
Between Religion and Politics

BRUNO DUMONS

Jean-Marie Mayeur, *La question laïque (XIXe–XXe siècle)* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 239 pp., 95 FF. ISBN 2-213-60013-9.

Etienne Fouilloux, *Les chrétiens français entre crise et libération (1937–1947)* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 293 pp, 130 FF. ISBN 2-020-28131-7.

Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 300 pp., £.15.95. ISBN 0-8014-8320-4.

Emiel Lamberts, ed., *Christian Democracy in the European Union (1945–1995)* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 511 pp. ISBN 9-061-86808-4.

‘Christians and political life’ (taking the latter term in its widest sense) is a theme which continues to attract a great deal of interest among contemporary historians, in terms of both detailed research and broader surveys. René Rémond and Aline Coutrot demonstrated the interconnectedness of the two domains of religion and politics when they abandoned the restricted subject of relations between states and the Roman Catholic church and initiated the study of religion as an integral part of history, and the social sciences, as a whole.¹ Approaches since 1966 have been greatly modified, as shown by the treatment of the material in the four works now to be reviewed.

I. Three aspects of the history of religion in the twentieth century: secularism, Vichy and Christian democracy

Two of the most noted French historians of religious life have recently published collections of their essays on topics on which they have been researching for several

¹ René Rémond, ed., *Forces religieuses et attitudes religieuses dans la France contemporaine* (Paris: Colin, 1965); Aline Coutrot and François-Georges Dreyfus, *Les forces religieuses dans la société française* (Paris: Colin, 1966). On these two works and on the links they create between history and political science, using the religious element as an explanatory variable, see François Goguel, ‘Religion et politique en France’, *Revue Française de Science Politique*, Vol. 16, no. 5 (October 1966), 1174–80. For a historiographical review of the subject, based principally on studies prepared under the direction of René Rémond, see Aline Coutrot, ‘Religion et politique’, in René Rémond, ed., *Pour une histoire politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), 287–314.

decades, publishing in journals and conference proceedings. Jean-Marie Mayeur gives us his specialist views on secularism, a term which arouses passions in proportion to its ambiguity and which has vigorous echoes in contemporary society, since it constitutes 'not only an area of ideological debate, but also one of the foundations of the common life of ordinary French people' (Mayeur, *La question laïque*, 9). This prompts a closer look at some of the turning-points in the history of secularism, including relations between the state and the churches from the Concordat of 1801 to the reconciliation of the 1920s and the Liberation. Mayeur surveys the attitudes of opportunist republicans such as Léon Gambetta and Jules Ferry and the conceptions of free-thinkers and government republicans such as Ferdinand Buisson and Louis Barthou, without neglecting such prominent socialists as Guy Mollet. Secularism, the outcome of a long historical development, is now enshrined in the French constitution and in French institutions, and it is intimately associated with virtues such as respect for others and freedom of conscience, which Ferry considered essential to the morality of the ordinary decent human being, the *honnête homme*. Mayeur also examines the components of what could be called 'the new secularism' and defends the flexibility of the current regime, the result of 'a slow and difficult compromise which established itself gradually in accordance with the changing nature of its protagonists' (*ibid.*, 227).

Etienne Fouilloux offers a collection of studies, most of them recent, which cover a shorter historical period – the decade 1937–47 – but one which begins before, and ends after, the Second World War with all its tensions and crises. The author has deliberately avoided focusing narrowly on the Occupation (1940–44) in order to locate the religious factor in the decade as a whole, to clarify the degree of resistance to the dangers of totalitarianism and to detect the currents of dynamism, innovation and internal church reform in an increasingly secularised world. Initially he directs our attention to some examples of spiritual resistance to the rise of Nazism and fascism in Europe from 1937 onwards; attitudes which were largely overshadowed by the drama of 1940. In the 1930s the Vatican, under the ageing Pius XI, stood as a barrier against communism and extreme right-wing ideologies. At the same time there was an element of sympathy for Jews among some French Catholics, despite the strongly anti-Semitic bias of French Catholicism as a whole. The Christians of Europe had reasons for hope even in 1940: the vitality of youth movements, the interest in rediscovering the biblical sources of the Christian revelation and the gathering strength of ecumenism. During the 'black years' the outlook of French Catholics mirrored that of French people in general: while most were enthusiastic supporters of Marshal Pétain and his 'national revolution', a minority were committed to spiritual resistance. A more stimulating field of research is the surprising dynamism of pastoral strategies and missionary work. At the Liberation, the French church emerged (paradoxically) almost unscathed, and even showed a remarkable capacity to adapt to current events, both in its apostolic activities and in the reconstruction of the Polis. For the most part, the principal denominations retained their prewar positions, and a new elite arose from within the Christian community which facilitated the access

to high offices of state of such men as Georges Bidault, Maurice Schumann and Edmond Michelet, most of whom were ex-members of the Resistance. This helped to rally Catholic support for the new republic. Thus the Liberation was undoubtedly a positive experience for Christians, although radical differences of opinion persisted between diehard conservatives, Christian democrats and progressives throughout the Cold War.

Another aspect of interaction between Christianity and politics which has attracted much attention from contemporary historians is the development of Christian democracy in Europe.² Stathis N. Kalyvas's work is at the interface between history and political science: it is an examination of the factors which contributed to the emergence of Christian democratic parties in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. This very well-documented study examines both the success of Christian democracy in five countries (Germany, Austria, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands) and its failure in France. The author analyses the strategies of the protagonists: the Catholic hierarchy, the conservative political elites and the liberal and anticlerical elements. These mobilisations of the religious components in society were often the unintentional outcome of convergent action by a number of different protagonists. In France, the serious internal divisions affecting both the left and right wing, which polarised political life, and the ferocious debate over the adoption of revolutionary principles did a good deal to impede the formation of a mass organisation. In all the countries where they did develop, the 'religious' parties tended to adopt a moderate stance in the political centre; they took a conciliatory approach and favoured programmes and policies which focused on public action. Kalyvas gives us a thorough synthesis with valuable interpretations and telling comparative analysis, but his approach, focusing as it does on the formation and role of partisan institutions, tends to neglect the development of a common culture of Christian democracy, which is essential to a full understanding of this particular current of political thought.

That very cultural aspect was the starting-point of the Louvain conference of 1995, organised by Emiel Lamberts, which was devoted to an assessment of fifty years of Christian democracy within the European Union. Jean-Dominique Durand opened the proceedings with his paper on the foundations of Christian democracy as it was in 1945. The primary consideration was a social one: it 'locked Catholics into an economically antiliberal and anti-socialist stance' (Lamberts, *Christian Democracy in the European Union*, 14). This intransigent Catholicism was inherited by a whole generation of Christian democrats, along with a close relationship to the ecclesiastical hierarchy: it was the foundation on which they erected the idea of Christian democracy which manifested itself in a great diversity of political experiences, and in the ideology of powerful political parties which arose immedi-

² David Hanley, ed., *Christian Democracy in Europe. A Comparative Perspective* (London and New York: Pinter, 1994); Kees van Kersbergen, *Social Capitalism. A Study of Christian Democracy and the Welfare State* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Jean-Dominique Durand, *L'Europe de la démocratie chrétienne* (Brussels: Complexe, 1995); Tom Buchanan and Martin Conway, eds., *Political Catholicism in Europe (1918-1965)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

ately after the Second World War. This diversity justifies a typology which classifies 'Christian democrats' according to political context, ideological background, approaches to the exercise of power and party organisation; but in 1945 it proved no barrier to the emergence of common values centring on notions of democracy, Christianity and the European ideal.

Durand's introductory remarks are followed by a chapter on the importance of Christian democracy in the most important states of the European Union during the latter half of the twentieth century. Later chapters focus on the sociological underpinning of the militant electorate and their elected representatives; on the influence of Christian democracy on political systems (particularly the nature of parliamentary government); on the role of intermediary bodies and the interest in regionalism and decentralisation; on approaches to economic and social problems, particularly on the basis of 'the social market economy' (*soziale Marktwirtschaft*), a concept dear to the hearts of German Christian democrats, and with regard to support for the ideals of social security among representatives of the Mouvement Républicain Populaire sitting in the French parliament. A further chapter examines the influence of Christian democracy on moral and cultural issues, in particular the defence of human rights and the school system. The concluding study of the construction of Europe, by Philippe Chenaux, challenges the idea that the Vatican plotted to establish its own version of 'Europe' in the 1950s. All in all, the volume constitutes a very thorough assessment of the influence of Christian democracy in Europe since 1945, along with a comprehensive and up-to-date bibliography. Much to be regretted, however, is the absence of any study of those parts of the European Union – Spain, Portugal, Britain and Scandinavia – where the influence of Christian democracy was so much weaker.

II. Separating God from Caesar

Overall, these four works illustrate, each in its own way, the vitality of political analysis in contemporary religious historiography; and they suggest numerous directions for further research. They also bear witness to the profound change in approaches to this historical domain over the past twenty years. As far back as 1980 Jean-Marie Mayeur, reviewing current research on religious history, noted the excellent returns from the mining of one rich vein, the interaction between the churches and political society: this included, for example, studies of the electoral choices of church members, the dissemination of particular ideas, and particular periods such as the Second World War.³ This vitality has undoubtedly continued to the present day, but the tendency has been to consider the religious aspect as a separate domain. The concept of secularism has been extensively reassessed on the basis of sociological and legal aspects of religion, in particular the concept of

³ Jean-Marie Mayeur, 'Histoire religieuse', in *La recherche historique en France depuis 1945* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1980), 54. For a more detailed approach see Jean-Marie Mayeur, ed., *L'histoire religieuse de la France – XIXe-XXe siècle, problèmes et méthodes* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1975), 125–36.

'secularisation'.⁴ Secularism, once used as a weapon against the theocratic outlook of certain nineteenth-century Catholic thinkers, has now returned as a process which, however polemic and conflictive, has done a great deal to end the 'war of the two Frances' and constitute a common approach to 'respect for others' and 'human dignity' some of the principles which form the 'cornerstone of [French] social life' (Mayeur, *La question laïque*, p. 226).⁵ This new and optimistic view of the history of secularism has also deeply influenced the opinions of French bishops on contemporary society:

in this light, after a century of experience, the separation of Church and State may strike us as an institutional solution which makes it possible to distinguish effectively between those things which 'are God's' and those things which 'are Caesar's': it puts French Catholics in a position to participate wholeheartedly in civil society. In saying this we are acknowledging the positive character of secularism, not as it originally appeared – an aggressively anti-Catholic ideology – but as it has become after a century of cultural and political evolution: both an institutional framework and a state of mind which fosters a recognition of the reality of the religious element, and especially the Christian element, in the history of French society.⁶

Thus political and religious quarrels become 'by-products' of a more comprehensive study of the religious element, which in turn is seen as part of a more general history (Fouilloux, *Les chrétiens français*, pp. 9–10). This is the focus of all Fouilloux's research.⁷ Historians are no longer obsessed with Catholic reactions to the events of Vichy and the Occupation: they aim to write 'the real history of religion' over a decade, without confessional bias and accepting the tenets of cultural and social history. Not only the Vichy era, but also the years immediately before and after it, become the field of observation for crises and changes in religious history which were to influence the whole subsequent course of the twentieth century. Attention must now focus on the history of religion as, essentially, part of the private sphere – personal religious belief – and we could detach it from the collective, public aspects of political life. If we wish to do justice to both God and Caesar we will tend to stress the autonomy of religion as a subject for historical research, both as part of the historical discipline and as an area which raises its own problems.⁸ The recent new approaches to Christian democracy are an example: the Louvain conference laid great stress on the influence of the culture engendered by that essentially religious strain of political thought (Jean-Dominique Durand, in Lamberts, *Christian Democracy*, pp. 13–26). For that reason, studies of the originality of Christian democracy

⁴ Jean Bauberot, *La morale laïque contre l'ordre moral* (Paris: Seuil, 1997); Alain Boyer, *Le droit des religions en France* (Paris: PUF, 1993).

⁵ Emile Poulat, *Liberté, laïcité. La guerre des deux France et le principe de la modernité* (Paris: Cerf-Cujas, 1987); Jean Bauberot, 'La laïcité française et ses mutations', *Social Compass*, Vol. 45, no. 1 (March 1998), 186.

⁶ Les évêques de France (the French bishops): *Proposer la foi dans la société actuelle. Lettre aux Catholiques de France* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 27–8.

⁷ Etienne Fouilloux, *Au cœur du XXe siècle religieux* (Paris: Editions Ouvrières, 1993), 7–21.

⁸ Claude Langlois and André Vauchez, 'L'histoire religieuse', in François Bedarida, ed., *L'histoire et le métier d'historien en France (1945–1995)* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1995), 313–14.

now tend to focus more on cultural and social questions, in the hope that the 'religious variable' per se will prove to be the key to a better understanding of political action by Christians. Durand's recent synthesis is a clear example, as is the work of Bruno Béthouart on the Mouvement Républicain Populaire and the social question.⁹ All these works share a new approach: an examination of the relationship between Christians and the society they live in, with specific attention to France.

III. Is France an exceptional case?

The fresh historical approach evinced by these four works is distinguished, in particular, by a determination to avoid narrow concentration on a single country, which would confine all three of the themes now under discussion to a purely French analysis of a purely French situation. As far as secularism is concerned, the French situation does indeed appear unique. However, Mayeur, while remaining within the French ambit, comments that 'the true picture was probably more complex' (*La question laïque*, pp. 227–9) – although it is still easier to discern the differences among national systems, rather than what they have in common. Here, an exclusive concentration on the religious aspect – on a cultural rather than institutional basis – brings out the originality of the French 'way' of secularism rather than its 'exceptional' nature.¹⁰ This desire to widen the perspective in a comparative direction is amply confirmed in Fouilloux's work, though he acknowledges that the writing of a purely religious history of the decade in question does not permit a truly comparative approach, except where Italy is concerned (*Les chrétiens français*, 10). However, his work amply demonstrates how rewarding a comparative approach can be, especially when he evokes the situation of 'European Christians in 1940' (*ibid.*, 63–78), or places himself at the heart of the Catholic experience rather than among purely French problems, or, especially, when he casts off the strait-jacket which has confined so many historians to the study of Catholic attitudes solely during the Vichy era.

The Louvain conference clearly pronounced in favour of opening windows on to diverse European countries, following significant lines of force, rather than pursuing national cases, and Kalyvas, as a political historian, takes the same line. The outcome is, indeed, a proposed theoretical model of Christian democracy in Europe. Nonetheless, Christians of every nation are seen to have found their own way of adapting to, and participating in, political life. In that light the French experience of the MRP no longer appears to be an exception within a Christian democratic Europe, but a particular response conditioned by the French experience of secularism and the progressive secularisation of society, within a movement which was continually seeking 'a politics underpinned by Christian values' (Lamberts, *Christian Democracy*, 92).

⁹ Durand, *L'Europe de la démocratie chrétienne*, 91–2; Bruno Béthouart, 'Le MRP et la question sociale' (unpublished 'mémoire d'habilitation à diriger les recherches', University of Lille III, 1997).

¹⁰ Jean Bauberot, ed., *Religion et laïcité dans l'Europe des Douze* (Paris: Syros, 1994).

This comparative approach represents not only a change in geographical scope, from the national to the European, but also a broadening of attention to include the entire confessional spectrum of Christianity and Judaism. Mayeur lays particular emphasis on the presentation of secularism within the system set up by the Concordat, which recognised the rights of Jewish and Protestant worshippers; he also examines what the idea of secularism owed to republicans inspired by the Reformation (*La question laïque*, 13–28, 73–109). Fouilloux, for his part, lends an ear to the ‘soft music of Protestantism and Judaism, quite distinct from the symphonics of Catholicism’; and he pays particular attention to the attitude of the Vatican towards the Jews during the Second World War and the varied responses of French Catholics faced with the alternatives of collaboration and resistance (*Les chrétiens français*, 10, 85–98, 99–113). The Christian democrats of Europe gradually learned to thrive either on a spirit of competition, as in Germany (Kalyvas, *Rise of Christian Democracy*, 211, 214) or on a sort of ‘political ecumenism’, as in the Netherlands and Switzerland; by 1945 the movement had assumed a far more interdenominational look (Durand, in Lamberts, ed., *Christian Democracy*, 25). All four books bear witness to the fact that the comparative approach constitutes one of the richest quarries for the new historiography of religion. This puts them in line with the comparative and interdenominational approach exemplified by general histories published in the 1990s, such as the *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine* edited by Gérard Cholvy and Yves-Marie Hilaire (3 vols., Toulouse: Privat, 1985–8); the *Histoire de la France religieuse*, edited by Jacques Le Goff and René Rémond (4 vols., Paris: Seuil, 1988–92); and *Etre chrétien en France*, published under the guidance of François Lebrun (4 vols., Paris: Seuil, 1996–8). The gigantic *Histoire du christianisme*, co-ordinated by Jean-Marie Mayeur, the late Charles Pietri, Luce Pietri, André Vauchez and Marc Vénard (14 vols., Paris: Desclée, 1990–9) extends this comparative and interdenominational approach not only to the European dimension, but also to Christianity in the East, the New World and the missionary lands of Africa, Asia and the Pacific.

To sum up, the decision to treat religious history as a separate field of research has not led to a scorning of political connections: instead it has helped to establish the frontiers between the two domains, and in particular has encouraged a fresh approach to problems from the viewpoint of related disciplines such as sociology and political science. This offers ample scope to students of contemporary history who seek to understand how, even in a secularised society, a sentiment as intimate and private as religious belief can still animate and influence the vast public space of politics.