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Book Review

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“THE MASKS OF THE POLITICAL GOD: RELIGION AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACIES”

Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2020, ISBN: 978-1-78552-337-3

The Masks of the Political God embarks on the hotly debated relationship between religion and democracy by focusing on political parties. The book is theoretically grounded on the cleavage theory but it also addresses the literature on democratization, shedding lights on the pitfalls of the secularization paradigm and on the merits of post-modernization readings. Finally, this book engages into dialogue with the literature around the so-called inclusion-moderation hypothesis.

Luca Ozzano investigates the relationship between religion and political parties in contemporary democracies by shedding the light on how religious parties arise, evolve and relate to the democratization processes and the quality of democracy. In so doing, the author firstly elaborates the concept of the *religiously oriented party*, and then proceeds in finding common patterns among religiously oriented parties and their relation with democracy across different political systems and religious/cultural traditions. He employs a qualitative historical analysis from the 1980s to the present-day by covering a set of countries, namely India, Israel, Italy, Turkey and United States, without however leaving unexplored also the case of Tunisia which, even if really young, is the sole Muslim-majority democracy in the MENA region. The main contention of this work is that the role of religion in current politics is no longer relevant as a system of belief or a practice, but it is merely instrumental (hence the choice of the world *masks* in the title) since it is exploited by political entrepreneurs as an identity maker to glue together the different sectors of the right-wing populist social base.

The book is tripartite, it consists of a theoretical, empirical and concluding comparative part. The first chapter disentangles some preliminary normative and theoretical conundrums while also accounting for the state-of-the-art when it comes to religion, democracy and political parties. The second chapter illustrates and revives the cleavages thesis by focusing on the religious cleavages and how it intersects with other cleavages in the society. In Chapter 3 Ozzano introduces the concept of religiously oriented party, defined as a “political party focusing significant sections of its manifesto on religious values, explicitly appealing to religious constituencies and/or including significant religious factions” and singles out five types of religiously oriented parties according to their

organizational model, ideology, relations with interest groups, social base and finally, their goals. These are: the conservative, the progressive, the religious nationalist, the fundamentalist and the camp parties. By following this typology, the author embarks on the empirical analysis. Chapter 4 is devoted to the case of India which is emblematic for its social heterogeneity, "marked by the presence of several intertwined religious, ethnic, caste, linguistic and class cleavages that arrange in different ways in the different state – and often substate- context". Through a diverse politicizations of these cleavages at the national level, in the last four decades the party system has changed the form of a "Congress system", dominated by the Congress Party (CP) to a new one, which is dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This transition was also accompanied by the passage from the secular platforms to a more assertive role of religion in politics, with the CP embracing identity-driven positions under the late years of Indira Gandhi's leadership, whilst the BJP oscillating between the conservative catch all party and the religious nationalist type. The fifth chapter is devoted to the case of Israel where, since its creation, religion plays a fundamental role and constitutes itself as a multilevel cleavage (i.e. opposing Jews to non-Jews communities but also creating divisions within the religious Jewish population, like the one between religious nationalists and ultra-Orthodox). eventually intertwining with the ethnic cleavage stemming from the different Jewish communities landing in Israel after 1948. Out of this complexity, Israel has hosted all types of religiously oriented parties as pointed out in the theoretical section, even though it now counts only camp and nationalist parties. The following chapter focuses on Italy where religion served to 'glue together' a variety of dispersed interests cutting across the different social strata that did not fall within the working class, politically represented by the Communist Party. With the collapse of the so-called "First Republic" and the disappearance of its major party, namely the Christian Democracy (DC), religion served as a cleavage within both left and right camp, as the creation of religiously oriented parties in both factions testifies. In line with a wider trends, however, religion has also been recently exploited by Lega Nord (LN) to ease its passage from a regional to a national party with a nationalistic and populist soul. The seventh chapter retraces the role of religion as either a democratizing factor - in opposition to secular despotism - and an instrument for the consolidation of Erdogan's autocratic rule, with many religious parties playing a role in either cases. Finally, chapter 8 surveys the case of the United States where the cleavages over religious denominations has been overshadowed, and partly replaced, by a value-based one which juxtaposes conservative religious vs. centrist and liberal religious people. Religion is thus playing a central role in deepening the polarization within the U.S. party system. Chapter 9 broadens the scope of the comparative analysis with a look at the MENA region. After a discussion on the compatibility between Islam and democracy, Ozzano addresses the case of Tunisia where Ennadha, an Islamist anti-system party, has become the

architect and a bastion of the new democratic order.

This book contributes on the literature on religion, political parties and democracy in several ways. First and foremost, it introduces the concept of religiously oriented party which exists within the dichotomy between secular and religious parties and is extremely fine-grained. In this way Ozzano provides the academic scholarship with an important tool to address the complex variety of parties grounded or appealing to religion. More than that, this is a broad study on the role of religiously oriented parties across different countries, religious traditions, cultures and historical paths that the author manages to do with a great accuracy and scientific rigor. Finally, this work is also an essay on the evolution of worldwide politics in the last four decades and, as such, provides an innovative reading about the resurgence of religion in current politics as a key instrument to politicize the traditionalist/communitarian libertarian/universalistic cleavages.

The Masks of the Political God is a much needed reading for students dealing with the role of religion in politics but also for those dealing with democratization in religiously-hostile environments as well as for political scientists willing to have a fresh perspective on the evolutions politicking and party politics are undergoing.

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