslims), but which also bring their own tensions with liberal-democratic norms, for instance on questions of gender equality. Future research should extend the analysis to these communities and, in comparative perspective, examine how different religious traditions interact with and contest liberal-democratic orders. Europe will continue to

grapple with questions of identity, sovereignty, and moral order; the Christian Right's interventions illuminate why religion must be taken seriously not only as a historical site of integration, but increasingly as a crucible of democratic conflict whose outcomes will shape who is able to flourish in Europe's future.

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