Christian Democracy: One word or two?

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The historiography of Christian Democracy has long been dominated by a debate about its coherence. Did Christian Democracy reflect the gradual maturation of a distinctive Christian (and largely Catholic) language of politics, which had its origins in the social Catholicism of the late nineteenth century, and which reached its progressive fruition in the decades following the Second World War? Or was it rather the somewhat accidental conjuncture of two essentially separate phenomena: a Catholic political tradition, which at different periods in its history took a variety of parliamentary and anti-democratic forms; and the development after the Second World War of a hegemonic democratic politics in non-Communist Europe, within which Catholic politics found a place?¹

This debate, like so many in the historical literature, is more useful in the abstract than in its concrete detail. It serves to illuminate ways in which we might think about Christian Democracy more than it provides clear alternatives that can be proven from the historical evidence. Indeed, in part, the very impossibility of resolving the debate one way or another illustrates a larger and more important point: the very wealth and diversity of primarily Catholic forms of Christian politics in Europe in the middle decades of the twentieth century. It is the recognition of the importance of Christian-directed politics in Europe, in the decades from the 1920s to the 1960s, which has been at the heart of the substantial renaissance in historical analyses of Catholic politics that has taken place over roughly the last twenty years.² Having played some small part in that process, it is interesting to look back now at the impulses which lay behind it, but also at how our understanding of the phenomenon of Catholic politics, and of Christian Democracy in particular, has evolved in the light of more recent work.

At the origin of that “Catholic turn” in the historiography of the mid-twentieth century there were, I think, two impulses. The first was a turning away from “-isms”, which coincided with the waning of the defining framework of the Cold War in later twentieth-century Europe. The idea that the experience of Europe’s twentieth century was defined by the conflict of a number of primarily secular political traditions – most notably fascism, communism and liberalism – each of which had their own specific characteristics – almost their own DNA – dominated much historical writing in the 1960s and 1970s. This was especially so in the case of fascism, defined as a particular genus of anti-democratic politics which took different forms in Europe’s plural political cultures, but which possessed a distinctive coherence. The body of empirical studies of movements of the political right which developed from the 1970s onwards, however, demonstrated the indissoluble pluralism at the heart of the authoritarian and extreme right of the 1930s and 1940s; and, in doing so, opened a space for understanding the particular position that Catholicism occupied within that range of political traditions.

Suddenly there was an opportunity to explore the way in which Catholics voted for the extreme right, but also were active in a wide range of Catholic-inspired political organisations, which contributed to the mid-century authoritarian regimes in Austria, the Iberian Peninsula, Italy and, during the Second World War, in France, Slovakia and Croatia.

The second was the (re-)discovery of ideology. Zeev Sternhell’s work, and more especially his *Ni droite ni gauche: l’idéologie fasciste en France* (1983), may have set out to demonstrate the prevalence of fascist ideas in French intellectual culture of the inter-war years, but its more durable impact was to give ideas as important a place in the history of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s as it has long been accorded in historical writing on pre-1914 Europe. French citizens, and by implication those of other European states, did not adopt authoritarian politics

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5 R.J. Wolff and J.K. Hoensch (eds.) *Catholics, the State and the European Radical Right, 1919-1945* (Boulder, 1987).


Sternhell was, of course, originally a historian of the intellectual ideas of pre-1914 Europe. See, for example, his *La droite révolutionnaire, 1885-1914: les origines françaises du fascisme* (Paris, 1978).
out of simple material interest or psychological unease, but because they regarded some version of the anti-democratic ideas circulating in the inter-war decades, as providing a more plausible way of understanding the world around them, and how indeed it might be made a better place. And that again led back to Catholicism. The discovery that the starting point, but also the durable inspiration, of many figures of the anti-democratic right lay in Catholicism, or indeed more especially in the teachings of the Church, led to a rediscovery of the ways in which Catholic ideas have mattered in the politics of twentieth-century Europe. As a consequence, Catholic forms of thought came out of a particular ghetto of courses on Catholic doctrine, and became part of how Europeans thought about a wide range of issues, including corporatism, social welfare, human rights, and the threat posed by modern forms of state totalitarianism.\footnote{Re. human rights, see in particular S. Moyn ‘Personalism, Community and the Origins of Human Rights’ in S-L Hoffmann (ed.) Human Rights in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 85-106. Re. the Catholic contribution to analyses of “totalitarianism”, see J. Chappel ‘The Catholic Origins of Totalitarianism Theory in Interwar Europe’, Modern Intellectual History VIII (2011), 561-90.}

And all of this, in turn, re-energised the study of Christian Democracy, as a form of politics that owed at least as much to the larger forces of the Second World War, of ideology, and of the political engagement of new generations of young Catholics, as it did to the rather dull logics of state and social reconstruction, European integration and the pursuit of material prosperity.\footnote{As examples of an older political-science approach, see R.E.M. Irving The Christian Democratic Parties of Western Europe (London, 1979); G. Pridham Christian Democracy in Western Germany: The CDU/CSU in Government and Opposition, 1945-1976 (London, 1977). Such literature might be best defined as a secular history of Christian Democracy.} Christian Democracy, in short, became historically interesting; but it was also highly successful. It is important to remember how sudden was the entry of the politics of Christian Democracy into European politics after the Second World War, and also how successful it was in building up a flexible politics of the centre-right, which rallied coalitions of cross-class support, incorporating those, such as the newly-enfranchised women of Italy, Belgium and France, for whom a vote for Christian Democracy was much more than the consequence of their subservience to clerical dictate.\footnote{J-C Delbreil Centrisme et démocratie-chrétienne en France: le Parti démocrate populaire des origines au MRP, 1919-1944 (Paris, 1990); R. Leonardi and D.A. Wertman Italian Christian Democracy: the Politics of Dominance (Basingstoke, 1989); W. Beke De ziel van een zuil: De Christelijke Volkspartei, 1945-1968 (Leuven, 2005); Un parti dans l’histoire, 1945-1995: 50 ans d’action du Parti Social Chrétien (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1996).} Seen in this way, Christian Democracy along with Communism was one of the two emphatic political victors of the Second World War in Europe and, without doubt, the most durable.
Given this success, the study of a Catholic-dominated Christian Democracy should be one of the central themes of the historiography of Europe after 1945, west of the Soviet-directed politics of central and eastern Europe. In truth, that is still not quite the case. Somewhere in the minds of many historians there remains the secularizing reflex which draws bold and in many respects unconvincing connections between declines in religious practice during the nineteenth century and those that have occurred since the 1960s to present a politics based on religious belief as outdated, and Christian Democracy as one of the ways in which European politics was knocked off its progressive path after 1945 by the Cold War and the American informal empire in Western Europe. None of that, of course, can really stand up to serious historical examination, and the challenge of those historians who are interested in Christian Democracy is in effect a double one: to understand the reasons for its remarkable success; and to convince their colleagues that that success deserves to be studied on its own terms.

In that respect, a number of works published in recent years mark a significant step forward. Three themes, in particular, seem to me to emerge prominently from recent work on Christian Democracy. The first of these is that Christian Democracy has to be approached as part of broader (and deeper) changes that had been taking place in Catholic political engagement since around the end of the 1920s. The idea of a generational caesura in Catholic politics in the inter-war years, whereby an older pre-1914 generation of political leaders, was replaced by the new militancy of a youth who had come of age since 1918 is of course a well-established one. But what seems to me to be new in more recent work, including that by my doctoral student Jorge Dagnino on the FUCI in Fascist Italy, is a much more substantial engagement with the medium- and long-term consequences of that caesura. In the short term, the young were at the heart of the radical Catholic politics of the early 1930s; but what we can now see more clearly is how the same generation, newly arrived at middle age, were also central to the politics of Christian Democracy after 1945. Of course, circumstances had changed: authoritarian ideas had lost their appeal, both within Church politics and the wider society, and a certain fringe of Catholic political activists had made long political journeys through the war years and Resistance to the political left. But these remained unusual cases. What

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10 There are elements of such an attitude in T. Judt Postwar: A history of Europe since 1945 (London, 2005).
mattered more was the way in which the testimony of experience had led many Catholics to adopt a serious politics of rather moderate democracy, whereby they saw the consolidation of parliamentary democracy, but also the active presence of Catholics within it, as the best means of reconciling their ideological inspiration with a society where any immediate Catholic re-conquest was unrealistic. It was this generation – born somewhere around 1910, active in the 1930s, but influential after 1945 – who were at the heart of Christian Democracy as a political project from the Second World War until a further generational change occurred in the later 1960s, and who were central to the post-war politics of non-statist welfare provision, of home building, and of European integration.

How far those political figures were truly Christian Democrats is a question which needs to be asked, because their instincts were also often predominantly pragmatic, reflecting their membership not only of Catholicism but of other influential communities of the post-1945 era: as state officials, and as members of a burgeoning professional middle class. To see Christian Democracy as a primarily ideological project is therefore always to risk privileging the bold doctrinal statements issued at the moments of political re-foundation after the Second World War over the quotidian practice of a multi-party politics of democratic compromise and the opportunist pursuit of electoral advantage. The second dominant theme of recent work has therefore been to take Christian Democracy out of a history of political elites and to root it much more in the politics of local communities and of socio-economic interest groups. We still have far too few local studies of democratic politics after the Second World War, and almost none which dig sufficiently deeply into the associational culture of post-1945 Catholicism. Yet, it was the resilience provided by what in the Low Countries is termed the Catholic “pillar” which rendered so imposing the success of Christian Democrat politics. But good recent studies, such as that by Robert


15 I have addressed some of these issues in M. Conway The Sorrows of Belgium. Liberation and Political Reconstruction 1944-47 (Oxford, 2012), pp. 206-15, which also provides bibliographical references to the substantial literature on “pillarisation”. An excellent recent example of the potential of local studies of
Ventresca on the success of the DCs in the pivotal Italian elections of 1948, have rightly focused attention on how electoral success in Italy was a by-product of organizational mobilisation.\(^\text{16}\) That was no doubt true elsewhere, and nowhere more so than in the case of the remarkable success of the MRP in the immediate post-war elections in France. Too many studies of the MRP, however, focus on the beginning of the story, and not enough on the end.\(^\text{17}\) The distance which gradually developed between the party's elites and its electorate seem to lie at the origins of the decline in its share of the vote, to the benefit of the Gaullists and other political forces of the right. In contrast, as the excellent recent study by Rosario Forienza on the DC in the Italian Mezzogiorno after 1945 shows well, much of the strength of the DC lay in the way in which the party acted as a transmission belt between Rome and local elites. Grievances were passed upwards, and benefits (notably state infrastructure projects) were transmitted downwards. All of this might take us a long way from overarching theses of the nature of Catholic politics, but it provides a much more convincing portrait of how Christian Democrat politics was able to root itself in the more individualist and self-interested politics of post-1945 Europe. Voters were no longer so interested in changing the nature of the political systems; but, be they farmers, mothers or small businessmen, they wanted something tangible in return for their votes. And, as the wealth of Christian Democrat socio-economic legislation and lobbying demonstrates, they tended to be pretty good at that.\(^\text{18}\)

As this suggests, it is easy to adopt an overly ideological approach to Christian Democracy. Ideas mattered less than, sometimes quite literally, the price of milk, and certainly the size of family allowances. But Christian Democracy was more than a flag of convenience for a variety of interest groups opposed to socialism. The third theme evident in much recent work on Christian Democracy has been the importance of intellectual culture. This is rather different from the emphasis placed in an older historical literature on the development of a particular Catholic attitude to democracy: the longue durée of the development of Catholic thought since the end of the nineteenth century no longer seems so relevant.

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\(^\text{17}\) See, in particular, the excellent study by P. Letamendia *Le mouvement républicain populaire : le MRP, histoire d'un grand parti français* (Paris, 1995). See also I. Woloch ‘Left, right and centre: The MRP and the post-war moment’, *French History* XXI (2007), 85-106.

\(^\text{18}\) I am currently working on a study of democracy in post-1945 Western Europe. See my discussion of this in M. Conway ‘Democracy in post-war Western Europe. The Triumph of a Political Model’, *European History Quarterly* XXXII (2002), 59-84.
What matters more is an understanding of the wealth of Catholic and Catholic-influenced ideas on democracy, on society and on social problems which had been developing since the 1930s. Jan-Werner Müller’s recent book is remarkable for the prominence which it accords to Catholic ideas; but that is only because we have become accustomed to thinking of the intellectual history of the age in terms of a predominantly secular canon of thinkers.\(^\text{19}\) That the 1940s and the 1950s were the golden age not only of Sartre, Camus and Raymond Aron, but also of, for example, Jacques Maritain might seem a small logical leap to make, but it reconfigures the way in which we think about the direction of intellectual life in Europe after 1945. Catholic politics rested on a sense that Catholic ideas did offer a resource which could be used to build, however incrementally, a better world. This was evident in the seriousness with which Christian Democrat parties set about developing their policies, and the prominence accorded to Catholic ideas in the activities of the parties.

This is a point which can be pushed further. Seen in retrospect, one of the most remarkable features of Catholicism in Europe from the 1930s to the 1960s is the degree to which it became an intellectual project: a way of seeing, interpreting, and changing the world. This gave an energy to Christian Democrat politics, but it also explains the direction of the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65. For too long, historians have been inclined to take that event for granted. Progressive-minded Catholic writers in particular have seen it, implicitly or explicitly, as the moment when the Catholic Church finally came right, by shaking off a reactionary past embodied most immediately by the long pontificate of Pius XII.\(^\text{20}\) But matters were more complex than that. As a recent excellent study by John Connelly has shown, there was no overriding logic to the transition of the Church from the largely anti-semitic attitudes of the 1930s to the declaration in October 1965, *Nostra Aetate*, that accepted the legitimacy of the Jewish faith.\(^\text{21}\) That that happened was essentially the product of the accession to positions of formal and informal influence of a new cohort of Catholic figures whose attitudes reflected the priority accorded to ideas. They saw Catholicism as primarily an intellectual project, and were determined that on the many pressing issues of the age – social justice, the dignity of the person, decolonization, peace, democracy – the Church should stand on the right side. In the short term, that was emphatically a victory, though this redefinition of Catholicism as an intellectual


project probably also made some contribution to the subsequent rapid decline in levels of religious practice in Western Europe over the subsequent two decades.²²

Ideas therefore mattered, in the Church, as in Christian Democracy, but only if they were combined with a more concrete engagement in the lives of the faithful and the voters. And that perhaps suggests, too, an answer to the somewhat stark dichotomy posed at the head of this essay. Christian Democracy had both long-term antecedents, and short-term causes; but its more durable significance lay in the way in which over the medium term since the 1920s Catholicism had developed new forms of social and political engagement: Catholic Action, trade unions, spiritual organisations, women’s movements, and finally political parties. Some of those emphatically led into the authoritarianism of the 1930s and 1940s. However, they also ensured that the Christian Democrat parties of the post-1945 era had leaders and ideas, but also activists and organisations capable of transmitting those political programmes into Europe’s Catholic communities, as well as voters willing to vote for parties and candidates.

²² I have discussed some of these issues in my review of L. Kenis, J. Billiet and P. Pasture (eds.) The Transformation of the Christian Churches in Western Europe 1945-2000 (Leuven, 2010) in The Catholic Historical Review XCVIII (2012), 393-5.