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The Religious Roots of Contemporary European Identity

**Edited by Lucia Faltin and Melanie J. Wright, London,
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What is Europe and who are the Europeans? This question has raised many answers and arguments, but it still remains unresolved. This book comes as a fresh approach to this on-going debate on the European identity, which seems to be moving across discourses and themes. The question of identity and Europeanism becomes more relevant in the light of European integration. Whom to include and whom to exclude, and how to deal with the increasing diversity with inclusion of new countries in the European Union, has raised renewed debates related to the identity. The intellectual and political conducts of the countries which have come under the European Union has become much wide and varied, and thus, has expanded the range of the discourses on the subject of identity.

The quest for building a European community identity is very new as seen through the historical perspective and lacks the relevant examples which can be drawn from the past for this purpose. A wide variety of literature have been published on the subject of identity and by the virtue of its number, one can emphasis on the existence of European identity. Previous literatures on the subject of identity have brought out the varied role played by from politics to football on the formation of European individuality.

In the above mentioned context, this book attempts to bring in the new dimension on the debate of identity by exploring the issue through the context of religion. It has tried to analyse the relation between the

contemporary European identity and religious roots of the people on the European continent. This collection of essays has tried to put religion as the focus for evaluating the question of European identity, by engaging together the scholars from the different parts of Europe, who are political scientists, historians, theologians, sociologists and philosophers, in a dialogue on the subject of religion and identity. This has brought about the multi-disciplinary approach to the theme. The editors of the book teach at the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations in Cambridge, have brought together the scholars from the different parts of Europe with a multiplicity of perspectives on the subject, over diverse historical periods.

This work has added upon the continuing debates on the secularisation of Europe, along with the identity creation in the religious context. It has addressed questions both on anti-Semitism and as well as more contemporary questions like the part played by Islam in shaping the notions of identity in the minds of the people, and has included the voices from all sides of the Europe. However, the emphasis in the book is upon issues dealing with the Christian and Jewish identity, which is vital, but in process while not entirely absent has side-lined the Muslim identity. This is an important issue as the Muslim identity too, lies in the heart of the European identity, especially when it comes to discussing religion in Europe.

However, the book though comprehensively edited, may not be regarded as entirely illustrative of the topic, as the essays tries to revolve around the work, academic or otherwise, done by the writers, which have linked but not doesn't always have direct associations with the theme. So in this regard, it may be said that the works are not done exclusively in accordance or around the theme. The line of thought that emerges from the most of essays is more theological rather than exploring the question of relationship between theology and identity. At the same time, social identity concerns have also appeared in some essays, which though useful, move away from the topic of religion and identity. Works dealing with Holocaust memories falls in this category, as memories drawn from trauma are more sociological in nature and not religious.

The recurring emphasis on the events, issues and places in the essays may provide a useful resource material for the academics. This book may be especially suitable for the scholars with an interest in history, theology, political-sociological areas and European cultural history. At the same time, the structure of the book could have been clearer, with the addition of

more subcategories to the index, as the topics and concerns of the essays are not exactly complementing. So with the help of subcategories, the subjects of the different works could have been categorised accordingly.

Nonetheless, the diversity of issues dealt in the essays makes this book an informative read. The essays have revolved around the subject of the Church and the non-Catholic cults, Polish-Jewish Relations, Russian Orthodoxy, approaches to identity construction, relevance of the religious roots for the contemporary Europe, with focus on the Pope Benedict XVI and the issue of developing the religion and secularism.

Along with these above subject matters, the book also includes an essay which has tried to bring about the analysis of a movie in relation to theme of the book. Melanie Wright has critically examined the Udayan Prasad's 1997 film *My Son the Fanatic* and the conceptions of religious roots. Her essay suggests,

whether they are pressed into the service of nationalism and ethnic division, or of multiculturalism, conceptualisations of identity that depend on the invocation of religious 'roots' simply will not do.
(p.38)

Another stream of essays in the book deals with the questions related to history, identity and memory, in the Polish context. Slawomir Kapralski has analysed the post-communist Polish identity in context of the Holocaust memory, where he argues that for the people "a decade of memory work has so far failed to achieve an acceptance of the reality of Polish-Jewish relations" (p.12). Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs concentrates on the Holocaust education as the device for communal memory formation, by basing this study on the historical reconstruction of the memories of the young Poles. She has shown some positive results achieved by the process, but the success of this evolving cohesive communal memory remains unproved. Zdzisław Mach on the other hand focuses on the Roman Catholic Church as an instrument of the social and cultural alterations in the Poland, in the context of identity formation, and has claimed that it has failed in its adaption to the democracies and European integration.

Matters concerning to different approaches to identity creation and for dealing with religious diversity have also been dealt in this book. Arguments against the top down approach of identity formation have come out in the work of Andrew Brown, where he has shown how the

local traditions can be formed as the basis for providing theology which in turn may prove to be imperative in the transnational identity formation of the smaller communities. Alongside Penny Mittler dwells on the issue of multiculturalism, along with the tolerance in diversified cultures, inquiring whether the present creations of liberalism will prove to be a feasible solution to the dynamic societies of the Europe, along with their ever evolving identities.

Ever since the measures for the formation of an afresh Europe, based on the ideas of the economic and political cooperation, have emerged, the religious issues have taken a back stage, with religion turning into a personal and private spheres of the life and making the public debates devoid of any religious ideology. This relegation has its roots into the experience of the fanatic rhetoric of the Nazism and Fascism. But with the inclusion of so many new member states, some lacking the kind of secular cultures nurtured in parts of Western Europe, and emergence of questions as to whether Turkey, being an Islamic state, be invited to join the EU, has provided a platform for the religious issues to be raised and discussed in the public domain. In this context, the current book has contributed towards recognising the variety of religious cultures and ideologies on the continent, be it secular or otherwise.

The book has attempted to transform the predominant view of religious relations and identities being seen as the areas which needs to be disregarded, in the pursuit of unity and integration. Instead, it has endeavoured to provide religious relations in a positive light -- bringing about common values and beliefs to abridge the cultural diversity.