Challenges to Church-State Relations in Contemporary Europe: Introduction

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The enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and 2007 redesigned the continent’s borders. By bringing together territories which were previously separated by ideological and religious differences, Europe acquired a new geographical shape. However, despite apparent unity under the umbrella of supranational institutions, Europe remains fragmented by various models of church-state relations. These relations have deep historical roots and are moulded on the national differences of religious and political realms.

European states can be grouped into three models (systems) of church-state relations: the state church model, the cooperationist (or hybrid) model and the secular (or separation) model.1 These models are fluid, evolving according to the trajectories of political regimes and religious communities. The state church model is represented by those countries in which a religious confession is predominant and perceived as a ‘national’ or ‘established’ church. Denmark, England, Romania, and Malta are examples of this model. The cooperationist model is characterised by formal separation between church and state; churches have their legal

status regulated by agreements with the state, mainly concordats. Most of the predominantly Catholic countries belong to this model, such as Italy, Austria, and Poland, but also major Protestant countries, such as Germany and the Baltic states. The secular model indicates that no religion is favoured by the state and that there is no established church. The most representative example is that of France.

Despite processes of secularisation and modernisation which have characterised post-war Europe, religious communities are now becoming more actively involved in the European political arena. Their influence extends from local engagement in social activities, such as education and health systems, to the reshaping of national identities and more broadly, to the emergence of a European identity. Church-state relations form the basis of contact between religious and political actors at both national and supranational level. They are at the very core of overcoming social differences and influencing the architectural evolution of the European Union.

The papers in this special issue examine the main challenges to these models of church-state relations. Both church and state react to issues which have direct consequences for their practice and structure. An analysis of contemporary church-state relations reveals that challenges do not simply come from legal and political fields but through the re-assessment of the wider place of religion in Europe. Secularisation, modernism, Islam, the concept of the ‘other,’ and identity are factors with direct impact on shaping these relations. They are bringing into discussion issues which overpass the hic et nunc of European social reality. The following papers provide a re-assessment of church-state relations and use an interdisciplinary approach, from the views of political science, history, sociology, philosophy, and law, to offer a fuller analysis of the role of religion in the political and social construction of Europe.

In her paper, Sabrina Riedel examines religious communities as part of the wider relationship between religion and politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She sets out the main models of church-state relations in the context of the democratisation process, taking into account the experiences of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes of the last century. She analyses these models with regard to the integration of Muslim communities in European societies, which, in her opinion, poses one of the most significant challenges to church-state relations. She suggests that understanding the nature and place of religious freedom could