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THE SACRED AS BORDERING PRACTICE

Introduction

Today, nationality is still among the most important justifications of political rule. Many modern *national* states have been created through the application of the following two principles of international law, that take nationality as their decisive criterion: Since 1918 the “Principle of Nationality” became operational in dividing former multiracial states into national states. According to this principle, applied after the end of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires as well as for states created after decolonization, a nation-state should contain one to three ethnic groups (Brand 2007, 232). A more recent update of this principle is a person’s right to self-determination, anchored in the UN Charter of 1945, Article 1,2. A supranational union like the EUropean¹ Union challenges this paradigm. Why do we consider a national government’s decisions to be normative for us, even if this government might be distant or not even represent us in terms of gender or ethnicity? Why do we feel bonds of nationality with some people, while we perceive others as strangers? If nationhood has replaced prior justifications of political rule based on religious belief, the legitimacy of claims to govern pronounced by supranational structures like the EUropean Union is not evident.

On the contrary, migration challenges nationhood and demarcates its limits. The latter becomes tangible through the perception of *foreign* people within the country, which can reinforce a feeling of national unity between an ingroup and at the borders. Borders are brought into existence by those who struggle to cross them. It is they who experience the border as such, at least for many EUropeans, which would otherwise just be a theoretical concept. The aim of this paper is to investigate how the actual physical border and the politics that constitute it interact with the theoretical concept understood as political faith. In this view, borders are not only physical but get reinforced by faith in a sacred unity, protected from perceived dangers. In the case of the EU, the experience of seemingly unsurmountable borders is

¹ In the following text, E and U are written in capital letters to highlight the difference between “european” as “relating to the continent Europe” and “EUropean” as “relating to the EU”. This practice is copied from Beznec and Kurnik 2020.

frequently created by people on the move² trying to cross its external borders. In order to explore the dynamic between borders and belief in the case of the European Union as it currently exists, asylum rights and their violation will first be given as important context. Then, religion will be discussed in the framework of European border and asylum politics. Next, the importance of the Christian religion will be examined in the history of the union. Finally, the notion of political faith and its embodiment in the case of the European Union will be discussed.

Rights Violations of Refugees by the EU

Different kinds of international law conventions bind countries in the European Union to respect refugees' right to asylum. First, on the level of the international community there is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948, that is as such not legally binding, but has a great moral value since it serves as foundation of modern human rights law.³ Article 14,1 states that "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution" (UN 2022), whereupon Article 25,1 adds the "right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."⁴

A legally binding convention is the 1951 Refugee Convention that is ratified by all 27 EU member countries.⁵ Article 33,1 contains the principle of non-refoulement: "No Contracting State shall expel or return ("refouler") a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group

² „People on the move“ does not differentiate between refugees and immigrants, that are oftentimes moving together in migration movements. In a wider sense, the term describes the situation that people are in, and does not comment on its legitimacy. The term is for example suggested by Pijnenburg and Rijken (Pijnenburg and Rijken, 2021). In the present text however, the term "refugee" will be used in order to talk about the legal situation, that is different for immigrants and refugees.

³ United Nations. n.d. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Accessed January 25th, 2023. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

⁴ The last information seems especially important considering the still missing criteria for flight because of climate change developments (Climate Refugees, 2022) and arguments against the legitimacy of migration based on economic aspirations.

⁵ UNHCR. n.d. "States Parties to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol." Accessed January 25th, 2023. <https://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b73b0d63.pdf>.

or political opinion".⁶ Since 1995, the European borders⁷ are administered according to the Schengen agreement that abolished checks at internal frontiers and homogenized external border controls.⁸ The elimination of internal border control puts focus on the external borders, which are hence the crucial obstacle for refugees to cross that wish to enter a Member State. In Article 18 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the right to asylum is guaranteed in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention.⁹ It is mandatory to follow this charter for all EU organs, as well as for member states, insofar as they implement union law. As an answer to the specific challenges created by the Schengen zone, the Dublin III convention assigns the responsibility of examining the asylum application to the first country where the demand is lodged, whereby exceptions, e.g., family reunifications, are allowed for.

Member states shall examine any application for international protection by a third-country national or a stateless person who applies on the territory of any one of them, including at the border or in the transit zones. The application shall be examined by a single member state (...); Where it is impossible to transfer an applicant to the Member State primarily designated as responsible because there are substantial grounds for believing that there are systemic flaws in the asylum procedure and in the reception conditions for applicants in that Member State, resulting in a risk of inhuman or degrading treatment within the meaning of Article 4 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the determining Member State shall continue to examine (...) whether another Member State can be designated as responsible. Where the transfer cannot be made (...), the determining Member State shall become the Member State responsible".¹⁰

These obligations, however, are broken on a regular basis. Thränhardt, for example, described the European asylum regime¹¹ in 2021 as "Lotteries," even as countries that

⁶ UNHCR. n.d. "Convention and Protocol relating to the status of refugees." Accessed January 25th, 2023. <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>.

⁷ Today, 26 countries participate in the agreement. Romania, Croatia and Bulgaria are not yet part of the Schengen zone, but in the process of joining. Ireland and Cyprus have not joined the agreement, whereas Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein as non-EU countries are members of the Schengen zone ("Schengen Area", 2022).

⁸ European Commission. n.d. "Home Affairs. irregular migrant." Accessed January 29th, 2023. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/irregular-migrant_en.

⁹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. n.d. "EU Charter of Fundamental Rights" Accessed January 25th, 2023. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The "European Asylum Regime" consists to a big extent of the countries sovereign policies that are subject to European decisions. Regarding the deviating asylum policies of e.g., Hungary, the European decisions seem more like guidelines.

are not overwhelmed by refugees and have traditionally effective governance exhibit an “organized ambivalence towards the acceptance of refugees”¹² According to the political scientist, this ambivalence is the result of legal principles on the one side and political impetus to constrain migrant inflows on the other side. The deciding asylum officers are left to deal with this tension, which can lead to long, uninformed procedures that have strongly diverging results in different countries or different parts of the same country about the same situation.¹³ A more drastic violation of the seemingly binding obligations, especially against the principle of non-refoulement, is the ongoing practice of pushbacks. The Border Violence Monitoring Network defines pushbacks as “informal expulsion (without due process) of individuals or groups to another country”.¹⁴ Chain pushbacks” are pushbacks that happen inside the EU and transport people back outside of the external borders, often through multiple stops in different countries. Since both kinds of pushbacks are illegal, according to international law, and often include violence or humiliation their documentation is poor, and the number of unreported cases is likely high.

However, the Border Violence Monitoring Network tries to document pushbacks mostly along the Western Balkan’s Trail and published together with “The Left,” a group in the European Parliament, the “Black Book of Pushbacks.”¹⁵ This report, that had been first publicized in December 2020 and updated on the 8th of December 2022, contains in its latest version 1635 testimonies that affected more than 24,990 people and 16 states, thereof 10 EU member states. These numbers display pushbacks from 2017 to 2022. While mostly national border guards are operating the pushbacks, FRONTEX, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, has also been proven to be indirectly and directly involved in human rights violations against refugees. Despite multiple investigations, a change of the Agency’s executive director, and official rebranding that includes a tendency to call their operations “life-saving,” the BVMN exposes that more pushbacks and more violence against refugees in FRONTEX’ operational areas have been recorded in the last two years. At the same time, FRONTEX has doubled in size in between 2019 and 2021, augmented their operational area to non-European countries, and gained influence over the Union’s border

¹² Thränhardt, Dietrich, “Lotteries. The Ambivalent European Asylum Regime and How to Fix It. Credibility and Effectiveness of Asylum Decisions in Europe.” *Zeitschrift für Flucht- und Flüchtlingsforschung* 5 (2021): 326.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 330-1.

¹⁴ Border Violence Monitoring Network. n.d. “How does the database work?” Accessed January 25th, 2023. <https://www.borderviolence.eu/how-does-the-database-work/>.

¹⁵ *The Black Book of Pushbacks*, vol. 1, Hope Barker and Milena Zajović, eds. (Brussels: The Left in the European Parliament, 2022), 2-4.

security technologies, e.g., it oversees EUROSUR¹⁶ and the forthcoming EES (Entry-Exit System), that should automatically monitor border crossings of third-country nationals.¹⁷

Religious Narrative in EU Asylum and Border Politics

Due to the specific political structure of the EU, it is not possible to speak of one coherent system of asylum and border politics. In fact, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) serves in large part as a set of merely minimal standards that member states are free to interpret in their national law. However, in terms of border politics, the EU could agree on common standards as on the Dublin or the EURODAC Regulation, a fingerprint database of asylum seekers and people crossing the border irregularly. On the 23rd of September 2020, the commission proposed the “New Pact on Migration and Asylum”, a corpus of drafts to amend the existing laws and directives.¹⁸ On the homepage of the commission, this proposal is titled: “New Pact on Migration and Asylum, setting out a fairer, more European approach”. The question is: What is a “more European approach”? Which values or practices are being referred to here? This reform proposal seems to take distance from the current practices even if human rights violations are not explicitly mentioned as its motivation. Instead, the reconstruction of trust amongst the member states and in the “capacity of the European Union to manage migration”¹⁹ are its indicated goals. In order to realise this, efficiency, fair share of responsibility and solidarity, cooperation with countries of origin, and transit as well as successful integration and returns are aspired strategies. A main idea of the pact is the harmonisation of asylum procedures in all EU member states, that are as Thränhardt showed, currently vastly diverging.²⁰

Therefore, trying to answer the question of religious narratives in EU policies on multiple levels is necessary. In a first step, within the framework of aspired and factual EU jurisdiction. In a second step, in national discourse and measures. In a third and final step, on the level of intergovernmental conferences serving as preparation for EU summits. Due to the limited space of this essay, the aim is not

¹⁶ EUROSUR is in charge of surveilling European borders and migration movements over these and of sharing this information with Schengen States and relevant agencies. It was already established in 2013 (“Eurosur”, 2023, which makes the unpreparedness of European States in the “long summer of migration” 2015 seem surprising.

¹⁷ *Black Book*, op. cit., 26-8.

¹⁸ European Council. 2022. “EU asylum reform.” Last reviewed December 5th, 2022. Accessed January 25th, 2023.

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/eu-asylum-reform/>.

¹⁹ European Commission 2020, “New Pact”, op. cit.

²⁰ European Council 2022, “EU asylum reform”, op. cit.

to do an exhaustive analysis but rather to give an impression that can serve as a basis for the further discussion of the connection between European border and asylum politics and religion.

Before starting the inquiry, the question of what exactly a religious narrative could be must be addressed. The most obvious understanding would be any explicit reference to either religion itself or to one of its forms, as Christianity or Islam. This however seems too superficial to grasp the whole realm of the adjective “religious.” In the early debate around the etymology of the word “religion,” two famous accounts have been presented: On the one hand, Cicero saw *relegere* as its origin, and on the other hand, Augustine traced it back to *religare*. Translated as “to review,” *relegere* differentiates the motivation of religious people to practise their religion in contrast to people performing the same acts out of superstition. While the latter do them out of fear that something bad could happen to them, the religious scrupulously rehearse their rituals in the worry of doing them correctly because of their choice to.²¹

Augustine interprets the verb *religare* (to connect, to bind) as an etymological origin of religion in two ways: In his early work “De vera religione” Augustine speaks about binding the soul to,²² whereas in “De civitate Dei” he describes how the word “religion” has been (wrongly) used to refer to “human ties, (...) relationships, and affinities”. Despite Augustine’s worry that this last sense creates undesirable ambiguities within the meaning of the word “religion,” it is highly interesting to our project. If religion can create social groups, it must also be able to install differentiations between an in- and an outgroup. The erection of invisible borders is hence one of its inherent capacities. Therefore, statements that refer to the identity of the ingroup (EU citizens; inside the external borders) and the outgroup (people on the move; outside the external borders) will be examined. Furthermore, the statements concerning the danger that is given as the reason for protection, as well as explicit references to religion will be presented. On the level of EU politics, only the introduction to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and two legal proposals of the “New Pact” will be reviewed. The declaration of the conference “Managing Migration Together” will be discussed to represent the intergovernmental sphere. Finally, in national discourse, two examples of right-wing positioning toward the EU and migration will be examined.

As required, legal documents of the EU that treat issues of asylum or migration always refer to the EU Charter

²¹ Cicero, *The Nature of the God*, trans. P.G. Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 72.

²² Saint Augustine., *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 111.

of Fundamental Rights and guarantee that their proposal will respect these. Interestingly, this catalogue of human rights that was proclaimed in 2000 and entered into force from 2009, starts off by ascribing a common spiritual identity to Europe:

“The peoples of Europe, in creating an ever closer union among them, are resolved to share a peaceful future based on common values. Conscious of its spiritual and moral heritage, the Union is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law. [...] The Union contributes to the preservation and to the development of these common values while respecting the diversity of the cultures and traditions of the peoples of Europe as well as the national identities of the member states [...]”.²³

On the one hand, the values of the EU are presented as rooted in a common “spiritual and moral heritage,” which reads as quite an explicit reference to Christianity. On the other hand, an undeniable diversity amongst cultures, traditions, and identities is mentioned. Overall, it seems like this tension should be overridden by the cited values that are founded in a common history of Christianity. But is this really the case? Can the centuries of war between religions in Europe and religious groups be harmonized as simply into one overarching “spiritual heritage”? In the 2020 “New Pact on Asylum and Migration” one striking aspect within the narratives of the legislative proposals is the technical language that is used to describe the migratory movements. For instance, common terminology to describe migration movements are “pressure”²⁴ or “flows”²⁵.

This leads into another feature of the examined proposals. In the proposal introducing a screening for third country nationals at external borders, as well as in the Commission’s recommendation on cooperation among member states concerning search and rescue activities, the term “stakeholder” is used. On the one side, this gives the impression of migration as economical enterprise (along with the term “management”), and on the other side, it indicates that the perspectives of people on the move are not considered in the process. For instance, the term “pressure” always addresses pressure on the member states or border regions, but not on the migratory pressures, the reasons that force people to leave their countries despite strategies of deterrence.

²³ EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, op. cit., preamble.

²⁴ “Make the system more efficient and resistant to migratory pressures” (European Council 2022, “EU asylum reform”).

²⁵ “[...] management of mixed migration flows” (European Commission 2022, “Proposal for a regulation introducing a screening of third country nationals”).

An interesting contrast to this one-sidedness in discourse is the handling of the refugee movement from Ukraine. In the case of the launch of the EU Talent pool, not only is the perspective of refugees considered, but also their presence: two Ukrainian Women got invited and presented within the launch of the program (“Launch of the EU talent pool”, 2022).²⁶ This shows a different sensibility to the refugees’ situation.²⁷

Also, the stated goals aim to give the European organs more control over migration and to increase their legitimization by reestablishing trust in them, as well as amongst the member states (European Commission 2020, “New Pact”). This practice finds an expression in the proposal to do the screening “pre-entry,” to not authorize people on the move to enter the European territory²⁸ and therefore to potentially coerce them to stay in these zones as well as bordering countries that are not (yet) member states to provide their territory as a “buffer” (Fitzgerald 2020, 11-12).

On the level of conferences between member states that prepared consequent EU policy decisions on migration, the closure of the Balkan’s trail in 2016 is an interesting example. One conference that was held in its preparation, “Managing Migration Together,” happened on the 24th of February 2016 in Vienna between the ministers of Foreign and Inner Affairs of Austria, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, and Bulgaria as an observer. The wording of its declaration is in line with the technical vocabulary of the EU proposals mentioned before, e.g., migration in the western Balkan being described as “high pressure.” These descriptions add to one of the claims of this declaration, which is that irregular migration is dangerous. One of the first lines of the preamble, “AWARE of the risks of crime, violent extremism and terrorism, which may spread as a consequence of irregular migration”²⁹ is directly followed by “RECALLING

²⁶ This launch also mentions the first activation of the Temporary Protection Directive ever for hosting refugees of Ukraine. This program, aimed to provide immediate protection when a high number of refugees potentially overcharges the national capacities of member states, was created in 2001 and has not been activated in 2015 (“Temporary Protection”, 2023).

²⁷ In the scope of this paper, no account about why there is such a difference between Ukrainian refugees and those coming through the Mediterranean or the Balkans can be given. With what is developed in the section “Borders and faith”, it only can be said that the first get integrated into the political faith of the EU, while the latter get confronted with a border. Von der Leyen describes the war in Ukraine as “war against our values” (“State of the Union” 2022, 3) and Ukrainians as “European heroes” (“State of the Union” 2022, 4).

²⁸ European Commission 2022, “Proposal for a regulation introducing a screening of third country nationals”, 5.

²⁹ Republic of Austria, Federal Ministry of the Interior. 2016. “Managing Migration Together. 24 February 2016. Declaration,” 1. Accessed 29th January 2023.

https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussendungen/2016/Westbalkankonferenz_Draft_Declaration_Letztfassung.pdf.

the Vienna Declaration ‘Tackling Jihadism Together’ of 20 March 2015 [...]: “Irregular migration is hence not only linked to a risk of crime and extremism, but specifically to Islamist terrorism. Later in the declaration, this reading gets affirmed within the agreed approach of the declaration: “In view of the increasingly visible connections between illegal migration and extremism, relevant measures agreed in the Vienna Declaration ‘Tackling Jihadism Together’ of 20 March 2015 will be swiftly implemented.”³⁰ It is clear to observe that Islamist extremism is seen here as an inherent feature of “illegal”³¹ migration that is hence perceived as a criminal phenomenon that must be.³² This impression gets intensified by the technical language used in the declaration that speaks about the impact of migration on member states and countries that want to join the European union but does not consider the situation of people on the move. The wish to stop people not in need of international protection in “misusing the route” makes it easy to assume bad motives of people on the move wanting to enter the EU. It leaves the challenge of a legal entry unmentioned. ³³A phrase as “It is not possible to process unlimited numbers of migrants and applicants for asylum, due to limited resources and reception capacities, potential consequences for internal security and social cohesion as well as challenges with regard to integration” introduces the prospect of an endless stream of people that want to enter the EU, while stating the evident fact that this impossible scenario would not be manageable. Furthermore, a differentiation is made between the in- and the outgroup in speaking about “potential consequences for social cohesion.” It is assumed that the refugees/immigrants are sufficiently different from the populations inside the EU borders so that the existing unity within the EU would get disrupted. What constitutes this unity or difference is not explicitly stated, an interpretation in terms of religion or phenomena inspired by religion as moral values or culture, however, suggests itself considering the pronounced allusions to refugees/immigrants being Muslims.

On a national level, a phrase that is oftentimes used in the last years to describe the change of the political landscape in Europe and globally is “shift to the right.” In any case, right-wing parties in Europe have been quite vocal about their views on immigration and how it has affected society since

³⁰ “Managing Migration together”, op. cit, 4.

³¹ Earlier in this declaration, the word “irregular” was used instead of “illegal”. The EU Commission defines the difference as follows: “The term ‘irregular’ is preferable to ‘illegal’ migrant because the latter carries a criminal connotation, entering a country in an irregular manner, or staying with an irregular status, is not a criminal offence but an infraction of administrative regulations. Apart from this, juridically and ethically, an act can be legal or illegal but a person cannot (“irregular migrant”, 2023).

³² “Managing Migration together”, op. cit, 4.

³³ Op. cit.

2015. They represent just one part of the political spectrum of the EU, however they have gained electorates or even won important elections since 2015 (in Austria, Italy, Sweden or Hungary for example). For the question of the interaction between EU borders and religion, it is worth it to glance at some right-wing interpretations about the in- and the outgroup since they have been present in discourse about migration.

Parties on the extreme right in EUrope find themselves easily torn between a strong nationalism on the one side, and a necessary relation with the EU on the other side. In the case of the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), there is a clear ideological limitation in the party's self-understanding.³⁴ According to it, EUrope should be a union of free and sovereign countries that live together as good neighbours. If the aspired reforms of the party however cannot be realised within the framework of the EU, exiting the union is considered an option. Then again, the AfD ranges Germany as an "occidental, Christian culture"³⁵, which alludes to a bigger framework of a Christian occident. While the party concedes the option for "moderated" Muslim individuals to belong to German society, it postulated that "Islam is not a part of Germany". The party rejects any practice of Islam that directs itself against the liberal democratic order, laws or the "judeo-christian and humanitarian foundations of our culture. Here again, the reference to a shared "spiritual and moral heritage," as it is cited in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights is clearly visible.

In the Austrian case, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) embeds Austria into a "European space of culture" that is rooted in Christianity but has also been influenced by other religions. It proclaims the values that spring from this "European worldview"³⁶ or "culture-Christianity"³⁷ as well as the readiness to defend these against fanaticism or extremism. Important to highlight is the emphasis that the FPÖ puts on the prevalence of Christianity in culture, but not necessarily in a spiritual sense: the party explicates that this cultural domination is founded in the separation between state and church.

These are just two examples for a far-right definition of the European ingroup that link their understanding of their own nation and its reasons for staying in the EU to cultural similarities based on a history of Christianity. Far right parties in other countries might root themselves less explicitly within

³⁴ Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), "Grundsatzprogramm für Deutschland." Written on the April 30th and May 1st, 2016. Accessed January 29th, 2023. [...](#)

³⁵ Originally: „ abendländische christliche Kultur“ (AfD, 2023). "Abendland" can also be translated as "the land of the evening, the land that is closest to the sunset."

³⁶ Originally: "Europäisches Weltbild" (FPÖ 2011).

³⁷ Originally: „Kultur-Christentum“ (FPÖ 2011).

Christianity (e.g., France's *Rassemblement National*³⁸) or have a more ambiguous or conflicting relation with the European context (e.g., Hungary's *Fidesz*). However, these two examples raise the question: Is the European union fundamentally a secular project? In order to answer this question, a short historical plunge into the interconnection between the European Union and the current of Christian democratic politics will be undertaken.

The Traces of Christian Democracy in the European Union

A first important aspect is the idea of European integration that existed well before the Second World War, despite the Holocaust and the experiences of war and totalitarianism as important moral turning points for European politics: As a politically marginalized democratic centrist, Luigi Sturzo proclaimed the idea of a European federation already in the early 1920's. The philosopher Jacques Maritain, who had influence on the Vatican and on leading post-war Christian democrats, wrote the program "Europe and the federalist idea" in 1940 to express his ideas for an after-war union. Both works conceive of Christianity as vital for the project. Maritain envisaged this political project as a third way in between liberalism and totalitarianism. Since 1929, Christian democrat parties started to network amongst each other within specifically established fora.³⁹

Wolkenstein describes the post-war period in Europe as a "Christian democrat moment".⁴⁰ Christian democratic parties won elections or got sufficient support for accessing important functions. He lists Germany's *Christlich Demokratische Union* (CDU), Italy's *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) and France's *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* (MRP)⁴¹ as the most influential parties in Europe at that time, whose leaders Konrad Adenauer, Alcide de Gasperi and Robert Schuman actively promoted the idea of a European union (Wolkenstein 2022, 18). The project finally began in 1950 with the *Schuman Plan* that led to the 1951 established *European Coal and Steel Community*, whose six members (Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) all disposed of strong Christian democratic.⁴² As the dominant power in Europe, Christian democrats had the possibility to try out their political ideas straightaway.⁴³ This political success is tied to ideological changes within the movement: While before

³⁸ Potentially due to the French tradition of *laïcité*, a strict separation of state and church.

³⁹ Wolkenstein, Fabio, "Die dunkle Seite der Christdemokratie: Geschichte einer autoritären Versuchung" (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2022), slide 10-12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴¹ DC and MRP do not exist anymore today.

⁴² Wolkenstein, op. cit., slide 6.

⁴³ Op. cit., 104.

the war they used to be parties for mostly Catholic Christians, they augmented their electorate in the post-war period to become “people’s parties” that aimed to represent all of society. Following previous histories of political Christian authoritarianism, the parties tried to emphasize their (new) democratic orientation. This was possible because of a bigger distance in between the parties and the Catholic church.⁴⁴ However, the church also modified its stances towards more democratic and humanist⁴⁵ values, in line with Maritain’s philosophy.⁴⁶ The postwar period Christian democrats coined their political movement with values such as peace and stability. Van Kersbergen defines the core features of the modern political ideology as follows: *integration* (of social groups, classes, nations in the EU), (class)*compromise* and *accommodation* to resolve conflicts in society, without changing its (socio-economic) *pluralism*.⁴⁷

Not only did the newly defined values of the Catholic church, as for example the concept of human dignity as indivisible value of the individual, get reflected in the writing of human rights and newly written constitutions, but Maritain himself was part of the promotion and drafting of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁴⁸ This importance of Christian thinking for the foundation of fundamental rights implies a certain ambiguity: The moral influence of the church was possible because its contribution to authoritarianism in Europe had been forgotten, and personal continuity of former regimes’ functionaries within the parties was overshadowed.⁴⁹ Contrary to democratic affirmations, especially German and Austrian Christian democrats supported the regimes of Franco and Salazar in Spain and Portugal; French and Belgian Christian democrats justified the continuation of their colonial regimes with the very same Christian values.⁵⁰ A final ambiguity resides in the constitution of the new democratic systems itself. The Christian democratic idea of protecting democracy by limiting it through juridical control has its origin in the idea that a state can only work well when it is restricted by the natural law of God.⁵¹ This mechanism that also prevails in the EU because of its supranational structure⁵² is furthermore connected to a mistrust in the decisions of the people and a preference for

⁴⁴ Op. cit., 90-2.

⁴⁵ The novelty of these humanist values adopted by the church is that they reside in the individual (Wolkenstein 2022, 100).

⁴⁶ Wolkenstein, op. cit., 100.

⁴⁷ Op. cit., 36.

⁴⁸ William Sweet, Jacques Maritain", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Accessed January 29th, 2023. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/maritain/>.

⁴⁹ Wolkenstein, op. cit., 101-2.

⁵⁰ Op. cit., 127-9.

⁵¹ Op. cit., 99.

⁵² Op. cit., 121-2.

limited self-rule that gets tied to strong leaders.⁵³

The already discussed myth of a “Christian occident” that is today rather connected to far-right agendas had been important for the post-war Christian democrats. First appearing in the Middle Ages as far back as the 15th century, the idea of Christian faith as a foundation for a shared European culture had already been used by intellectuals after the First World War in their plans to reshape Europe after Christian principles. Through the opposition with communism and the following Cold War, the term became a slogan amongst the Christian democratic parties. Alcide de Gasperi even formulated the vision of a European Union as an actualized version of a Carolingian *Res Publica Christiana*.⁵⁴ In the 1950’s, the vision of a union as “Christian occident” based on a cultural or spiritual understanding of Christianity, competed with the conception of a Europe united through Christian culture, but primarily through economic dependencies. The first idea was promoted mainly by Catholics as Adenauer, Schuman or Strauss, excluded the United Kingdom as well as the Scandinavian countries from the European project and aimed to make Europe an independent third world power in the Cold War. The latter was mainly represented by Protestant politicians as Ludwig Erhard intended to include Scandinavia and the United Kingdom and aspired towards a possible alliance with the United States against the Eastern Bloc.⁵⁵ Evidently, the second idea was realized in the process of the European integration which started with and still heavily relies on an economic union.

Despite ideological changes since the foundation of the EU, notably a liberalization of the former anti-liberalist Christian democrat parties,⁵⁶ it is striking to see how the concept of a “Christian occident” and the influence of the Christian religion as such featured significantly in the construction of a political union that is now easily perceived as secular.⁵⁷ Are its borders, debated from the beginning around the question of cultural and/or religious unity, constituted or at least affirmed also by belief?

Borders and Faith

Considering the heritage of Christian values of the EU, there are two ways of thinking about a faith that constitutes its inner unity and hence its borders, which suggest themselves. On the

⁵³ Op. cit., 13.

⁵⁴ Op. cit. 123-4.

⁵⁵ Op. cit., slide 32.

⁵⁶ Op. cit., 32.

⁵⁷ Sarah Wolff for example describes European identity and its’ foreign politics as strongly marked by a normative secularism (“Europe as a Secular Power: An interview with Sarah Wolff”, 2021).

one hand, the secularity of the European Union could be questioned and its relevant faith could be described as tied to Christianity. On the other hand, the union could be seen as secular with the twist that secularism can also serve as a foundation for faith establishing unity.

But what is meant here by secularism, and how should faith be understood? In the proposed opposition, secularism first needs to be defined as a doctrine ascribing its proper sphere to politics and is separated from religion.⁵⁸ However, the distance between religion and self-claimed secular politics can be disputed in real circumstances up to the point where secularism is considered a religion on its own.⁵⁹ In the present reflections, both understandings of secularism can be found. In the first step, its “ideal” definition serves as contrast to a politics informed by religion. In the second step, the factual ambiguities of the concept get explored.

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11,1)

Faith is understood here in a broad sense, and more precisely, as every content of consciousness that establishes or contributes to the unity of a political community. For example, these can be values, imaginations, or utopias founding a certain basic identity of a political community, but also to the same effect these can be fears or general attitudes towards group outsiders. The latter are highly relevant for the question of borders, to find out for whom common utopias or identities stay inaccessible. In a democratic society defined by a plurality of opinions, there is certainly no consensus on these attitudes; the relevant claim however is, that even democratic communities need a minimal identity, an ideology may simply be an answer to the question: “Why should this regime be continued?” And this cannot be exclusive only to a political elite or contained in “pure politics.” Especially in a democratic society, there exists the need for most people sharing this kind of faith in order to legitimize the system by votes.⁶⁰ As the abovementioned question and the mention of hope in the quotation from Hebrews 11,1 suggest, faith is directed to the future. However, the past presents a ready source for common values and is not excluded of faith. This assumption is made

⁵⁸ Cambridge Dictionary suggests the meaning “not having any connection with religion” for “secular” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

⁵⁹ This is claimed for instance about *laïcité* in France (“Europe as a Secular Power: An interview with Sarah Wolff”, 2021).

⁶⁰ These claims are based on an “optimistic” conception of democracy, that understands it literally as rule of the people, where people’s votes and opinions matter. It is assumed that people actually have a choice and can influence rule. If democracy is understood as just another form of elite rule, a “pessimistic” understanding of democracy, these considerations are less important. A common cause or identity is however one way to stabilize a regime and avoid force in doing so.

because faith about the future seems more important concerning the stability of a political system than faith about the past. This political faith seems especially important in times of war, when the status quo is endangered. For instance, Raymond Aron insisted 1939 in pre-occupied France on the need for democracies to *want* their victory, to find their values again.⁶¹

Another relevant detail of the quotation is the phrase “assurance about what we do not see.” It implies an inaccessibility to something, or a lack of vision, that is made up by faith. The separation between a faithful person and faith’s object produces a certain insecurity or risk that faith answers with assurance. A relevant question is whether this assurance needs to be given or suggested by someone else, as in the biblical context the origin of faith would be God. Another aspect of the biblical definition of faith is its relation to action: “[...] faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” (James 2,17) Hence, faith is visible in actions by which it needs to actualize itself to persist. In order to describe the phenomenon of social imaginaries in politics, the term “faith” was here chosen intentionally in order to highlight the conceptual similarities with the biblical term: Political faith is incited by political elites and concerns oftentimes something that is not possibly visible, as for example a “migration wave” or intentions of immigrants to “Islamize Europe.” Ultimately, political faith also expresses itself in corresponding actions that are the origin of this reflection about the interaction between faith and borders. Furthermore, the object of religious faith is usually something considered as sacred, as God or the afterlife for example, which can be translated into the *sacred unity of a political community* in the case of political faith. In this sense, faith demarcates what is sacred to a community and what needs to be protected as the source of meaning and values that it represents.

The first possible specification of faith in case of the EU is a faith rooted in the Christian religion. This ties smoothly into the originally Christian democrat conception of Europe as a “Christian occident” and the presented examples of right-wing discourse in European member states. Indicators about a continuation of reference to Christian belief could be seen in multiple factors. First, in the mentioned difference of treatment between refugees from Ukraine and the global south. Together with the emphasis on Islam as a potential danger in multiple sources, this points to difference in religion or religiously informed culture as decisive borders in political faith. Second, ongoing political adherence can be interpreted into singular events, as for example Von der Leyen’s visit in

⁶¹ Aron, Raymond, *Croire en la Démocratie*, Vincent Duclert, ed. (Paris: Arthème Fayard/Pluriel, 2017), 79.

Taizé, a Christian community that is visited by thousands of young people every.⁶² As president of the European Commission, she referred to the young people she met there as a model for Europe, as they have different backgrounds but share common values and ideals (“State of the Union” 2022, 20). She does not say it explicitly, but those values are most likely Christian.

Another model exists to think of the political faith of the EU as inspired by secularism. Continuing with the ideas the introduction, nationality can serve as a “secular” foundation for political faith. Benedict Anderson famously called these “imagined communities,” since the subjective antiquity of nations as well as their unity are imagined: Most nationals will never meet each other, but still imagine a communion that is in fact a relatively recent invention. According to Anderson, an inherent property of nations is their limitedness and exclusivity.⁶³ This implies that political faith, if it follows the rules of an “imagined community,” necessarily has borders. In terms of political faith, this translates into narratives of chosenness. But can a supranational structure incite the same kind of imagination? Can it coexist with national, political faith, or is it doomed to compete with it?

Régis Debray postulates the existence of what he calls “Europeanism,” a secular cult that proclaims humaneness, inclusivity, prosperity, and peacefulness as its values.⁶⁴ These are at the core of a vision of future and progress, “Eurotopia” the idea of transcending the nation-state that caused wars⁶⁵ and to unite over the idea of a better future, even if the differences between countries and political ideas are big.⁶⁶ Today, however, Debray diagnoses that the faith into Europeanism is getting weaker and weaker: It satisfies people’s desire for agency in global challenges and provides hope, but it is “the spirit of a period without spirit” and makes people believe in a progress despite existential absurdity.⁶⁷ According to Debray, presenting oneself as European today is the follow up of what it was once to call oneself a “good Christian.” It is the presentation of adherence to a certain set of moral values.⁶⁸ The political faith however is prevalent mostly amongst political elites that cling to their “collective narcissism” even if collective solidarity and interest amongst member states are shrinking. Debray introduces a specific kind of secular, political faith that replaced religious beliefs and supposedly got weaker or even transformed into nihilism.

⁶² Press Release, “Ursula von der Leyen in Taizé”, August 19th, 2022. Accessed February 15th, 2023. https://www.taize.fr/en_article34443.html.

⁶³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 5-7.

⁶⁴ Régis Debray, *L’Europe Fantôme*. Paris: Gallimard Tracts, 2019), 4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

Regarding the war in Ukraine and the interactions with refugees, it is questionable if political faith in Europe is not rising and whether political nihilism is possible at all.

Anderson suggests distinguishing communities not by their genuineness, but rather by the style in which they have been imagined. In this sense, it could be that the European political faith is in fact a combination of Christian and secular narratives.⁶⁹

Conclusion

More than one European political faith is possible. What they have in common is an idea of progress and future. This ideal however is inaccessible in the first place for many people on the move. They experience the physical border that is hard to cross despite legal and humanitarian promises. They face the limits of political faith, of the sacred community through Xenophobia and Islamophobic discourse, even if they are in Europe. It is them that live through pushbacks – they embody the limits of political faith. Considering the drafts for the “New Pact on Migration,” this situation will not change soon.⁷⁰ How long can people be sacrificed (literally: “made holy”) for the integrity of an in-group before this group gets held responsible for this sacrilege?

The question remains: How can we create a better future? If it is true that political faith aligns or even interacts with border and asylum politics, as it has been argued in this paper, it is worth it to try to alter our beliefs about community. In order to do so, it is pertinent to question the use of the ascription “secular” to challenge the notion of progress and reflect upon who is allowed to join in on it. Alternative conceptions of progress are thinkable. For example, through Joseph R. Winter’s “Melancholic hope,” a proposal for a kind of progress including melancholia, grief, and loss; a progress made through vulnerability for other people’s situations.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Anderson, op. cit. 6.

⁷⁰ An idea of the “Proposal for a Regulation introducing a screening of third country nationals” is to filter people that are unlikely to receive international protection at the earliest stage possible. “Unlikely” means that the usual recognition rate is below 25%. As the early recognition has the goal to ascribe as soon as possible the correct administrative process to a person – either an asylum procedure or a return – it seems that people with less than 25% of chance to get admitted asylum would be returned without any individual hearing. (European Commission 2022, “Proposal for a regulation introducing a screening of third country nationals”).

⁷¹ Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black. Race, Melancholy and the Agony of Progress* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 16.