Analysis

Chapter 18

Mobilizing Religious Heritage in Politics: Inclusivity in a Pluralistic Society

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While concepts like citizenship, justice, participation, and sovereignty are core terms of political philosophy, the same cannot be said for cultural and religious heritage. The political significance of cultural and religious heritage, however, has become increasingly important both in politics and in scholarly debates about the public presence of religion in liberal democracies. This contribution focuses on political work that is done by religious heritage, and on ethical dimensions of controversies about religious heritage in the context of democracies that are characterized by religious diversity and committed to political equality. Following a discussion of the concept of religious heritage, the article sketches two controversies in which Christian holidays and the symbol of the cross were mobilized as religious heritage for political purposes. I use these controversies to analyze possible implications and effects of politics of religious heritage for members of both majority and minority religious communities. In the concluding section, I propose a direction for scholarship on inclusive politics of religious heritage that takes seriously the transformation and pluralization of the religious landscape in countries like Germany, on which I focus in this contribution, since the 1950s.

Religious Heritage

Concepts like cultural or religious heritage are difficult to define, since they need to be sufficiently inclusive to capture the heterogeneity of objects and practices one associates with them (see Matthes 2018). The Faro Convention[1] of the Council of Europe deals with this challenge by defining cultural heritage in broad terms as "a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions" (Council of Europe 2005, Article 2a). Related to that, the Convention describes a "heritage community" as consisting "of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations" (Council of Europe 2005, Article 2b). Consequently, I suggest understanding religious heritage as those components of cultural heritage that also

belong to, originate in, and derive at least part of their meaning from particular religious traditions (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, or Islam) and/or that currently are or were in the past used for religious purposes such as communal worship. This applies, for instance, to cathedrals like the Notre Dame de Paris, to practices like the singing of Christmas carols, or to historical events like the Reformation. In many cases, the status of such religious heritage is formally recognized by official authorities and state institutions, for example, provinces, the government, or heritage agencies.

Heritage making selects and defines certain objects or events from the past as particularly significant in the present and for the future of a collective, the heritage community. By doing so, religious heritage objects are not only remembered and preserved but also a specific secular value is conferred onto them that is important for the collective identity and self-understanding of a group (see Meyer, this volume). The composite nature[2] of heritage—involving reference to something in the past, while also propelling it into the future as especially valuable (Seglow 2019: 13)—is evident in monuments and commemorations that are erected and organized with the stated aim to deliberately mark the importance of something or somebody of the past. Think of national holidays like the 4th of July in the United States that commemorates the passage of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 or monuments like the Luther Monument in Worms that invokes not only the historical event of Luther's defense of his writings at the Diet of Worms in 1521 but also the continuing importance of Martin Luther and the Reformation for Europe and Germany in particular. In public debates, however, the status of heritage is not limited to those things that are deliberately created to commemorate past events in the present and mark their significance for the future (as in the case of public monuments) or that are officially declared as heritage objects by state authorities (e.g., Notre Dame de Paris). Rather, it is sometimes also ascribed to and claimed for informal and relatively elusive entities like values, traditions, or culture at large that are described, for instance, as Christian heritage or Judeo-Christian tradition of a country or region. Such informal and elusive forms of religious heritage deserve particular attention because they are often mobilized for political purposes, which can raise issues related to democratic ideals of equality. To illustrate this, the following section briefly describes two controversies from Bavaria, a federal state in the south of Germany.

Holidays and Crosses: Controversies about Religious Heritage in Bavaria

The first case concerns a controversy in 2017 that was sparked by the then Federal Minister of the Interior Thomas de Maizière, who stated at a campaign event that one could think about introducing a local public Islamic holiday (see FAZ 2017), in regions where many Muslims live.[3] He compared this to All Saint's Day, which is a public holiday only in regions with a largely Catholic population. De Maizière's statement was received very positively by the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland) whose chairman Aiman Mazyek pointed out that such a holiday could grant "Muslims a sense of being taken into account at school and in the workplace" (Wagener 2017). Some representatives of Christian churches also supported an introduction of an Islamic public holiday. The spokesperson of the Central Committee of German Catholics Thomas Sternberg argued that Christian public holidays like Easter and Christmas expressed that German society is connected with Christian tradition. This cultural connection would not be threatened by the introduction of an Islamic holiday, according

to Sternberg, but rightly and publicly "take note of the Islamic holiday culture" (ZEIT online 2017). Conservative politicians of Thomas de Maizière's own party Christian Democratic Union (CDU), however, swiftly rejected the idea of introducing an Islamic holiday even on the regional level. The Christian Social Union (CSU)—the Bavarian counterpart of the CDU—as well as the Free Voters of Bavaria (Freie Wähler [FW]), another conservative party, initiated a formal intervention when both parties submitted to Bavarian State Parliament urgent motions to pre-emptively disallow the introduction of an Islamic public holiday in Bavaria. Clearly, the CSU and the FW in Bavarian State Parliament assumed that an Islamic public holiday was incompatible with the existing holiday culture in Bavaria and would undermine what they described as "the Judeo-Christian values and traditions" (BayLTDrucks 17/18718), "the Christian imprint of Germany and Bavaria," and "Christian-occidental heritage" (BayLTDrucks 17/18705).

The second case concerns a decision of the Bavarian government in 2018 to decree that all government offices prominently display a cross in their entrance halls. This happened only six months before the Bavarian state election, in which the populist far-right political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) was gaining political momentum, rallying against migrants and what they described as a threat of an "Islamization of Germany." As in the previous case, a Christian form—here the cross—was described as "an expression of the historical and cultural imprint of Bavaria," as the text of the so-called Bavarian Cross Decree puts it (Langner-Pitschmann 2019: 310). Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder (CSU) defended the decree against the accusation that it would violate constitutional rules about the religious neutrality of the state by declaring that the cross was not a religious sign, but a symbol of "Bavarian identity" (Knight 2018). Representatives of the Christian churches, however, expressed different opinions. The head of the German Bishop's Conference Cardinal Reinhard Marx criticized Söder for "expropriating the cross in the name of the state" (DW 2018), and Protestant Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm emphasized that the cross had first and foremost a religious meaning, which should not be used to exclude people by mobilizing it as regional heritage (Bedford-Strohm 2018). Moreover, and crucial to an analysis of ethical dimensions of politics of religious heritage, Jewish historian Michael Brenner pointed out that for Jews, the crucifix has been a symbol that stood for many centuries of intolerance, persecution, and Christian missionary zeal, and that it is effectively exclusionary even today, since it is "solely the symbol of Christianity" (Brenner 2018: 45). Jews, Muslims, and atheists cannot relate positively to the crucifix, according to Brenner. Rather, "it makes them outsiders. Perhaps they belong a little, but not really" (45).

So what do these controversies tell us about the political work that is done by religious heritage in pluralistic societies? In the following, I want to distinguish two directions into which religious heritage and controversies about it can influence political processes: one, in which religious heritage functions (for members of the majority) as a component of collective identity and contributes to social cohesion, and another, where it contributes (for members of religious minorities) to alienation from society and processes of othering and informal exclusion.

Religious Heritage as Marker of Collective Identity or National Culture

From the perspective of the cultural majority in a society, cultural, and religious heritage can function as a marker of national (or regional) identity and culture. Such collective identities, Aleida Assmann points out, are important for the construction of groups, nations, and states and

are usually "based on chosen key events, significant places, and cultural artifacts and practices that offer the group … both a sense of their uniqueness and a historical orientation" (Assmann 2020: 210). Heritage objects are particularly important, because they are construed as things from the past that matter for how the respective heritage community imagines its own future. We construct and come to know a nation's meaning—its culture, values, and ideals of belonging—"partly *through* the objects and artefacts which have been made to stand for and symbolise its essential values" (Hall 1999: 5, emphasis in original). Because of its selective character (only certain things are defined as heritage), heritage production authorizes only *particular* histories as being especially significant to the collective identity of a group or nation.

Such motives are present in the Bavarian controversies explored above. In both cases, conservative politicians described Christian symbols as heritage, declaring them worthy of preservation and normative for the future development of Bavaria. Consequently, the symbol of the cross and the holiday culture that includes Christian, but not Islamic holidays are construed as essential parts of the collective identity of Bavaria and Bavarian people, respectively. The fact that both controversies concern *religious* forms and that the state clearly privileges Christianity in both cases raises questions about state neutrality with respect to religion and political equality in contexts of religious diversity. To deal with such issues, heritagization of religion is used as a strategy that transforms religion in a traditional sense into a "secular sacred" (Balkenhol, van den Hemel, and Stengs 2020), while at the same time maintaining a close relationship between (stated) collective identity and traditional majoritarian religion as heritage. However, the contributions by representatives of Christian churches to the controversies in Bavaria described above and Michael Brenner's response to the Bavarian cross decree indicate that the political work of construing these things as heritage does not erase their potentially divisive connotations. Consequently, it is not a matter of course that a heritagization of majority religious forms contributes to a shared and inclusive collective identity. This brings me to the second direction of religious heritage's influence on political processes.

Religious Heritage Fostering Alienation from Society and Othering of Religious Minorities

While the previous section concerned politics of religious heritage with respect to members of the cultural majority in a society, this section addresses the effects that heritagization of majority religion can have for members of minorities. In the context of religiously pluralistic societies, two potential problems can be distinguished: alienation on the one hand and othering on the other.[4]

People can be alienated from the state and society, respectively, if they feel unable to identify with them or if they feel excluded from the polity. The presence of religious heritage that is authorized as such by the state or state institutions can contribute to such alienation if it only includes the religious forms (e.g., holidays, symbols, or literature) of one particular religion and denies the forms of other (usually minority) religions. If that is the case, members of minority religions lack opportunities to see themselves with their religious traditions as fully included in the "we" of the collective identity; "what is worth preserving does not belong to them and does not originate with them" (Beaman 2020: 19).

Two objections have been made to the claims of alienation due to exclusion from authorized religious heritage. One objection points out that the sense of alienation is strongly dependent on subjective experiences and sensibilities of people who feel alienated and does not say much about whether the thing that causes one to feel alienated (here: religious heritage) is morally or politically problematic (see Laborde 2017: 135). Another objection can be derived from Aleida Assmann's observation concerning the formative role of cultural memory for collective identities in a democracy. Here, Assmann argues, official references to and commemorations of past events—that characterize religious heritage as well—can only "create possibilities for identification and structures of participation that enable individuals as well as collectives to make the past their own" (Assmann 2020: 211); people are not obliged to relate to heritage objects in an affirmative or supportive manner. Accordingly, members of religious minorities could use other components of collective identity to develop a sense of belonging. With respect to the controversies about religious heritage in Bavaria, for instance, people who do not identify with the cross or with Christian holidays could use other components of "Bavarian culture" to build a positive relation to their society, for instance, cuisine, landscape, or language.

These arguments, however, can only solve part of the problem because relations like belonging to a society can only be stable if the respective person is also recognized by others as a full and equal member of society. The politics of religious heritage can impede this process if they contribute to processes of othering by publicly construing minority religions as not being part of, or even at odds with national (in the cases above: Bavarian) culture. In this context, the concept of "religious heritage assemblage" that was coined by Marian Burchardt is especially useful, since it describes not only particular heritage objects (cathedrals, the cross, holidays etc.), but "the totality of heterogeneous discourses, sites, and practices in which claims to religion as a national culture are articulated, authorized and institutionalized" (Burchardt 2020: 3). An analysis of the controversies described above utilizing the religious heritage assemblage framework reveals that influential contributors like Bavarian prime minister Söder and members of Bavarian State Parliament connected the discussion of heritage to the fierce public discussions about people migrating to Germany from predominantly Muslim countries like Syria or Afghanistan. In such a political climate, authorizing the symbol of the cross as heritage and ordering its public display in government offices while rejecting the idea of a public Islamic holiday with reference to a "Christian-occidental heritage" contributes to construing Islam as somehow "not really" part of the Bavarian "we."

Taking stock of the considerations about politics of religious heritage, one can describe religious heritage as a potentially ambivalent phenomenon, especially in religiously pluralistic societies. On the one hand, it can function as a medium for a collective identity and foster bonding ties between people who may not even know each other, but who still feel connected in an imagined community (Anderson 2016). On the other hand, there is a danger that such bonding primarily connects those people who belong to the cultural and religious majority. In this case, religious heritage contributes to marking boundaries between the imagined community and those who are construed as "other" and somehow "foreign." The resultant alienation caused among members of minority religions can indirectly form an obstacle to realizing political equality and social inclusion. In the following section, I want to sketch some thoughts about an inclusive politics of religious heritage for pluralistic democracies.

Toward Inclusive Politics of Religious Heritage

As a remedy for the possible challenges raised by religious heritage to inclusive democracies in general and political equality in particular, I want to suggest a reconceptualization of the understanding of heritage that guides politics of religious heritage-making in pluralistic societies. At the beginning of this article, I introduced a definition of the Faro Convention that characterizes heritage as resources inherited from the past that people identify as a reflection of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, and traditions. Some of the most pressing political issues of religious heritage result from a "mismatch" between the heritagized past of a society that is construed as largely homogeneous and dominated by one religion, and a religious heterogeneity in the present situation. To overcome this predicament, an inclusive politics of religious heritage, so I suggest, should turn its gaze not only to the past and historical narratives of grandeur but also incorporate more recent changes in society. What does that mean?

To remove impediments to inclusion and political equality, politics of religious heritage should also enable members of religious minorities to actively contribute to religious heritage so as to reflect not merely constellations of some time in the past but also in the present or even the foreseeable future. This invites not only a more inclusive retelling of history, but at times a conceptual disentangling of the notion of "heritage" from the past. Though this might appear a surprising proposal, Irene Stengs's anthropological scholarship on Dutch institutions collecting relics from national tragedy provides conceptual tools that can be useful here. Stengs introduces the notion of "anticipatory heritage" to describe "the ways that societies seek to construct the future memory of their time" (Stengs 2018: 267). They do so in the present, by identifying things that are especially important to current members in society and taking seriously how such things are invested with meaning and emotional power. Recalibrations of the concept of heritage that include notions like anticipatory heritage could guide the politics of religious heritage in its efforts to take seriously the significant but relatively recent transformations of the religious landscape in societies like Germany and regions like Bavaria.

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Notes

1 The term Faro Convention is used as a shorthand for the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, which was adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on October 13, 2005. The Convention entered into force in 2011.

2 Chong-Ming Lim describes commemorations as "composite" in the sense that "they are remembrances of certain people or events, accompanied by the expression of some evaluative view (or views)" (Lim 2020: 187). Many forms of heritage share these characteristics and one could even argue that heritage always has commemorative dimensions, though they may often remain implicit.

3 This section follows, partly verbatim, Baumgartner 2022.

4 The considerations presented in the following section are informed by Modood and Thompson 2021; Lægaard 2017, and Laborde and Lægaard 2020. These authors discuss "symbolic religious establishment," with the exception of Laborde and Lægaard 2020, however, the phenomenon of culturalization and heritagization of religion is rarely addressed in these contributions.

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