Priming religion: The effects of religious issues in the news coverage on public attitudes towards European integration

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Abstract

Religion can affect public support for the European Union (EU). However, specifying the circumstances under which religion may become a stronger predictor of EU-support has so far been neglected. This article shows that the media play a role in this process and it is investigated to what extent the presence or absence of references to religious issues in EU news coverage primes people’s religious attitudes to contribute to their evaluation of the EU. For this purpose, a content analysis of the amount of religious news items in EU coverage in German and Dutch newspapers between 1997 and 2007 was conducted. Two points in time were chosen – 1998, when only a small amount of religious news items appeared in EU coverage, and 2005, when religious items reached a peak. Eurobarometer data were used to test the media priming proposition. The findings show that an increasing religious dimension in media coverage about the EU primes a linkage between religious and political considerations and thus influences the strength of the impact of religion on attitudes towards the EU.

Keywords: religion, European Union, European integration, media effects, priming

Introduction

Factors that influence public EU support are by and large economic, institutional or cultural (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005). Out of these, utilitarian considerations (e.g., economic interest or income), nationalism and attitudes towards the incumbent government are the most prominent in the literature (Hooghe and Marks, 2007; McLaren, 2007). Regarding the cultural dimension, few studies look at religion, religiousness, and their impacts on attitudes towards European integration (e.g., Boomgaarden and Freire, 2009; Nelsen, Guth, and Fraser, 2001). That
Religion has been virtually neglected in prior studies is surprising, given the fact that religion is a major societal force and even in secular societies, remains to be a vital source of collective memories and identities influencing cultural values (Casanova, 1994). Furthermore, religious doctrine and theology offer coherent and elaborated cognitive rationales that diagnose social problems, formulate possible solutions, and justify the reactions — often in the cause of universal verities (Rhys, 1996). Correspondingly, religion and religiousness have been shown to exert a powerful influence on political preferences, economic attitudes or party alignment (e.g., Bruce, 2003; Van der Brug, Hobolt, and De Vreese, 2009). In sum, there are strong theoretical reasons to assume that religion and religiousness play an important role to understand European attitudes (see Nelsen et al., 2001).

No studies exist, however, which focus on the circumstances, the context in which religion becomes a stronger predictor of EU-support. Research has effectively demonstrated that public opinion about the EU is volatile and potentially influenced by new information provided by the media (e.g., Hobolt, 2005; De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; De Vreese and Smetko, 2004). Furthermore, theorists diagnose a higher salience of the religious dimension in political discourse and the media after the ending of the Cold War (e.g., Huntington, 1993), and especially since the attacks on the World Trade Center (Klausen, 2006). In particular, the process of media priming suggests that the importance of religion for understanding attitudes towards European integration can be altered by the media. The proposed media priming effects are of a conditional nature: Religious issues in EU coverage prime religious attitudes to contribute to the evaluation of European integration. Furthermore we take into consideration the citizens’ political ideology as a second moderating factor. Thus, this study will, first, investigate the relationship between religion and religiousness and European attitudes, and second, show how the media may alter the linkage between religious attitudes and European integration by covering topics with a religious dimension, while taking into account political ideology.

**Religion as an antecedent of attitudes towards European integration**

Christian ethical values were seen by the pioneers of the European Union as the main starting point for overcoming a merely nationally organized Europe (see Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1926). In 1940, Jacques Maritain wrote in his seminal essay *L’Europe et l’idée federal* that founding a “Federal Europe” was only possible provided that an abandoning of nationalism, imperialism, individualism, and totalitarianism in favor of a common ideal of civilization based on the “The Spirit of Christian-
would take place (Maritain, 1993 [1940], p.103). The universalistic premise of Christian religions, that the true believers, wherever they are in the world, are united under the roof of their church(es) — regardless of their nationality, socio-economic background, or race — corresponded to the European idea.

Acknowledging the historical origins and the theological foundations of doctrine of the Christian religions (especially, their relation to the idea of the nation state), one would expect Orthodox Christians to be more reluctant towards a European project than Catholics, and even more so Protestants1. All the more because the European project was founded by Catholic, or mainly Catholic, countries under the leadership of Christian democrats (Deutsch et al., 1957; Thomas, 2005)2. Indeed, since predominantly Protestant countries entered the European Union, populations in these countries (Sweden, Denmark, and Anglican Great Britain) have shown to be rather reluctant towards a deepening of the European integration (Boomgaarden and Freire, 2009)3.

Despite the importance of religion and religiousness in shaping political attitudes, research on the impact of religion on EU support is scarce4. A few studies have tested whether assumptions about the supportive nature of Christian belief for European integration and the different historical tendencies of Protestants, Orthodox, and Catholics in their attitudes towards Europe can be empirically confirmed. In an analysis of Eurobarometer data from 1973 to 1998, Nelsen, Guth, and Fraser (2001) found that church attendance was positively correlated with EU support. Theoretically, this openness towards European integration is rooted in the moral-philosophical, altruistic and peaceful conviction related to Christianity. Furthermore, the authors found that, as theoretically anticipated from the historical attitudes towards stateliness, Catholics and Orthodox were more sympathetic towards the EU than Protestants. The same patterns were ascertained by Scheuer and Van der Brug (2007) and have been confirmed for the new Eastern European member states (Nelsen and Guth, 2005; cf. Boomgaarden and Freire, 2009).

To illustrate how even slightly different theological emphases in the belief systems can have a big impact on people’s political attitudes, Haggevi’s study (2002) is noteworthy. In Sweden, he states that evangelical values — independent of the church people belong to — are associated with being more sceptical towards the EU5. Furthermore, also atheists/agnostics can be affected by religious issues in their opinion concerning the EU, for example when they think that certain EU policies are endangering ‘their’ secular political achievements6. The studies outlined above consider religion and differences between denominations as a political resource mainly as a cultural factor; other studies explicitly look at the ideological impact of religion7. This paper has its focus not on denomi-
national differences with regard to EU attitudes, but on the impact of religiousness itself, because arguably in secular countries the difference between denominations has become less important while religiousness has become a more defining characteristic (e.g., Minkenberg, 2009).

The cleavages between religion as a conservative, “right” force (e.g., Johnson, 1976; Liebman and Wuthnow, 1983) and religion as a progressive, “left” force (e.g., Casanova, 1994; Epstein, 1991; Smith, 1991) are both available in the empirical and theoretical literature. Generally, religiousness has been found to be associated with “new”, left-wing political values such as environmentalism, post-materialism, libertarianism (Freire, 2006), which have been shown to lead to a more favorable attitude towards European integration (e.g., Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2004; Marks and Steenbergen, 2004). However, in the Dutch referendum on the EU constitution the percentage of “no”-voters was highest among citizens who attend religious services most regularly and those who are on the right of the political spectrum (Aarts and Van der Kolk, 2005).

Thus overall, religious people might show tendencies to be more in favor of the European integration process, but there are theoretical reasons to believe that differences between the attitudes towards the EU of religious conservative-right-wing people and religious progressive-left-wing people do exist. This proposition is especially reasonable when considering how religion becomes a factor important for the public evaluation of the European project at a time in which church attendance is decreasing throughout Europe – namely via the coverage of the media. Theorists argue that a religious dimension in international politics has become more important due to clashes between Western and Islamic culture (Huntington, 1993; Klausen, 2006). If that were the case, one would suggest that the discussion in, and the information provided by, the media generally affect religious people more than others. Furthermore, it is probable that, depending on the religious issue at stake, right-wing religious people are affected differently than left-wing religious people. For example, right-wing religious respondents would probably be more reluctant towards an accession of Turkey to the EU than left-wing religious respondents. Thus, we believe that impact of religiousness on EU attitudes depends on the strength of the effect of religious media primes in EU coverage and furthermore that the direction of the effect is dependent on the political ideology of the respondent. We now turn to explicate the priming effect of religious media coverage on public attitudes towards the EU.

**Priming religion**

A number of studies have analyzed the impact of media coverage on attitudes towards the EU. The media influence peoples’ attitudes
towards the EU because the European integration process is more complex and its decision-making is more detached from the everyday life of the citizens than national or regional policies (Dalton and Duval, 1986). Media formulate an agenda (e.g., Dearing and Rogers, 1996), and the EU may feature more or less prominently on this agenda. Generally, we know that EU news is given comparatively little attention (e.g., De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006). Besides influencing how salient citizens perceive the European integration process or religion/religious topics to be (agenda-setting), the combination of these topics in the coverage can also make people think about the EU in terms of religious issues.

Media priming focuses on the effect that by making some issues or messages more salient than others, these primes influence the standard by which a particular issue is judged (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar and Simon, 1993; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Studies found that people often (have to) use a shortcut strategy, basing their judgments on information most easily retrieved from memory (Krosnick and Brannon, 1993). Consequently, a heightened accessibility of a certain subject (e.g., religion) portrayed in the news increases the likelihood that audiences will base subsequent judgments on their thoughts about the subject (Sheafer and Weimann, 2005). By focusing attention on religious aspects of the European integration, media have the ability to prime peoples’ evaluation of the EU by religious topics.

Media priming effects are potentially conditional. Political knowledge has been found to both boost and limit priming effects (e.g., Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen and Dillman Carpentier, 2008; Krosnick and Brannon, 1993; Togeby, 2007; Van der Brug, Semetko and Valkenburg, 2007). Furthermore, it has been shown that issues in political coverage can trigger an association of the general perception of the issue with political ideology, and in turn can prompt individuals to become more ideologically distinct in their political evaluation (Domke, 2001). Domke, for instance, shows by comparing the short-term and long-term impact of religious primes in political coverage that evangelical Christians and undergraduate students react quite differently to the different experimental stimuli. While both groups show the proposed priming effect concerning the initial cognitive accessibility and its consequences, when looking within the groups it turns out that the evangelical Christians show clearer trails of ethical evaluations that lead to subsequent judgments. Accordingly, religious references in media coverage about the EU can be expected to increase the linkage between religious attitudes and ideological predispositions, which in turn can be expected to affect evaluations of the European integration process. Furthermore, while religious issues in news coverage should generally make this information more accessible, a clearer pattern concerning ethical considerations is
more likely to be found for religious people. This reasoning thus leads us to expect that exposure to religious issues in the news has the strongest impact on the attitudes towards the EU of religious people, but that the direction of this effect will be different for left-wing and right-wing churchgoers.

H1: Priming Hypothesis: The effect size of religiousness on attitudes towards the EU is dependent on the amount of exposure to religious issues in news coverage about the EU.

H2: Political Ideology Moderation Hypothesis: The effect specified under H1 is moderated by political ideology, so that the direction of the effect is different for religious people with left-wing predispositions versus religious people with right-wing predispositions.

Technically speaking, Hypothesis 2 leads us to expect an increasing three-way interaction effect of news exposure, religiousness, and political ideology on attitudes towards the EU in a situation in which the salience of religious issues in EU media coverage is high: Over time more religious news to which people are exposed should trigger religiousness to have a greater effect on EU attitudes. More, religious news items in EU coverage which for example focus on Christian/altruistic/social welfare policies (e.g., the introduction of the globalization fund) may have a more positive impact on left-wing churchgoers’ attitudes towards Europe. Right-wing churchgoers are expected to be more positively affected when religious news items appear which are related to more traditional Christian values such as the opposition of Christian Europe versus Islam, or an introduction of God into the constitution. Thus, we believe exposure to religious issues to increase the strength of the relationship between religiousness and attitudes towards the EU, and that political ideology moderates the direction of the effect. It should be noted that we have no expectations regarding the direction of the proposed effects but only concerning the strength and that the impact should be different for left- and right-wing religious persons, because we only consider the amount of religious issues in EU coverage but not the content (see also the discussion).

The study

To test these hypotheses, variation in news coverage, religiousness, and political ideology is needed. A content analysis of newspapers focusing on the last decade and two surveys from 1998 and 2005 are used to assess the priming effects of the media coverage during this time, in which arguably religion has become more important in political dis-
course. Two countries were selected, Germany and the Netherlands, and the content of the news in both countries was studied over time by means of a systematic content analysis. Concerning the religious dimension, the two countries share a number of important similarities: Both countries are decisively secular in their constitutions but remain Christian-dominated (65% in Germany, 43% in the Netherlands compared to agnostics/atheists and members of other religions). They are divided into a Southern Catholic (34% in Germany, 27% in the Netherlands) and Northern Protestant part (32% in Germany, 17% in the Netherlands), and a Muslim minority (4% in Germany, 6% in the Netherlands). In both countries, Protestants had the upper hand in public affairs for most of the past two centuries until the end of the Second World War. Also, the media systems of the two countries are rather similar (for more information on the German media system see Kaase, 2000, and on the Dutch system, see Van der Eijk, 2000). In both countries the churches have some influence on the media system as they are presented amongst other societal groups in controlling bodies of the audiovisual broadcasting system. Thus, concerning our research interest, the two countries are similar enough to compare but also provide some variation concerning church attendance, news exposure and attitudes towards the EU, so that considering the two of them decreases the chance that findings are attributable to national idiosyncrasies. In order to test media priming Hypothesis 1, we need to select periods where we have change in one context and stability in the other context concerning the amount of religious issues in EU news coverage. Accordingly, we selected points in time on the basis of our content analysis of the news (see below).

In order to investigate the impact of changes in the coverage on public opinion towards the EU, two Eurobarometer surveys were chosen. The first was conducted in 1998, the second in 2005 (Eurobarometer 50.0 and Eurobarometer 63.4). In Germany, there was far more EU coverage including references to religious issues in 2005 than in 1998, while in the Netherlands, in the two years the salience of religious references in EU news was about the same (see Figures 1 and 2 below). Thus, for the purpose of testing H1, 1998 and 2005 provide an adequate basis for comparison: a changing media context in Germany and a stable media context in the Netherlands. According to Hypothesis 1, we expect that in Germany higher news exposure should have a stronger impact on EU attitudes in 2005 than in 1998. In the Netherlands, we expect no significant change in the explanatory power of the interaction of church attendance and news media use as the amount of religious news items in EU coverage is about the same in both years.

The years selected for the survey analysis, as depicted by circles in Figures 1 and 2, are not ideal but were selected because in these years
the Eurobarometers provide all variables necessary to test our hypotheses. While we cannot guarantee that the meaning of responses to the items stayed stable over time, the wording of the item remained the same, and due to the rather small time frame we believe that a comparison between the two points in time is justifiable.

Content analysis: Since media coverage is the key contextual variable in this study, a content analysis on the intensity of religious topics in the coverage about the EU was undertaken. Newspaper coverage is used as an indicator for the amount of religious topics in EU coverage provided by the German and Dutch media system. Via the LexisNexis database, searches of newspaper articles published in Germany and the Netherlands were conducted. The following newspapers available in LexisNexis were chosen for the analysis: in Germany, Süddeutsche Zeitung, taz – die tageszeitung, Die Welt, and Die Welt am Sonntag; in the Netherlands, Trouw, De Telegraaf, De Volkskrant, and NRC Handelsblad. These non-tabloid newspapers serve as good indicators for the media coverage in the two countries as they are amongst those with the highest circulations and cover the political spectrum from left to right (for a detailed description see the Appendix) and hence provide an indication of the general media environment (see, e.g., Soroka, 2002).

First, all articles dealing with the “European Union” or “European Community” and their abbreviations were identified in the two countries’ newspapers between January 1997 and December 2007. Then, within this population of EU coverage, all articles dealing with religion, religious topics, Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism, Shintoism, Islam, Jewry, or Buddhism were identified. The same over-time distribution was to be seen when excluding all keywords concerning Islam.

Survey analysis: As stated above, two Eurobarometers – one conducted in 1998 and the other in 2005 – were chosen to investigate how a changing amount (in Germany) and a stable amount (in the Netherlands) of religious issues in EU coverage affect attitudes towards the EU. The following variables were used for the analysis:

The dependent variable is a combination of two measures of support for the European Union asked for in the Eurobarometer (for an overview of the operationalization of EU support, see Scheuer, 2005). The sum of the affirmative answers to the two survey questions is used. These are: 1) Generally speaking, do you think that [your country’s] membership of the European Union is a good thing? and 2) Taking everything into consideration, would you say that [your country] has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Union? The index variable is coded from 1 “membership of my country is a bad thing and my country has not benefited from EU membership” to 6 “membership of my coun-
try is a good thing and my country has benefited from EU membership” (Germany, 1998: $M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.48$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.28$; Germany, 2005: $M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.56$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.38$)\textsuperscript{16}.

The main \textit{independent variable} is a \textit{news exposure index} comprising the sum of the answers to the following three questions: \textit{About how often do you 1) watch the news on television, 2) listen to the news on the radio, 3) read the news in daily papers (per week)?} This is coded from 1 “never read newspapers, listen to radio news, or watch television news” to 12 “read newspapers, listen to radio news, and watch television news everyday” (Germany, 1998: $M = 9.84$, $SD = 2.29$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = 9.75$, $SD = 2.45$; Germany, 2005: $M = 9.66$, $SD = 2.53$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = 9.72$, $SD = 2.28$). Furthermore, religiousness was a \textit{key variable} in this study. It was measured by \textit{church attendance}, ranging from 1 “never” to 5 “more than once per week” (Germany, 1998: $M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.11$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.28$; Germany, 2005: $M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.11$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.22$)\textsuperscript{17}. Furthermore, it has been hypothesized that respondents’ political ideology influences the direction of the moderated priming effect. In this study, left-right self-placement (1 left-wing – 10 right-wing) was taken as a proxy for political ideology (Germany, 1998: $M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.96$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.74$; Germany, 2005: $M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.85$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.87$).

The effects explicated above have to be seen in the light of extant research on factors influencing attitudes towards European integration, so as to control these factors in subsequent analyses. It has been shown that higher income, higher levels of education, certain occupational skills, and living in areas near to country borders leads to different evaluations of the costs and benefits of European integration and thus to a more favorable attitude towards the integration process as a whole (e.g., Anderson and Reichert, 1996; Gabel, 1998; Gabel and Palmer, 1995). Inglehart (1970) stresses the importance of cognitive skills for evaluations of the EU – the higher the cognitive skill, the easier the complicated process of European integration and the benefits accompanying it are understood. But attitudes towards European integration are not only about utilitarian considerations and cognitive skills (e.g., Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993). Cultural and ideological values play a significant role. Concerning political ideology, while in earlier studies it has been shown that left-wing people had a tendency to oppose European integration, since the 1990s being left-wing is generally related to a higher support for the EU (Nelsen, Guth, and Fraser, 2001). Right-wing voters on the other hand are more sceptical towards European integration (e.g., Freire, 2005)\textsuperscript{18}. Culturally, a powerful sociological “us versus them” –
dichotomy is challenged by the European project – national identity. Studies have shown that those who feel more attached to their nation and the national community tend to feel threatened by European integration (e.g., Carey, 2002; Christin and Trechsel, 2002; Hooghe, Huo, and Marks, 2007; Kriesi and Lachat, 2004; Marks, 1999). The same tendency can be seen for those that feel hostility towards, and fear of, other cultures (McLaren, 2002; De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005). Others have found that the strength of national or regional identity can also correlate with a stronger feeling of having a European identity (for an overview, see Hooghe and Marks, 2005).

The two Eurobarometers only provide some of these variables to test against religiousness and its interaction with media use and political ideology. Occupation, economic interests, income, and social capital could not be considered, yet the following variables included into the analysis also serve as proxies for these factors: age of the respondent, education, sex, expectation of the economic development of the country (as a proxy for income), religious denomination (Protestant or Catholic), political interest (as a proxy frequency of political discussion), and self-perceived knowledge about the EU (as a proxy for cognitive mobilization) — for means and standard deviations see the Appendix.

We tested our hypotheses by means of multiple regression analysis (ordinary least squares). All variables were Z-standardized in order to make the effects of the variables easier to compare and as to account for the standard deviation of each variable in country and year. This was also necessary as the interactions had to be calculated by using the Z-standardized main effect, while for the interpretation the unstandardized regression coefficients of the interactions had to be inspected. The samples were weighted to be more representative of the adult population in the respective countries by the existing Eurobarometer weighting variables.

**Results of the content analysis**

The content analysis shows that nearly twice the amount of coverage of the EU appears in German newspapers compared to the Dutch newspapers. The overall share of religious references, however, is comparable. In Germany, a total of 125,330 articles dealing with the EU were found of which 10,628 (8.4%) had a religious reference. In the Netherlands, 68,264 articles about the EU were found of which 6,036 (8.8%) also dealt with religious issues. While the German newspapers *Die Welt*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and *taz* – *die tageszeitung* devoted about the same share of EU coverage to religious affairs, the most conservative of the newspapers, *Die Welt am Sonntag*, had a slightly higher share of religious
topics. Equally, in the Netherlands, the share of articles that mention religion in their EU coverage does not differ much, with the exception of De Telegraaf.

In Figure 1, we see that judging from the absolute number of articles a general tendency towards more coverage with reference to the EU and to religious topics can be observed in German newspapers.
Table 1. News exposure and its effects on churchgoers' support of the EU.

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<td>(.030)</td>
<td>(.030)</td>
<td>(.059)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Germany</th>
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<th>The Netherlands</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church attendance</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>-0.42</td>
<td>0.044(*)</td>
<td>0.057*</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x news exposure</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
<td>(0.048)</td>
<td>(0.056)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-right x news</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.069</td>
<td>0.069</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
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<tr>
<td>exposure</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td>(0.063)</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Left-right x church</td>
<td>0.124***</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>-0.042</td>
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<td>-0.039</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attendance</td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.052)</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-way interaction</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.056*</td>
<td>-0.052</td>
<td>0.064*</td>
<td>0.064*</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
<td>(0.051)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adj. $R^2$</td>
<td>0.090***</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>0.103**</td>
<td>0.386***</td>
<td>0.386***</td>
<td>0.396*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.386***</td>
<td>0.396*</td>
<td>0.403**</td>
<td>0.403**</td>
<td>0.403**</td>
<td>0.403**</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>1258</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adj. $R^2$ change</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-Test</td>
<td>7.441***</td>
<td>6.881***</td>
<td>6.467***</td>
<td>19.853***</td>
<td>15.401***</td>
<td>12.790***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. of $R^2$ change 2005 compared to 1998</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients of the Z standardized variables with standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$, (*) $p < .10$. The significance asterisks of the Adjusted $R^2$ indicate the change compared to the model without interaction(s).
In Figure 2, we see that, contrary to the German newspapers, the Dutch newspapers show no general tendency towards more articles referring to both religious and EU topics. Still, when comparing the overall average amount of coverage within the time periods before and after 9/11, there also seems to have been an increase in coverage in the Netherlands, but there is no difference to be seen when comparing the specific years 1998 and 2005.

Results of the survey analysis

According to Hypothesis 1, we expect that in Germany a higher news exposure to religious topics should have a greater impact on EU support in 2005 than in 1998. Since in the Netherlands about the same amount of EU coverage referring to religion appeared in 1998 and 2005, according to Hypothesis 1, in the Netherlands there should be no significant change in the explanatory power of the interaction of church attendance and news exposure on EU support.

Table 1 depicts regression models A and B to explain EU support, calculated in both countries in 1998 and 2005. Model A provides a test of the control variables. Model B includes the interaction of news exposure and church attendance. In Model C, the three-way interaction of left-/right-wing self-placement, news media use, and church attendance is included in order to test Hypothesis 2. Each analysis is calculated while controlling for other possible factors affecting EU support.

Table 1 shows in column B that in Germany, news exposure indeed had a stronger effect on religious people in altering their opinion about the EU in 2005 (with a higher amount of religious issues in EU coverage) compared to 1998 (with a lower amount of religious issues in EU coverage). In the Netherlands, where the amount of religious issues in EU coverage was about the same in the two years, the explanatory power of the interaction of news exposure and church attendance on EU support did not increase. This supports Hypothesis 1.

In column C, we see that when looking at the interaction of political ideology, church attendance, and news media use, a higher news exposure affects the evaluation of the EU of left-wing churchgoers and right-wing churchgoers in different directions. In both countries in 2005, a higher news exposure leads those who go to church more often and are more on the right of the political spectrum to be significantly more positive towards European integration than right-wing, non-religious people. Furthermore, in the Netherlands, non-religious, left-wing people that are
more exposed to news are significantly more positive towards the European Union. The findings in column C support Hypothesis 2.

In column A, we see that generally the control factors age, sex, Catholic or Protestant denomination, and news exposure have no significant effect on EU support. Column C depicts that in 1998 in Germany, church attendance shows a high significance and positive relation to EU support when people are more on the right of the political spectrum. The other control variables show the same tendencies as accounted for in the literature. The perception of the country’s economic development in the next year, arguably correlating with income, is the most important factor. Education is positively related. Frequency of political discussion is significantly and positively related to EU support in the Netherlands in 2005, which can be probably linked to an intense discussion in Dutch society preceding the referendum on the European constitution (Schuck and De Vreese, 2008). The amount of self-perceived knowledge about the EU is also positively related to EU support. In 2005 in Germany, some significantly negative effects of perceiving oneself as being more on the right of the ideology scale are accounted for.

The next figures depict the three-way interaction effect of news exposure, church attendance, and left-/right-placement on EU support, first for Germany (Figure 3), then for the Netherlands (Figure 4).
Generally, left-wing churchgoers who consume little news are slightly more positive about the EU than left-wing non-churchgoers, followed by right-wing churchgoers. Least supportive are the right-wing non-churchgoers. Left-wing churchgoers and non-churchgoers are slightly more negative if they consume more news. The significant effects of news exposure are observable for those people on the right of the political spectrum. Here, a higher news exposure has the opposite effect on churchgoers and non-churchgoers. While right-wing non-churchgoers are far less in favor of the EU when they have a higher news exposure, right-wing churchgoers are far more positive.

In the Netherlands, contrary to Germany, when consuming little news, left-wing churchgoers are most positive towards the EU, followed by right-wing non-churchgoers. Third rank right-wing churchgoers and fourth left-wing non-churchgoers. Thus, contrary to Germany, left-wing people are not per se more positive towards the EU; instead, in the Netherlands it depends strongly on whether they are religious or not and on the amount of their news media use. Left-wing non-churchgoers are only positive towards European integration when they consume more news. As in Germany, in the Netherlands right-wing non-churchgoers are far less in favor of the EU when they have a higher news exposure while right-wing churchgoers are far more positive.
Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this study was to analyze in how far the presence or absence of references to religious issues in EU news coverage primes people’s religious attitudes to contribute to their evaluation of the EU and European integration. Religiousness is an important cultural factor that explains attitudes towards the European integration process. The content analysis of EU news coverage of German and Dutch newspapers ascertained that after 9/11, in Germany EU coverage referring to religious issues generally increased. In the Netherlands, on average, only in the time period after 2001 was there more EU coverage on religious issues. According to media priming theory, people are expected to make political judgments increasingly based on references to religious issues in a media context in which there are more references to religious issues in the media coverage (Iyengar and Simon, 1993; Valentino et al., 2002).

Eurobarometer surveys were analyzed in order to investigate how different developments of the salience of religious issues in EU coverage affected public opinion towards the EU in the two countries. In Germany, in 2005 a higher share of religious issues in EU coverage was found than in 1998. In the Netherlands, about the same share of articles on the EU dealing with religious issues was found for both years. As media priming theory suggests, we found that in Germany the increasing religious dimension in EU coverage had a stronger impact on religious peoples’ attitudes towards the European Union in 2005 than in 1998. Also, as expected, such a change in explanatory power of religiousness and news exposure could not be accounted for in the Netherlands where the salience of religious issues in EU coverage was about the same in the two years. When considering peoples’ ideological self-placement, higher news exposure led people who go to church more frequently and who are more on the right of the ideological scale to appreciate European integration significantly more in both countries. Still, the latter results seem to indicate that generally over time the interaction between political ideology and religiousness seems to have become stronger.

In conclusion, it has been shown that peoples’ (religious) value systems affect their political attitudes towards European integration. The media can affect attitudes towards the EU by emphasizing religious issues. Thus, media effects research explaining attitudes towards the EU over time should not only take into account the tone of the general coverage or general structures of frames (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; De Vreese and Semetko, 2004), but also the rise and decline of different issues in EU coverage, and how they relate to existing predispositions towards these issues. The finding that religious issues in media coverage
increase the strength of the linkage between religious attitudes and political ideology and thus influence perceptions of the European integration process coincides with Domke’s finding that an issue can trigger the association between the perception of the issue and political ideology (Domke, 2001). Thus, this study has demonstrated that media priming effects can depend on issue sensitization and thus issue importance via personal traits, in this case religiousness.

The latter remark points to the central shortcoming of this study — the absence of more detailed information concerning the contents of the religious coverage ascertained on the one hand, and on the other hand a more in-depth analysis of the specific elements of the values of citizens. For instance, the finding in 2005 that a higher news exposure of those who are right-wing and go to church more often leads to more EU support might have been caused by the enormous media attention surrounding the celebrations during the funeral of John Paul II and the inauguration of Pope Benedict XVI in the month prior to the survey. Hypothetically, it is likely that EU issues which have a religious dimension can also lead religious people to evaluate the EU more negatively. Based on the existing data this question cannot be answered.

Furthermore, the dependent variable of this study, that is, attitudes towards the EU, should be analyzed more thoroughly. For example, in the literature (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Haesly, 2001; Taggart and Szcerbiak, 2004) a distinction is made between those who endorse all aspects of integration (Europhiles), those who support only specific aspects of European integration (Instrumental Europeans), those who are skeptical of certain facets of European integration (soft Euroskeptics), and those who resent the process as whole (hard Euroskeptics). This distinction should in further studies be investigated in its relation to religion.

Finally, religiousness should be analyzed in context of the religious denomination of the respondent. While in this study Catholic or Protestant denomination did not turn out to be a significant predictor, and when considering ideological self-placement the significant effects accounted for in 1998 showed different directions in the two countries, other studies have shown that both over time and cross-sectionally Catholics are more in favor of the EU (Nelsen and Guth 2005; Nelsen, Guth, and Fraser 2001). Furthermore, Hagevi (2002) has demonstrated how even within religions slightly different emphases in doctrine can substantially influence attitudes towards the European Union. Therefore, values related to different kinds of religions should be taken into account in future studies.

Though not only religious belief itself affects political attitudes towards the EU; also perceived religiousness of an issue has an impact on public opinion. It has been found that both Protestants and atheists/
agnostics perceive to some degree that a (conservative) re-Catholicizing of society via the European Union is posing a threat to ‘their’ achievements, such as gender equality, abortion, gay marriage, soft drugs, euthanasia, and secularism (Schlesinger and Foret, 2006; Vollard, 2006). Thus, in future the content of the religious issues should be scrutinized more in depth, also regarding non-religious people.

The aforementioned limitations should be overcome by future studies. Still, the findings of this analysis have shown that indeed an increasingly religious dimension in media coverage about the EU triggers a stronger linkage between religious and political considerations and thus influences attitudes towards the EU. At a time where the accession of Turkey to the EU is looming and identification with European integration is decreasing, the religious dimension should be considered in studies explaining the development of public attitudes towards the EU and feelings of European identity. Furthermore, this study has suggested the importance of values and how they can be triggered by the media and thereby alter the perceptions of political developments. Thus, the findings of this study have shed new light on media priming and research on public attitudes towards European integration.

Bionotes

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Notes

1. The Catholic and the Orthodox Church, as the two heirs of the (Western and Eastern) Roman Empire shared a deep distrust towards the evolving nation state
in the 15th century. Since then, Catholic culture has led believers to accept the spiritual authority of the pope in Rome beyond the regional and national worldly principalities. The Orthodox Church has increasingly been nationalized in the Slavian movements in the former outskirts of the Roman territory on the Balkans after having been expelled by the Islamic movement out of the Northern African and Turkish territories from the seventh to the tenth century. Again, Protestantism could not have evolved without the protection of mainly regional, feudal (later national) authorities, opposing the papal superiority (e.g., Ranke, 1957; Treitschke, 1897).

2. Accordingly, Deutsch et al. (1957) conclude that Catholics found the new community comfortable and contributed to a developing ‘we-feeling’ that added “an emotional bond to a largely nuts-and-bolts enterprise”.

3. But also Catholic belief has shown to be a reason to oppose EU policies; for example, during the recent referendum of the Catholic Irish on the Lisbon treaty, the sceptics argued that the treaty was posing a threat to the Irish laws on abortion.

4. Religion is defined as a coherent system of beliefs, values, and behavior that is related to transcendent reality and unites those who adhere to a community (Dobbelaere, 1981, p. 93). Religiosity, on the other hand, “can be defined as the individual’s subjective perception of a transcendent, extranatural reality”, whereas religious involvement refers to the “emotional attachment of the individual to the values, beliefs, and behaviour of a religion as a social reference group” (Hagenvi, 2002, p. 760), a process that takes place in a largely institutionalized surrounding. According to Wald and Smith (1993, pp. 32–37), the relationship between the religious belief system and politics is of a cognitive nature that helps the believer to interpret and evaluate political affairs. This religious belief system is mainly influenced by officials from the churches.

5. The Evangelists’ tradition of reading the bible from an eschatological point of view leads some of them to link a warning of an evolving vicious empire in the revelation part to the European Union. While this is only of importance for fundamentalist Evangelicals, Evangelical values seem to be generally related to a tendency to distrust state entities, which also affects opinions towards the EU.

6. It was found that both Protestants and atheists/agnostics perceive to some degree that a (conservative) re-Catholicizing of society via the European Union is posing a threat to ‘their’ achievements, such as gender equality, abortion, gay marriage, soft drugs, euthanasia, and secularism. On the discussion in the Netherlands, see Krouwel (2007); Volland (2006). On the discussions between secularists and Christians surrounding an introduction of God into the EU legal framework, see Schlesinger and Foret (2006).

7. For an overview and analytical distinction of empirical studies on political effects considering religion as culture and religion as ideology, see Rhys (1996).

8. Furthermore, priming effects can even occur when there is no direct link between the issue and the evaluation’s subject in the news item (Valentino 1999; Valentino et al. 2002). Thus, for example, if religion has generally become a more salient issue, people may evaluate any news item dealing with the EU and its policies — independent of whether a link to a religious issue is made in the news item — from a religious perspective.

9. We have also tested prominent moderators in the literature: the interactions of news exposure with political knowledge and trust in media but they did not yield significant results.

10. Church attendance has been decreasing in both countries since the 1960s. In the German parliament, two parties (Christian Democratic Union and Christian So-
cial Union), and in the Dutch parliament, three political parties (Christian Democratic Appeal, the Christian Union, and Political Reformed Party) base their policies on Christian belief. Both countries have been amongst the founding members of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951. Germany and the Netherlands are among the most important net payers of the EU. In the Eurobarometer, 61% of Germans perceived the membership in the European Union to be a good thing, whereas 78.6% of the Dutch thought so (Eurobarometer 63.4).


12. Newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Average circulation per day</th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1997–2007 (WamS)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: German newspapers: IVW – Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern e.V.  
Source: Dutch newspapers: PCM Media and the website of De Telegraaf.

13. Articles dealing with the EU were found in the German newspapers by searching for the words: EU (AND NOT DÜSSELDORF) OR EG OR (Europäische Union) OR (Europäische Gemeinschaft). In the Dutch newspapers the following search terms were used: EU OR EG OR (Europese Unie) OR (Europese Gemeenschap).

14. Articles containing EU, although not necessarily having a focus on the EU but merely contain the reference, are called “EU coverage” in this paper.

15. Although it would have been favorable to include an intensity index into the analyses of the amount of coverage (e.g., Watt, Mazza, and Snyder, 1993), this was not done because necessary information concerning the page numbers on which the articles appeared were missing for some newspapers in Germany.

16. The significant results ascertained are also found when treating EU membership and EU benefit separately.

17. Other religious denominations are left out; on the one hand, because they have not been asked in 1998, on the other hand, the Eurobarometer survey, for example, concerning the Muslim population in Germany and the Netherlands, seems hardly reliable.

18. Alongside this finding, the more momentary political evaluation of the incumbent government and its policies has an impact on the evaluation of the EU (e.g., Ray, 2003; Van der Brug, Van Eijk et al., 2007).

19. These, at first sight contradictory, findings are illuminated by De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2005, p. 65): While a sense of national identity is correlated with hostility towards other cultures/immigration, it cannot be equated with it. The former can under certain circumstances even lead to support for the European integration; the latter is far stronger related to Euroskepticism since its bases are psychological traits of the individual, for example, insecurity.
References


**Appendix**

**Variables**

**Control variables**

**Sex**: 0 = female, 1 = male.

**Age**: in years.

**Years of education**: was considered in the standard Eurobarometer recoded version ranging from 1 (about primary school), to 4 (about master or equivalent degree).

**Catholic**: 1 = Catholic, 0 = not Catholic (Germany, 1998: $M = .39$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = .27$; Germany, 2005: $M = .35$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = .29$).

**Protestant**: 1 = Protestant, 0 = not Protestant (Germany, 1998: $M = .37$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = .11$; Germany, 2005: $M = .32$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = .21$).

**Economic outlook of the development of the country**: ranging from 1 (worse), to 3 (better) (Germany, 1998: $M = 1.96$, $SD = .77$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = 1.73$, $SD = .65$; Germany, 2005: $M = 1.70$, $SD = .75$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = 1.94$, $SD = .73$).

**European knowledge scale**: ranging from 1 (know nothing at all) to 10 (know a great deal) (Germany, 1998: $M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.78$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.82$; Germany, 2005: $M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.93$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.63$).

**Political interest**: measured by frequency of political discussion as a proxy, coded from 1 (never), to 3 (frequently) (Germany, 1998: $M = 1.94$, $SD = .55$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = 1.89$, $SD = .55$; Germany, 2005: $M = 2.15$, $SD = .59$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = 2.07$, $SD = .57$).
Key variables

News exposure: (additive) coded from 1 (never read newspapers, watch television news, listen to radio news) to 12 (read newspapers, watch television news, listen to radio news every day) (Germany, 1998: $M = 9.84, SD = 2.29$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = 9.75, SD = 2.45$; Germany, 2005: $M = 9.66, SD = 2.53$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = 9.72, SD = 2.28$).

Church attendance: coded from 1 (never go to church) to 6 (go to church several times a week) (Germany, 1998: $M = 2.26, SD = 1.11$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = 2.17, SD = 1.28$; Germany, 2005: $M = 2.20, SD = 1.11$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = 2.07, SD = 1.22$).

Left-right self-placement: coded from 1 (left-wing) to 10 (right-wing) (Germany, 1998: $M = 5.19, SD = 1.96$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = 5.23, SD = 1.74$; Germany, 2005: $M = 4.95, SD = 1.85$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = 5.15, SD = 1.87$).

Support for the EU: (additive) coded from 2 (country has not benefited and membership is a bad thing) to 6 (country has benefit a lot and membership is a good thing) (Germany, 1998: $M = 4.33, SD = 1.48$; the Netherlands, 1998: $M = 5.07, SD = 1.28$; Germany, 2005: $M = 4.48, SD = 1.56$; the Netherlands, 2005: $M = 5.04, SD = 1.38$).