



RELIGION AND NATIONALISM IN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT: At the beginning of the 21st century, nationalism is still on the rise in Europe, exalting elements such as language, ethnicity, religion or the awareness of belonging to a political entity, creating exclusionary communities. Religion, which for centuries has operated as an element of identity, is being used in some countries to either encourage or restrict the presence of religion in the public sphere. The author analyses the dangers of the political use of religion in Europe as well as the use of political ideologies as a substitute for religion.

KEYWORDS: religious freedom, nationalism, laicism, Europe, politic religions, identity, human rights

The 21st century is beginning and nationalism is still on the rise in Europe and the rest of the world. Recent events in a large number of EU territories such as Scotland, Ireland, Spain, Belgium, Italy, Austria, Germany, France, Hungary, Slovenia, Sweden and Poland are a clear example. In all these cases, there is a mix of more or less intense secessionist demands, the rise of Eurosceptic and xenophobic parties demanding a greater presence in migration policy or appealing to sub-national identitarian sentiments, among which religion stands out.

Nationalism is a mechanism that builds the idea of nationhood with the exaltation of elements such as language, ethnicity, religion or the awareness of belonging to a lasting political entity. These are criteria that serve to distinguish between "us" and "them", and thus establish a form of identification for the in-group and the out-group. Nationalism is an excluding ideology that leads to the construction of an "imagined community" by the people who are part of that group (Rodríguez García 2007). And in this process there is an idealisation of the nation that leads to the emergence of a feeling of national superiority, the consideration of the

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nation as a homogeneous group and an uncritical acceptance of the national state and national authorities.

But there have been different nationalisms throughout history, which unfortunately are re-emerging again. There is a political nationalism, the most obvious example of which is the French Revolution, in which the identity of the individual or group is not defined by cultural but political attributes: citizenship. There is also a cultural nationalism which, in the opposite direction, trends towards the difference and the rupture of universalities. Where the popular and idiosyncratic are exalted. Where collective unity is based on ethnic, cultural and religious values and where there is a romantic interpretation of history (Cruz Prados 1995). A nationalism that had its moment of splendour at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

Today, in the globalised world in which we live, the nationalist phenomenon takes, in most cases, the form of cultural nationalism. And for this reason, by claiming that the political coincides with the cultural community, nationalism redefines that community and asks individuals to feel that they belong to it over and beyond the other communities to which they belong. Belonging to that community - defined in terms of whatever attribute it is, in this case the religious one - is what makes him an immediate member of the political organization (Cruz Prados 1995).

The fact is that every human being needs to belong to a basic identity group that provides the basis for his or her collective personality. A national group that is united by a series of links that distinguish them from other national groups: historical memory, territory with its borders, the use of the same language or belonging to the same religion (Petschen 1995).

History has proved to us that religion is a factor that can operate, and indeed has operated and continues to operate, as a group identity base. Europe has been an example of this for centuries. On the other hand, we cannot forget that the characteristics of nationalism and religion, in relation to the subject of my speech, have similarities. The sentimental and irrational aspects, the weight of tradition, the holistic reference to its object or the idealism of those who profess allegiance, are elements common to religion and nationalism. It is therefore not difficult to argue that nationalism is the new civil religion of our world (Petschen 1995).

In this sense, it is important to remember that some of the characteristics of political nationalism are not exclusive to this system and may be comparable in other systems, as is the case with religion. The big difference lies in the fact that its discourse is not focused on the



consolidation of a national state, but on the uniformity of large masses of the population in the face of the same idea of transcendence.

It is these common characteristics that make the nation and religion resources for shaping personal and collective identity. The example is that throughout history there has been a political use of religion to legitimise political authority and to obtain support for a regime and, at the same time, religious leaders, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, have used the support of political authorities to prosecute their own ideal and their own moral and material interests.

It is true that religion has not been, on its own, a nation-building element, it has always gone hand by hand with other elements, but it has usually worked as an actor of national reinforcement. Religion has always paid attention to the national sentiments of peoples, in order to become more closely linked to them. In this way, religion has been linked to the nation in its political, military, cultural, etc. vicissitudes.

For example, the Spanish monarchy relied on the Catholic religion for its conquests and defences. In western Ukraine, the Greek Orthodox Church has been the identifying element in establishing distance from Russian Orthodox and Polish Catholics. In Croatia, nationalism ascended linked to Catholicism, while in Serbia, historically dominated by the Turks, the only institution that identified its nationals was the Orthodox religion. It is in this historical context that we must analyse the rise of these new nationalisms in Europe (Petschen 1995).

New nationalisms or populisms which, as Linz pointed out, could mean the return of political religions, a phenomenon that was thought to have been overcome with the defeat of Nazism, fascism and communism (totalitarianism), or the politicisation of religions.

The political religions, to which we have referred, tried to compete with existing religions by trying to occupy their position. There are examples in Nazi Germany or communist Russia (Elorza 1996). And historically they have been successful in societies that have undergone a process of secularisation and have ended up adopting a hostile position towards the presence of religion, which is the enemy, in the public sphere.

This hostile model of separation between the State and the Church, currently supported in Europe by left-wing parties, is based on the rejection of cultural and religious pluralism. This model, which I dare to call laicistic, is based on the idea that true political community requires a system of shared values, beliefs and even patriotic and civil rituals to replace religious manifestations in our secularised society in a way that displaces religion, which is seen as a source of division in society (Linz 2006). Secularism as a



political religion is starting to become a reality in the political strategy of some governments in Europe.

As I have pointed out before, there are situations that continue to facilitate the fusion of religion and politics in today's world. On the one hand, there are authoritarian regimes that reject individualism and the values of liberal society, and on the other, certain manifestations of cultural nationalism, supported by religion, that support the process of nation-building or the affirmation of national identity (Linz 2006). And in all cases, there are either governments that support it or political parties that incorporate it into their programmes.

In this sense, we should not forget that the politicisation of religion in the service of nationalism or nationalism in the service of religion have been central themes in the 19th and 20th centuries, leading to a phenomenon that has sometimes looked like political religion.

But nationalism and religion, although they may have points in common, are two different things, so that throughout the history of the last century there has also been a distancing between them. In the case of the Catholic Church, the ethical problem of "nationalism" as a defining element of the pre-political essence of the State and of its social, cultural and juridical aims and objectives was raised with the communist, fascist and German National Socialist totalitarianisms, examples of political religions. Even then, Pius XI, in 1935, in the encyclical "Mit brennender Sorge" pointed out the conflict between these political systems and the fundamental postulates of the Christian faith and the most elementary ethical principles of human reason.

But the doctrine of the Catholic Church on the national question (nation and nationalism) has not been frequent, except at the beginning of the pontificate of Pius XI in 1922 and in the years immediately preceding the Second World War in 1938 and 1939. Subsequently, it was John Paul II in 1980 in his speech to UNESCO, in the context of the end of the Cold War, and in 1995 who spoke out critically by understanding the Nation as a cultural reality and not as a political reality.

The doctrine of the Catholic Church does not legitimise or support nationalist pretensions and has always been critical of the phenomenon of nationalism. Maritain, in his work "Man and the State", took a critical approach to nationalism in the 1950s, denouncing the confusion between nation and state, the myth of the national state and the so-called principle of nationalities whereby each national group should become a separate state.



According to Maritain, through these political processes the nation is divinised and perverted by nationalism. He understands that in this process the nation is assaulted by nationalism, because it is an illusion, contrary to natural law since, according to Maritain, political communities must be shaped by what they are and must not be shaped by what they are ideologically forced to be. This nationalism that is beginning to flourish in Europe is destroying civilisation and the nation as a political body.

This nationalism, according to Maritain, ends up in the blind cult of the homeland, a national cult, sometimes racist, which takes on the superior function of morality or religion (Maritain 1951). In more contemporary terms, we can say that nationalism becomes a religion of substitution.

For this reason, the doctrine of the Catholic Church has never considered so-called "exaggerated nationalism" as an acceptable proposition. In fact, while recognising the central role of the nation as a historical subject, it has never legitimised the positions of cultural nationalisms, based on religion, ethnicity or language, which claim for the nation a political configuration as an independent and sovereign state. He supports the value of patriotism, the love of the homeland, but warns of the danger of this becoming an immoderate nationalism that undermines this value and absolutises the nation as an autonomous political subject, independent of its configuration as a place where different languages, ethnicities, religions or cultures coexist (Margenat 2018).

The fusion of religion and nationalism, as Linz points out, in many cases involves the politicisation of religion in order to achieve traditional nation-building goals and in many societies has been a temptation for religious leaders. Moreover, it is not always easy to know whether intellectuals, in elaborating a politicised religion, do so as a result of their religious sentiments or as a result of their commitment to nation-building (Linz 2006). My impression is that in many cases, as for example with some ideologues of National-Catholicism in Spain, they started from a sincere religious conviction, although there are examples where religion was instrumentalised for a different political agenda (Muñoz 2020).

This reference to national Catholicism is essential if we want to understand part of what is happening in Spain today. I am of the opinion that national-Catholicism is a political model that began during the kingdom of Alfonso XIII, at the beginning of the 20th century, and that Franco took advantage of it to consolidate and justify his regime, although the position and attitude of the Catholic Church towards Franco was not the same throughout the entire period of the dictatorship. In the first period, from the end of the civil war until the end of the 1950s, the bishops' documents



made an apology for the regime, but after the Second Vatican Council these documents took a critical attitude towards General Franco's regime.

In this way, Spanish totalitarianism, attenuated in the mid-1960s, came into conflict with Catholic doctrine basically as a consequence of the Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* and the need for the recognition of fundamental rights, the most obvious example being the promulgation of the 1967 Law on Religious Freedom.

But the nation's position on religion has recently taken different approaches in different European countries.

There was defensive nationalism such as in Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine during the time of communism. In these countries, the most appropriate place to fight communism was the Catholic Church, which gave the struggle a greater depth and vigour. With the fall of communism, the political link to the Catholic Church was no longer so necessary, and secularising elements appeared, even if the sectors that practise religious life are characterised by their firm convictions.

There is also a nationalism that has reclaimed religion as a necessity and used it to its benefit. The most obvious case is that of Bosnian Muslims, who were accustomed to secularisation and living in a secular state. The young population was not very practising but the war has pushed Bosnians to use Koranic slogans and symbols. They have even entertained the idea of founding a Muslim state. In very similar religious terms, the Serbs have also responded by building Orthodox churches.

Finally, there are more radical nationalisms in which religious elements are transferred to the nationalist imaginary. This was the case in the Basque Country, where being a good *Abertzale* meant practising unlimited Catholic loyalty and fervour. Sabino Arana, father of the Basque homeland, would have liked Spain to have had a religion other than Catholicism. Since this was not the case, he stressed the different way the Basques and Spaniards practised their religion, which meant that they were two different categories of peoples (Anchústegui 2020).

Currently, the independentist parties in Catalonia, in their relations with the Catholic Church in Spain, support those Bishops who defend that the Catholic Church in Catalonia should have its own Episcopal Conference. This has not happened as it has not been approved by the Holy See. The nationalists seek a Catalan Catholic Church, which relies on nationalist religious symbols such as the Abbey of Montserrat, which differs from the Catholic Church in Spain. Religion is once again becoming the identity element of a community.



In these cases, it is not easy to separate the fundamentally political characteristic and the initiative to use religious identities, symbols and the support of religious leaders by nationalist movements from the religious roots of this identification.

I think it is a mistake to think that the motivation of deeply religious nationalist leaders and religious leaders who engage in nationalist movements is not a religious motivation and that they do not try to put nationalism at the service of religion. And it is remarkable that on many occasions these movements enjoy the support of religious citizens even when they encounter hostility and condemnation from the religious hierarchy.

Nationalist religious leaders, especially in minority nationalities within a state, often identify the achievement of religious salvation with the liberation of the nation: only a free nation can ensure the pursuit of religious salvation. Nationalist politics is for them a service to religion.

But these religious leaders must recognise that the benefits of a politicisation of religion are sometimes more apparent than real. For fundamentalist nationalism carries within it the seeds of conflict with the Church. Nationalism sometimes rejects the transnational identity of the Churches, their vocation of universality, and thus their questioning of nationalism as a supreme value. The fact that this leads to a confrontation between religion and politicised religion in the service of the state or the nation may be concealed for some time, but sooner or later it leads to a crisis within the religious institution itself (Rossell 2017).

But those who are part of the religious institution, religious leaders and believers, who are also citizens, must understand this. And politicians need to understand that in order to avoid such a dalliance between nationalism and religion, leading to political religions or politicised religions, it is necessary to opt for a liberal model of separation between Church and State in which there is a cooperative model for the management of religious diversity.

This model of relations, referred to in Spain by our Constitutional Court as "positive secularism", reduces the interference of the religious authorities in the political sphere, but also reduces the interference of the State in the religious sphere (Rossell 2017). This ensures a certain balance insofar as it is based on a formula of cooperation that guarantees respect for religion; and, in the case of a multi-religious society, respect for religious pluralism without imposing a secularised model of society that reserves to the State the definition of moral meanings, objectives and ultimate values and creates a political religion.



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