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The role of Christianity in the European Union's heritage and history initiatives

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Abstract

In its political discourse, the European Union balances Christian heritage, the secularization of European societies, liberal values and Europe's culturally and religiously diverse contemporary reality. This article explores how the European Union narrates the story of Europe and the role of Christianity in this narrative. This exploration is based on two qualitative case studies focusing on key heritage and history initiatives of the European Commission and the European Parliament: the European Heritage Label and the House of European History. The article argues that issues related to Christianity become easier to handle for the European Union when they are dealt with as memory, tradition and cultural heritage – and thus linked to the history of Europe.

Keywords

Christianity, cultural heritage, European Union, religion, secularism

Introduction

In the previous literature on the idea of Europe, Hellenistic aesthetics, Roman law and governance, and Christian religion and ethics have often been regarded as the foundation of European heritage (De Rougemont, 1966; Valéry, 1924). This foundation is also acknowledged in the political discourse of the European Union (EU) and its heritage and history initiatives – although the role of Christianity in them is in many ways problematic and a difficult subject for the Union. In its political discourse, the EU balances Christian heritage, the secularization of European societies, liberal values and Europe's culturally and religiously diverse contemporary reality (Lähdesmäki, 2020b). Achieving equilibrium between these various factors is complicated by the

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different attitudes that EU member states have towards Christianity, Islam, secularism and the liberal values promoted by the Union.

In this article, I explore the EU's story of Europe and what kind of role Christianity has in this narrative. The subject is topical for various reasons: the core institutions of the EU, the European Commission (EC) and the European Parliament have launched several heritage and history initiatives aiming at increasing European citizens' sense of belonging to Europe and the EU, as well as highlighting the positive impact of cultural diversity within the Union. The EU's increased interest in cultural heritage and the narratives of Europe stemming from it can be seen as a counter-reaction to the challenges the Union has faced in the 2000s (Lähdesmäki et al., 2020). These challenges include a contest about the direction of EU integration policies and political legitimacy as well as right-wing varieties of anti-EU populism and nationalism that have gained a strong foothold all over Europe during the past decades. Both the EU and right-wing populist and nationalist actors have become increasingly interested in the cultural dimension of Europe and utilizing cultural heritage to describe its 'shared' features (De Cesari, 2020; Lähdesmäki, 2020a). The motives of these opposing actors are of course very different. While the Union aims at increasing unity and inclusion of Europeans, the right-wing populists and nationalists promote an exclusive Europe that is based on delineations between 'us' and 'them' – that is, 'Europeans' and the 'non-European' others. In these excluding views, Europe is framed as a coherent religious and cultural community, in which Christianity is the foundation of European culture, values, morals, and mentality. In the right-wing populist agendas, anti-immigration, xenophobic, racist and Islamophobic views have been reframed as concern about the preservation and continuity of Christian heritage and values – and, hence, of all Europe (Brubaker, 2017; Lähdesmäki, 2020a; Vasilopoulou, 2017).

In recent studies, Europe has been approached as a construct that continues to be conceptually and historically in flux and is, therefore, hard to define. Instead of exploring Europe through geographical or political 'realities', scholars have approached Europe as an image (Kockel et al., 2012: 1; Passerini, 2002: 201–202), narrative (Lee and Bideleux, 2009; Stone, 2014) or idea (Delanty, 1995; Mikkeli, 1998). Mikkeli (1998) notes how attempts to create images or narratives of Europe as a unified whole have culminated during the eras when the creators of such images and narratives have perceived Europe as facing threats by various 'others': the idea of Europe has usually been narrated as their negation. Defining Europe and the 'European' against what or whom they are not expected to be is not unique to contemporary right-wing populism. In the past centuries, Europe has been defined through both its inner and outer religious and cultural 'others' (Brague, 2002; Pagden, 2002; Stråth, 2000; Wiesner and Schmidt-Gleim, 2014): Jews, Muslims, Arabs as well as 'uncivilized' and indigenous peoples. Colonial politics strengthened the idea of racial difference in the attempts to define Europe. Whether Europe has been defined as the negation of a 'foreign' religion, culture or race, Christianity has had a pivotal role. Christianity has strongly influenced the cultural discourses of European identity, especially as religious and cultural traditions, values and norms intersect.

The EU's narrative of Europe constructs the continent as a unified entity. In this narrative, shared values and common political principles defined as European are centred. According to the Lisbon Treaty (EC, 2016b: 17),

[t]he Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

Although there is not much room for religion or Christian heritage in this liberal value discourse, the EU's narrative of Europe is still founded upon Christianity in manifold ways. As this article shows, the relationship between the EU and Christian heritage is ambiguous and of a discursive rather than legislative nature.

I explore how the EU balances Christian heritage and a secular value discourse through two case studies. I start this exploration with a discussion on the relationship between religion, secularism, modernism and European integration. This discussion contextualizes my analysis of how Christianity is dealt with in the promotion of European cultural heritage in two EU initiatives. The first case is the European Heritage Label (EHL) that the EC has awarded to 60 sites in 20 European countries since 2013 and 48 sites in 19 European countries since 2014. The second one is the House of European History (HEH), the European Parliament museum, which was opened in 2017 in Brussels. The article concludes with the main findings. Based on the analysis, I argue that issues related to Christianity become easier to handle for the EU when they are dealt with as memory, tradition and cultural heritage – and thus linked to the history of Europe.

Christianity and the development of European integration

The important role of Christian Democratic parties in Europe's post-war politics and the influence of Christianity on its value discourses have been scrutinized in several recent studies (Chamedes, 2019; Chappel, 2018; Conway, 2020; Moyn, 2015). Besides this influence, the post-war era in Europe was impacted by a new social context: The founding of the EU and the beginnings of European integration in the 1950s coincided with rapid societal change, the loosening of value systems and secularization in Europe. Some scholars have interpreted this period as a post-Christian era, in which the meaning of religion was narrowed down or even disappeared from both public and private lives (Casanova, 2006: 65). However, the idea of a post-Christian Europe is profoundly complex; hence, other scholars relate the development of European integration to a plethora of religious meanings (Casanova, 2006: 65). Along with EU Eastern enlargement and especially after Catholic Poland joined the EU in 2004, Christianity has become a topic in discourses on the 'European' and the EU's core values. Simultaneously, the discussions regarding the EU membership of Turkey (that began in the early 2000s and has since been put on hold) and the plans to expand the EU into the Balkans have brought Islam into this cultural and political discourse. Increased immigration from Muslim countries and the increased public visibility of Islam in Western European societies has accelerated the debate. The strengthened cultural, ethnic and religious diversity in (Western) Europe has also been reflected in policies that are used to govern cultural diversification. Countries with high immigration, such as Great Britain, Germany and France, have changed their diversity policies in the 2010s to emphasize the promotion of interaction and dialogue between different cultural groups (Barrett, 2013). The Council

of Europe and the EU have made a similar political move (Lähdesmäki et al., 2020; Lähdesmäki and Wagener, 2015). In practice, this has meant the discursive strengthening of secular values in the political rhetoric of these actors.

Secularization (as a change of value system from religious to secular), secularism (as an ideology aiming at decreasing the influence of religion in society and especially in public institutions), the change of European societies and the development of European integration are closely connected. Since the 1950s, secularism has been seen in Western thought as a prerequisite of a modern, enlightened and progressive society, while religion has been encapsulated as the antithesis of these developments (Casanova, 2006: 66, 2009; De Cesari, 2017: 26). Thus, secularism and democratization have been seen as interlinked developments (Joppke, 2015: 84). The conceptions and ideas related to secularism are distorted by the ambiguity of the concept, multifaceted interpretations of it and resulting debate (Taylor, 2009). I see secularization and secularism as interlinked phenomena: the decrease in personal religious beliefs and practices leads to a decrease in the significance of religion in public arenas, activities of the state and politics. However, secularism should not be seen as a binary system where things are either completely based on or totally detached from religion, but rather as a continuum between these two positions. Because of this, in societies that are regarded as secular, religion can still have significant, even institutionalized roles in social, cultural and political practices (Casanova, 2009). Moreover, the state and society more broadly may relate to religion differently.

The secularization of European societies and discussions about a post-religious Europe does not mean that religion no longer has significance on the continent. In fact, several scholars have stressed the new role that religion plays in Western countries. The cultural and religious diversification of Europe and the ways in which the state has responded to this have created a situation described by Habermas with the concept of a 'post-secular society'. This society is characterized by a multifaceted adaption to various ongoing religious tensions and conflicts in a largely secular environment and in public life (Habermas, 2006, 2008). The concept stems from Habermas' observation regarding the commonly held assumption that modernization shifts religion from the public into the private sphere, which has not happened in Europe as had been expected.

In all contemplations related to a post-religious or post-secular Europe, it is important to ask what religion, faith or belonging to a religious community actually means (Cesari, 2014; Martin, 2010). While there has been a significant decrease in the people's attendance at and involvement in traditional religious rituals, their personal religious convictions have not necessarily changed (Casanova, 2006: 65–66). For many, religion has become 'believing without belonging' to a religious community (Davie, 1994, 2000). Simultaneously, scholars have noticed how it has become typical for secular societies to 'culturalize' of religion, that is, to primarily give it meaning as cultural heritage without reference to belief (Casanova, 2006: 65–66; Foret and Riva, 2010: 793). This process refers to a shift in which religion as a belief has narrowed down or lost its meaning in people's daily lives, while different habits, traditions and cultural heritage related to religion have become a mode of 'belonging without believing' (Bullock, 2000: 218; Hervieu-Léger, 2000: 162, 2003). In today's European societies, the secular and Christian cultural identities are often intertwined. Christianity has

become a ‘cultural religion’ – the connection that people have to religion is maintained even when their participation in religious activities has decreased (Demerath, 2000: 136–137; Pew Research Center, 2018).

A similar intertwining of secular and religious dimensions characterizes the EU. The Union decision-making process and legal initiatives are easy to perceive as stemming from political secularism: religion has no explicit role in them. This does not mean that religion is insignificant in the activities and development of the EU. For instance, Casanova (2006, 66, 71; see also Kaiser, 2007) has interpreted the European Coal and Steel Community, a supranational organization that preceded the EU, as a collaborative project between the Christian democratic parties of its founding nations. The values of these parties impacted broadly the post-war politics in Europe (Moyn, 2015). In the geopolitical context of the Cold War, the founders of the Community emphasized freedom and the idea of ‘Christian civilization’ as the opposite of the totalitarian and atheist regimes in the Eastern Bloc. Although the EU has never had any specific policy on religion or competence in religious matters, the legacy of Christian morality and ethics influences the legislature of the community in many ways. McCrea (2010: 1) notes how ‘[t]he EU recognizes the promotion of public morality as a valid basis of law’, and therefore enables the influence of religious norms on its legislature. For him, the Union’s law-making process is shaped by religion – in this case, Christianity.

Besides the EU law-making process, religion has a role in the discourse of EU treaties. References to religion were part of a broader debate on EU constitutional reform in the early 2000s. The debate regarding the values of the proposed constitution focused on the role of religion in it: whether Christian heritage should be mentioned as the foundation of the Union, or whether secular values, such as human rights, tolerance and inclusive multiculturalism, should be emphasized without any references to religion. The process of drafting the constitution resulted in a contest over values, where actors representing both secular and religious value systems attempted to emphasize their position in the constitution (Foret and Riva, 2010; Mudrov, 2016). The Vatican and Pope John Paul II joined the debate, demanding that references to Christianity and the Christian God should be included in the constitution (Mudrov, 2016: 6).

Explicit references to Christianity were removed from the Lisbon Treaty, ratified in 2008, but religion is still present in its phrasing. Although this removal disappointed some, the Treaty was still praised for including references to churches (Willis, 2009). In Mudrov’s interpretation, the Treaty ultimately strengthened the role of religious elements in European identity, as well as the role of the Christian actors in constructing it (Mudrov, 2016: 1, 15–16). The preamble states how its parties draw ‘inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law’ (EC, 2016b: 15). In the Treaty, religion is listed as one of the human traits protected by the EU against discrimination (EC, 2016b: 53). The Treaty declares that the EU ‘respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities’, although the Union also pledges to engage in open and continuous dialogue with churches and religious organizations (EC, 2016b: 55). Moreover, religion is mentioned in the articles regarding freedoms, education, non-discrimination and diversity included in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of

the European Union (EC, 2016a: articles 10, 14, 21, 22). Instead of focusing exclusively on Christianity (though the wording ‘religious inheritance of Europe’ seems to imply it), the Treaty text takes an inclusive approach by referring more broadly to religion and religious associations, communities and organizations in addition to churches.

The EU’s heritage and history initiatives and the way they deal with Christianity as part of the European narrative are easy to locate in the development of the EU and European integration. Christianity plays an ambiguous role in this development. On the one hand, Christianity seems to form the fundamental basis for it. On the other hand, this development seems to draw on secular value discourse. The role of Christianity in the EU’s heritage and history initiatives can be explained through the ‘culturalization’ of religion, as the following sections show.

Case studies: The EHL and the HEH

Since its foundation, the explicit goal of EU cultural policies has been to emphasize both Europe’s cultural diversity and features of European culture and heritage that are deemed to be common or shared. Promoting these common features results in what Anderson (1983) calls an imagined community, that is ‘united in diversity’, as stated by the official slogan of the EU (see Sassatelli, 2002). During the past decade, the idea of a common history, memory and cultural heritage shared by Europeans has become a more prominent part of EU cultural and identity politics (Lähdesmäki, 2017; Littoz-Monnet, 2012; Prutsch, 2013). The EU’s increased attention to Europe’s past has produced a number of EU initiatives that attempt to create a European narrative through fostering (and constructing) European cultural heritage.

My first case study focuses on the EHL, founded as an intergovernmental scheme and initiated by the French Ministry of Culture in 2006. The aim of the scheme was to identify and award sites that ‘have played a key role in building and uniting Europe’ and to promote ‘a European reading of these sites’ as opposed to ‘a national reading’ of cultural heritage (EC, 2010: 15). The ideological and political motives behind the scheme were to promote European cultural heritage as a foundation for building European identity and strengthening a sense of belonging among European citizens (EHL, 2007). By 2011, the committee consisting of European ministers of culture and representatives of the EC had awarded the EHL to 68 sites in 19 European countries. However, the national actors saw that the criteria of the scheme were confusing and it was difficult to implement without EU coordination (EC, 2010: 18–20; ECOTEC, 2009). The Commission considered the scheme important and turned it into an official EU action in 2011. Biannual application for the Label in the official EHL action is a two-stage process: preselection is organized by national panels and the final selection is made by a European panel of experts in cultural heritage and management, appointed by EU institutions. The EC grants the Labels on the basis of the European panel’s recommendations. A key criterion for the Label is the sites’ European significance: they must have ‘a symbolic European value and must have played a significant role in the history and culture of Europe and/or the building of the Union’ (European Parliament and the Council (EP&C), 2011: 4).

My second case study is the European Parliament’s history museum, the HEH, the planning of which started in 2007. In his speech launching the initiative, the then President

of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pötter, expressed hope that the museum could function as ‘a locus for history and for the future where the concept of the European idea can continue to grow’ (Committee of Experts, 2008: 4). The Parliament invited nine experts in European history and culture to envision the concept for the museum. First, the European narrative of the museum was planned to start from the emergence and spread of Christianity. Two of the experts suggested that the museum’s narrative should be rooted in the heritage of Antiquity and the Homeric tradition. The selection of this starting point increased the secular dimension of the European narrative in the museum (Kaiser, 2017: 524). The experts’ concept report provoked a lively debate regarding the narrative of the museum and its focuses. Some members of the European Parliament (MEPs) hoped that small European peoples could be given a more prominent role in the concept of the museum, while others expected that it would highlight individual historical events, such as the wars against the Ottoman Empire and especially the Battle of Vienna (Huistra et al., 2014: 134). The Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community (COMECE), representing the Catholic Church within the EU, also suggested changes to the concept of the museum in order to strengthen the role of Christianity in its narrative of the history of Europe (Huistra et al., 2014). None of these suggestions, however, impacted the museum’s narrative.

After various delays caused by construction and restoration work, the HEH was opened in 2017 in Léopold Park in Brussels, in the Eastman building that used to house a dental clinic for poor children. According to its website, the museum focuses on telling the story of Europe from a transnational perspective, instead of emphasizing the role of any single nation (HEH, 2021a, 2021b). The introductory text of the permanent exhibition gives a thorough description of its goals. This text notes how, ‘today, Europe is multicultural and diverse but its nations share a common history, traditions, achievements and a way of thinking’ (HEH, 2017–2018). The exhibition highlights the development and change in Europe from the nineteenth century to today. Its main thematic focus is on the division and unification of the continent. The museum’s European narrative emphasizes political history, but it also examines Europe’s cultural history and internal and external relations. The permanent exhibition includes 1500 artefacts from 35 countries. The narrative is exhibited through a plethora of visual and sonic materials. As part of the visit, the audience can make use of interactive tablet computers, which include much information in textual and multimodal forms.

My data for the first case study include the European panel’s EHL selection reports of the first five selection rounds published in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, and 2019. In the second case, the data include my field notes of the observation in the permanent exhibition at the European House of History, the textual information included in the tablets and the museum’s website and brochures. I have visited the museum several times since its opening. I have analysed these data by close reading of how it deals with Christianity, religion and the EU value discourse, and how it includes them in the narrative of Europe. This methodological approach was originally developed in literary studies aiming at the ‘mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings’ (Brummett, 2010: 3). Conceptually, close reading refers to the analysis of words and the interpretation of texts by highlighting meanings, their structures and the contexts in which they are produced in the data. In practice, my

analysis draws on identifying words, expressions and instances in the data that explicitly refer to (any) religions, religious objects, places, persons, symbols or ideas, and European values. In the first case study, I also compare the recognition of religious sites in the intergovernmental and official phases of the initiative.

The decreasing role of Christian heritage in the EHL

The basic criteria for the EHL did not significantly change when the initiative was turned into an official EU action coordinated by the EC. However, this shift affected the overall picture of European cultural heritage formed by the labelled sites: it became more secular. Before the shift, the old Label had been awarded to 12 churches or monasteries (19% of all sites). Six (9%) of the sites were connected to Christianity in some other way. Moreover, 11 sites consisted of clusters of buildings, broader archaeological sites or historical city centres that included a church, churches or other Christian buildings, but their religious meanings were not emphasized in the application documents or website of the former EHL scheme (Lähdesmäki, 2014). This strong presence of Christian heritage can be explained by the site selection process, in which the culture ministers of EU member states played a pivotal role. The personal views of ministers, officials from national ministries and national heritage authorities may have influenced the choices, as the scheme was not coordinated by the EU yet and a definition of the European dimension was specified later in the decision of the official EHL action. After the shift, the number of sites related to Christian heritage has decreased. The 48 sites that have received the official Label by 2021 include only one church and one monastery (4%), and 3 sites are related to Christianity in some other explicit way (6%). In addition, six sites consist of broader building clusters that include a church, churches or other Christian buildings or heritage sites, though these buildings are only mentioned in the description of two sites in the selection reports. The sites labelled under the old EHL scheme included two Reformed churches, a site of Byzantine religious heritage and a site of early Christian catacombs. Otherwise, both in the old scheme and the new EHL action, the Christian heritage sites related to the Roman Catholic denomination. The image of 'European Christianity' constructed by the EHL initiative thus draws on the Catholic Church.

After gaining official status, the EHL action has started to emphasize sites through which European cultural heritage can be constructed with secular narratives. In these narratives, the role of religious buildings and sites is mainly as locations where peace has been built, tolerance increased, diversity celebrated and people from all over Europe have collaborated. Through these sites, the selection reports tell the narrative of European unification and integration without emphasizing or even mentioning Christianity. For example, Cluny Abbey in France is signified in the EHL selection report as a site of transnational civilization focusing on 'the promotion of literacy and learning in many regions of Europe, serving to educate some of the most brilliant teachers and intellectual leaders of their time', as well as a site of peace politics since 'Cluniac abbots played a crucial role in international politics and diplomacy often seeking peaceful resolutions to conflicts' (EC, 2014: 7). The other Christian building that was granted the Label, the Church of the Holy Spirit in Javorca, Slovenia, is described in the report from the point of view of peace building. This is brought out by

emphasizing how the church was ‘built by soldiers of different backgrounds to remember the fallen and as a call for reconciliation’ after the First World War, expressing their ‘longing for peace’, and as ‘a reminder of this call for conciliation, equality and human dignity’ (EC, 2017: 12). The reports do not emphasize these sites as historical or contemporary places for practising religion. These excerpts from the selection reports show how the EHL sites function as locations through which the political and ideological narrative of Europe can be articulated, based on the EU’s value discourse of peace, human dignity, pluralism, equality and solidarity.

In the reports, Christian heritage is often intertwined with the discourse of cultural and religious diversity and tolerance. Hence, religious EHL sites are commonly represented in the reports through references to religious freedoms, reconciliation after conflicts and the peaceful encounter of different religions. When words such as religion or religious are specifically used – in the descriptions of 11 sites – in most cases this is done to highlight ‘religious tolerance’, ‘religious freedom’, ‘equal respect regardless of . . . religion’ (EC, 2015: 13) or ‘the fusion of cultures and religions across borders’ (EC, 2019: 22). In the reports, the peaceful coexistence of different faiths, implicitly referring to different Christian denominations, and the description of religious diversity as a trait of past European empires are paralleled with the EU’s contemporary attempts to create a culturally diverse and tolerant community. The characterizations of the Roman Empire or the Habsburg monarchy in the reports seem to tell the reader most about the EU’s conception of itself:

The Roman Empire is considered by some as a predecessor of Europe, combining different cultures, religions, and geographic areas under one administrative system. (EC, 2013: 7)

The Habsburg Empire included a wide range of ethnicities and religions that by standards of the time developed an evolved status of citizenship, including religious freedom and access to education. (EC, 2015: 9)

The selection reports include descriptions of EHL applications that were refused, with justifications. A much larger group of sites that are related to Christian heritage were denied than were awarded the Label. In 2013, two of the five rejected sites were directly related to Christian heritage. The next year, 7 out of 20 rejected sites included Christian buildings and 4 more had other kinds of religious significance. In 2015, the panel rejected nine applications of which one included Christian buildings and two had other religious connotations. In 2017, 6 sites among 16 rejected applications included Christian buildings and 2 more had other religious meanings. In 2019, one of the nine rejected candidates commemorated the translation, printing and dissemination of the bible. Altogether, one-third of the rejected sites had direct ties to Christian heritage. Except for two of these sites, the panel justified its decision by stating that the applicants lacked a European dimension and were more relevant on a national or local scale. Although many of the rejected religious sites emphasized values that are defined as criteria for the EHL, the panel was not convinced of their European dimension. Yet the panel could find the same values as indicators of the European dimension in the cases of awarded secular sites. It should be noted, however, that the panel assessed the applications comprehensively, values being only one criterion.

Besides Christian heritage, the EHL includes sites that deal with Judaism. The panel chose Camp Westerbork, a transition camp in the Netherlands through which over 100,000 Jews were transported during the Second World War into concentration camps, as an EHL site in 2013. In 2017, the panel recommended the Label to Nazweiler concentration camp and its satellite camps located on the border region between Germany and France. In 2019, the Label was awarded to a memorial space of Chambon-sur-Lignon in France commemorating the rescue operations provided by the locals during the Second World War to 5000 people, mostly Jews. Through these sites, the EHL is connected to a moral obligation to conserve sites that serve as reminders of Europe's difficult past of religious persecution as 'places of remembrance' (EC, 2017: 13) and 'testimonies' (EC, 2013: 8, 2019: 29). So far, the only awarded EHL site related to Judaism as a religion, chosen in 2017, is the synagogue of Dohány Street, along with the buildings connected to it in Budapest, Hungary. Unlike in the case of Christian heritage, the selection report for the synagogue does not utilize religious or cultural diversity discourse. Instead, like the three aforementioned sites, it is given significance as a place of remembrance. When describing the synagogue, the report mentions the word 'memorial' six times, as the site includes various memorials, an archive and a museum. The report also highlights the discourse of integration and assimilation, which are never used to describe Christian sites. The synagogue is said to be 'a focal point of Hungary's Neolog movement, a branch of Hungarian Jewry which promoted assimilation and integration into European society' and 'a symbol of integration, remembrance and openness to dialogue' (EC, 2017: 10).

Islam has only had a marginal role in the EHL. During the intergovernmental phase of the EHL scheme, the sites awarded with the Label included two larger architectural areas with historical mosques. The narratives of the three sites had references to historical battles against Muslims. The official EHL sites do not include any Muslim buildings. The narratives of two candidate sites that applied for the official Label in 2014 and 2017 referred to battles against the Ottomans and Turks. The panel, however, judged that these sites did not have enough European significance to be awarded the Label – and thus avoided the situation in which Islam would have been included in the European narrative within the EHL only through the fight against it.

'Culturalization' of Christianity in the HEH

The staff of the HEH, as well as the politicians who have been involved in its establishment, have emphasized that the museum seeks to avoid telling any singular or all-encompassing truths about European history or to give any clear definitions regarding European identity (EuroparlTV, 2017). The HEH's information material claims that the museum is a place in which 'visitors will be encouraged to think critically about its [Europe's] past' by 'asking questions about the continent's heritage of shared traditions and achievements – as well as adversity' through which 'different ways of thinking about Europe are explored' (HEH, 2017: n.p.). The narrative of the HEH's permanent exhibition is, indeed, built largely around asking questions. The rhetorical style of asking questions and challenging visitors' preconceptions can be seen, however, as simultaneously offering answers.

The first section in the permanent exhibition is titled 'Shaping Europe'. The narrative of the visitors' guide – presented digitally on a tablet device – starts with the following questions:

What could be regarded as European heritage? Europe is more than the addition of national histories, but is it a civilization and culture characterized by particular traditions and values developed through history? There are basic elements which are originally European and have spread all over the continent. Can these be considered distinct hallmarks of European culture? If so, what part of this European heritage should we preserve, what do we want to change, what should we contest? (HEH, 2017–2018)

As the quotation shows, the core of the HEH's European narrative is the unquestionable idea that all Europeans share 'basic elements' or heritage that spread throughout the continent. These elements are collected in the digital visitors' guide under the title 'Memory and European Heritage' introducing a word cloud with the terms 'The Enlightenment', 'capitalism', 'state terror', 'the nation state', 'revolutions', 'colonialism', 'philosophy' and 'Marxism, communism & socialism', written with a bigger font and the 'rule of law', 'omnipresence of Christianity', 'humanism', 'genocide', 'democracy' and 'the slave trade', written with a smaller font (HEH, 2017–2018). The term 'the nation state' is located in the centre of the word cloud. The composition of the cloud illustrates the general role of religion in the exhibition's European narrative. In it, Christianity is represented as a cultural context or mentality related to memory and heritage.

The 'culturalization' of Christianity characterizes the HEH's website, where 'European heritage' is introduced through the abovementioned questions but their answers centre around only three themes: Christianity, the Age of Enlightenment and democracy. According to the website, 'Christianity spread across Europe to become immensely influential and a defining feature of "Western" civilisation. Today, European values, traditions and culture still reflect this long Christian heritage' (HEH, 2021b). The visual material that accompanies this description is a picture of a wooden sculpture of a Dutch pope from the late 1400s (Adrian VI of Utrecht) emphasizing the significance of Christianity as part of Europe's past and material cultural heritage related to Europe's history. The website creates an impression of Christianity as a foundational feature of Europe but at the same time as something that belongs to its past. This kind of 'culturalization' of Christianity constructs the European past as mono-religious.

Religion is not included in the museum's European narrative of societal arenas, politics or public life in Europe. Nor is the secularization of European societies explicitly discussed, although the shift of science to the forefront of public life and the shift of intellectual authority from the religious leaders to scientists is mentioned in the section of the exhibition that examines Europe's nineteenth century. Secularization is, however, implicitly embedded in the museum's narrative on the development of European societies since the Middle Ages through ignoring the role of religion.

The HEH gives a lot of exhibition space to the narratives of the rise and fall of totalitarianisms in twentieth century Europe and the World Wars. In these narratives, religion has a dual role. On the one hand, religion is connected to the sphere of personal life. In this context, the museum exhibits religion in a display case that contains 'talismanic objects' and 'mementos' from soldiers in the First World War – simultaneously highlighting the diversity of their ethnic backgrounds (HEH, 2017–2018). These items include prayer beads and a bible. The bible – torn apart by shrapnel from a bomb, saving the

soldier's life – was also displayed in the marketing material distributed before the opening of the museum (EuroparlTV, 2017). On the other hand, religion is dealt with in the same section of the exhibition as a broad societal topic through the memory and remembrance of the Holocaust. Here Jews and Judaism in Europe become intertwined with the European narrative. However, neither the HEH nor the EHL reports refer to or construct the idea of Judeo-Christianity – let alone all three Abrahamic faiths – as a shared cultural basis of Europe.

The sections of the exhibition that deal with the reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War and the European integration process up to today focus on the EU's value discourse of democracy, peace and human rights. Religion is not highlighted in the exploration of these topics even though the EU's value discourse reflects the cultural and religious diversification of European societies and the need for principles of living together in a multicultural Europe. In these sections, religion is only explicitly mentioned as an antithesis to the peaceful unification of Europe in former Yugoslavia 'where ethnic, religious and cultural differences led to brutal civil wars and ethnic cleansing', as the digital visitors' guide notes (HEH, 2017–2018).

The narrative of Europe, as told by the HEH, can be seen as actively avoiding linking religion and religious themes to modern Europe. This can be interpreted as an attempt to eschew subjects that could potentially divide Europe, and, instead, to promote unity and belonging by means of a secular, ethnically and religiously inclusive narrative of Europe (Kaiser, 2017: 528). The avoidance of Christianity in the HEH narrative has not gone unnoticed by some museum visitors. Some religious actors and heritage professionals have criticized the HEH for bypassing or undermining the role of religion in the narrative of Europe (Huijgen, 2017; Ukielski et al., 2017). The Polish government and Polish MEPs from the Law and Justice party objected to the HEH narrative of Europe, as in their view the museum undermined the role of Poland in European history and misinterpreted Polish history during the Second World War. These topics were discussed in a debate in Brussels organized by the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Group in the European Parliament and hosted by MEP Anna Fotyga on behalf of the Polish Law and Justice delegation. The absence of Christianity from the HEH's permanent exhibition was one criticism raised in this debate (Apelblat, 2017). In pro-Christian and anti-Islam online forums, the HEH was interpreted even as 'erasing Christianity and welcoming Islam' and as a museum 'creating a post-Christian pro-Islam identity', and thus being a warning example of the EU's contemporary policies (Meotti, 2017).

Conclusion: Christianity as cultural memory, tradition and heritage

There is no neutral or value-free way to narrate the history of Europe or to define the European dimension of cultural heritage. The EU's heritage and history initiatives narrate the story of Europe based on its liberal value discourse, reflecting the idea of a contemporary multicultural Europe where diversity is seen as an asset. The EU's political objective continues to be to create a Europe that is 'united in diversity' as delineated by its official slogan. In this objective, religion has a difficult role. The EHL and the HEH

serve as good examples of balancing Christianity and secularism and of the challenge of incorporating Christianity into the EU's value discourse. In the European narratives of these two initiatives, the secular worldview and the EU's value discourse are cornerstones. Religion, particularly Christianity, provides physical venues or cultural contexts to promote these worldviews and values, such as peace, human dignity, pluralism, equality and solidarity. The critical views of the HEH's exhibition, stated by conservative and religious Christian actors, reveal tensions between religious and secular worldviews and divergent European narratives stemming from them.

The European narratives in these two cases reflect the idea of a post-religious Europe, where Christianity is 'culturalized'. The cases can be interpreted as simultaneously echoing the post-secular Habermasian viewpoint: the ideal of religious diversity and equality of religious communities in post-secular multicultural Europe drives the EU to approach Christianity in the narrative of Europe with caution and restraint – without emphasizing it too much. The liberal values that are highlighted as European in the rhetoric of these cases reflect this Habermasian viewpoint. Habermas mentions liberal values – such as equality, tolerance and respect for diversity – as prerequisites for the legitimized participation of religious individuals and communities in public life.

In addition to the cases analysed in this article, the EU's balancing acts in relation to religion can be found in its political discourses, public communications and symbols (Fornäs, 2011). The debate over including mentions of Christianity in the constitution of the EU is an example of this. At the heart of this balancing is the role and visibility of Christianity in the formation, history, functioning, value system and political discourse of the EU. The liberal values that the EU promotes – such as peace, equality, tolerance and respect for others – have been interpreted as resonating Christian ideals. Scholars have even noted that the EU's concept of human rights has its roots in both Western philosophy and Christianity (Panikkar, 1982; Sharma, 2006). This balancing is thus challenged by the intertwined nature of secular and religious views.

The EU implements its history and heritage initiatives in a context characterized by the 'culturalization' of Christianity in secularized European societies. In this context, the significance of Christianity has increasingly shifted from the field of religious practice and devotion to that of culture, where it serves traditions related to the life cycle of individuals and communities. Recent surveys show how the religious significance of Christian identity and belonging has been constantly declining among Europeans, particularly in Western Europe (Pew Research Center, 2018: 36–37, 83). In the EHL and the HEH, Christianity is approached primarily from the viewpoint of cultural heritage that communicates the political value discourse of the EU but which is simultaneously implicitly connected to religion. This connection is easier for the EU to deal with within a multicultural Europe characterized by both secular and religious worldviews when Christianity is given meanings through memory, tradition and cultural heritage. This underlines how European narratives in these two initiatives draw on a chronological reading of the relationship between the religious and the secular. That reading characterizes Europe first in terms of religion, before it becomes secular and 'modern'. Instead of a chronological and dichotomic relationship between the religious and the secular, this study shows how these aspects are as closely intertwined and how the religious still has an important role in EU narratives on Europe.

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