



**Book review: What is Christian Democracy?
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.**

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REVIEW BY FLORENCE HAEGEL, SCIENCES PO PARIS

Four years after the publication of his first book on *Relativism and Religion*,¹ Carlo Invernizzi Accetti continues to reflect on the relationship between religion and politics from a different angle. He has shifted his focus to Christian Democracy, a political family that is somewhat neglected in political science. It is mainly as a political theorist that he is interested in this current of thought, which might be considered outdated in relation to more debated political notions such as ‘populism’ and ‘neo-liberalism.’ But one could say that Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, in true fashion, considers Christian Democracy worth analyzing as a constellation of “political concepts”—as Michael Freeden² put it—that is full of potential.

His book is divided into two parts. The first presents core arguments showing that Christian Democracy is an ideology in the full sense of the term, that is, a coherent and distinctive system based on six key concepts: anti-materialism, personalism, popularism, subsidiarity, social capitalism, and Christian inspiration. He sheds light on the historical and intellectual founding principles of Christian Democracy, and on how they are linked and distinct from other closed concepts originating from other ideological constellations. This very analytical and clear section is highly convincing if one accepts that the objective is to develop a conceptual map rather than a precise and therefore more sinuous and complex history of these concepts’ genesis. In fact, the interest in undertaking this ambitious conceptual clarification is fleshed out in Chapter 8, which shows the persistence of key Christian democratic concepts in EU institutions.

In the second part, Invernizzi Accetti takes off his political theoretician’s hat—albeit only partially—and addresses not only the history of Christian democracy but also its future. I say “only partially” because only a theorist would risk tackling such a normative “question of the persistent value of Christian Democracy ideology,” assuming that “it is not necessarily in the process of disappearing as a partisan phenomenon, and also that it remains a useful category to describe distinctive features of both the EU and USA” (317).

As a French political scientist working on political parties in a European comparative perspective, with a particular focus on the right side of the spectrum, I would like to focus on the discussion in the second part of the book. I am aware that my reading of his work resurfaces classic debates between, on the one hand, historians and empiricist political scientists, who are more attentive to the complexity of historical and social processes, and, on the other hand, political theoreticians who embrace the clarity of conceptual systems.

Chapter 8 focuses on the history of Christian Democracy in continental Europe, and more precisely draws particular attention to Catholicism (at the expense of Protestantism in the multi-faith country such as Germany) in Italy, Germany, and France. Inevitably, it is a little frustrating, because it is less rooted in socio-historical analysis than would be expected. For instance, comparison between the three cases is not placed at the heart of the chapter’s argument. While justifying his case selection, Invernizzi Accetti underscores the French paradox that results from the fact that “while the country has had a longstanding and influential social and especially *intellectual* tradition of Christian Democracy, the latter’s political translation has always lagged behind those of other continental European countries” (195), but the absence of well-organized and established Christian Democratic parties in France is not subsequently frontally addressed. In this respect, beginning the history after World War II is too late, at least for France, since the key developments played out in the nineteenth century. It could even be suggested that the *Mouvement Républicain Populaire’s* (MRP) ephemeral success in 1945 success is an exception, since it was primarily attributable to the burnished reputation of Christian Democrats as a result of their involvement in the French Resistance.

¹ Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, *Relativism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

² Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory, A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

As I argued in a book on French rightwing parties,³ the Christian Democratic movement's failure to structure the French right as it had done in other European countries is a real puzzle which might shed light on contemporary challenges such as the ones Invernizzi Accetti addresses in the last chapter of his book. It is intriguing because, as Pierre Letamendia⁴ highlighted and Invernizzi Accetti quotes, the Christian Democratic movement's doctrine is of French origin. What is more, Catholic circles have indeed constituted the biosphere of the French partisan right. French historians have pointed to the many attempts to politically structure French Catholicism. Some of them purposefully remained at the margins of the political and electoral system, alongside the Catholic youth movement and social work organizations; others sought to influence elections without participating in them⁵; finally, some organizations did enter the electoral fray in response to the call of Pope Leo XIII in 1892 for a Rally to the Republic of French Catholics. But these organizations never succeeded in mobilizing the bulk of Catholic voters.

The most classical explanation for this failure lies in the rejection of the Republican regime by the Church and its followers after the French Revolution. Institutional issues so deeply divided Catholic circles that it slowed and weakened their partisan consolidation. If one shares Carlo Invernizzi Accetti's functionalist definition of Christian Democratic ideology as one aiming to reconcile "Christianity (and in particular Catholicism) with modern democracy" (20), some French Catholics' reluctance to support the Republic explains why Christian Democracy was marginalized, or marginalized itself. A complementary explanation emphasizes socioeconomic divisions and resistance of French Catholics to capitalism, leading them to reject a liberal bourgeoisie that could have lent them support, as was the case in Germany⁶. It points to the weight of intransigence in a Catholic movement that was built around hostility towards the French Revolution and the political, economic, and religious liberalisms that it established. Far from being marginal, this intransigent current has propagated in both Catholic and Christian Democratic circles in France.

This Catholic reservation about the socioeconomic and political Republican order did not prevent clergy from politically intervening by seeking to influence and control the French Catholic vote: "electoral clericalism", as Yves Déloye⁷ put it, did indeed exist in France, but it did not lead to partisan clericalism. One explanation lies in the fact that the French and Vatican Catholic hierarchies sought to exercise the most direct control possible over the French Catholic vote, and prevented any collective attempt to organize Catholic influence within the political sphere, confining lay Catholics to the care sector.

By making this point on the French case, I aim to more broadly discuss how Invernizzi Accetti grasps the socio-historical phenomenon of Christian Democracy and draw some consequences on contemporary issues. First, it shows that institutional configuration matters a lot in explaining the fate of Christian Democracy in different countries. The presence of two strong and rival institutions, the State and the Church, left no room for the structuring of a Christian democratic party in France whereas the more open situation in Germany and Italy allowed it.

Further, by showing that Christian Democracy is far from having established a monopolistic or even a dominant position among French Catholics, the French case attests to a competitive space in which Catholic conservatism has played a central

³ Florence Haegel, *Les droites en fusion* (Paris : Presses de Sciences Po, 2007).

⁴ Pierre Letamendia, *Le Mouvement Républicain Populaire - Le MRP. L'histoire d'un grand parti français*, Paris: Beauchesne, 1997.

⁵ *La Fédération Nationale Catholique*, which was created in 1924, acted like a true interest group.

⁶ François-Georges Dreyfus, *Histoire de la démocratie chrétienne en France : De Chateaubriand à Raymond Barre* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, Paris, 1988).

⁷ Yves Déloye, *Les voix de Dieu : pour une autre histoire du suffrage électoral : le clergé catholique français et le vote, XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris : Fayard, collection « L'espace du politique », 2006).

role and continues to do so. This historical reminder is a key element in the discussion about the current role of Christian Democracy in counteracting far-right populism. In many European countries, the practice of Catholicism used to be an antidote of sorts to the far-right vote. This is no longer the case, and Invernizzi Accetti is right when he argues that a new battlefield is forming around the use of religion, as far-right populism attempts to capture religious references.⁸ In Western as well as in Eastern Europe, a fierce competition is taking place to attract the shrinking Christian electorate that opposes the radical populist right, catholic conservatism and Christian democracy, and the latter has already lost ground although one might want to consider the potential of its ideology.

⁸ Such as Matteo Salvini, Deputy Prime Minister of Italy from 1 June 2018 to 5 September 2019.