
Reviewed by Piers Ludlow, London School of Economics and Political Science

Lucian Leustean’s article represents a skilful investigation into an almost entirely unknown side of the early history of European integration. Thanks to research that involved the slightly improbable archival pairing of the European Commission (EC) historical archives in Brussels, and the archiepiscopal archives of Brussels-Mechelen, combined with a good number of interviews, Leustean demonstrates how the Catholic Church authorities responded to the start of the integration process, how they sought to inform themselves about what was going on, and the ways in which they tried to engage with both the institutions of the new European Communities and with the staff who worked in those institutions. In many ways it is a tale of awkwardness and fumbling. The Roman Catholic Church certainly tried to establish links with the new Brussels entities. It also made a real effort to ensure that it was kept informed about what was going on the integration process. But while it had some success in catering to individual Catholics working within the European Commission and the other Community institutions, its efforts to create stronger institutional ties with the EC itself initially came to naught. And partly as a result, Leustean suggests, the Church seems to have decided from the mid-1960s onwards to concentrate on building bridges between Eastern and Western Europe, rather than focusing its attention on efforts to bring Western European countries closer together. Catholic transnationalism extended beyond the ‘Little Europe’ of the Six.

Methodologically, this article represents an interesting new way of exploring the links between religion and European integration. Up until now this has tended to be done, to the extent that it has been done at all, primarily by focusing on the role of Christian Democratic politicians in the establishment of the first European Communities. Wolfram Kaiser, in particular, has thus done much to suggest that to an important degree, the roots
of European integration lie within transnationally organised political Catholicism. Kaiser’s focus however is very much on the origins of Communities, rather than their subsequent development. And the politicians and activists upon whom his work focuses were individuals who operated within national political fora, albeit sometimes in coordinated fashion with fellow Christian Democrats elsewhere in Western Europe, rather than the bureaucrats and ministers who populated the offices and Council chambers of early Community Luxembourg and Brussels. Leustean, by contrast, focuses on the actions of the church hierarchy, rather than political Catholicism, and explores actions in Luxembourg and Brussels rather than activism in Paris, Bonn or Rome. As such he makes a genuinely new contribution to the historiography. He also reinforces the slowly-expanding effort of historians to get to grips with the new institutional landscape that began to emerge in Luxembourg and Brussels from 1950 onwards. Much work remains to be done, but we now know considerably more than used to be the case about how the early Community institutions functioned, what their ambitions were, and who worked within them.

What might have been brought out more strongly in this article, though, is the overall significance of this awkward first encounter between the Roman Catholic Church and Community Brussels. Leustean does succeed in demonstrating that there was a Vatican response to the start of European integration. Similarly he is able to prove that the Community institutions were not wholly uninterested in the Vatican’s approach, despite being ultimately stymied in their efforts to establish diplomatic ties by the opposition of Gaullist France. But because Leustean’s access, on the Church side, is primarily limited to papers of the Belgian diocese to which the day-to-day business of interaction was delegated, rather than to whatever discussions might have occurred in Rome, there is little in this article that can tell us about the place of European integration in the Roman Catholic Church’s overall political priorities in the 1950s and 1960s. Did European integration, with its capacity to bring together the non-Communist countries of Europe, thereby potentially strengthening them vis-à-vis the ‘Godless’ communist regimes of the East, fit with the strong Cold War views of the early post-war Vatican? Or was it by contrast seen as a largely irrelevant primarily economic venture, confined as it was during this period to certain fairly narrow economic activities and to only a minority of countries within the European continent? There is little in Leustean’s piece to really answer these important questions.


Likewise, the Commission archives cited in this piece are largely silent on how important the early Community institutions deemed Vatican links to be. The periodic involvement of senior figures like Walter Hallstein, the first President of the Commission, and Piero Malvestiti, President of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community, would suggest some level of enthusiasm and commitment; the highly sporadic nature of their engagement, by contrast, would suggest that many other issues took priority. And if the establishment of relations did matter, why was this so? What did either individual institutions like the European Commission or the High Authority, or the Community as a whole, have to gain from diplomatic ties to the Holy See? It perhaps didn’t matter, in this case, that the Pope did not have many battalions, but rather more relevant surely was the Vatican’s economic unimportance. Once more the article is good at prompting such questions, but slightly more limited in its ability to answer them.

Despite its silences, though, this is a useful contribution to the field. It reminds us once more of the complexity of the Western societies within which integration occurred, and the multiplicity of entities, official and unofficial, national and transnational, secular and religious, with which the fledgling European bodies had to interact. Such interaction was often not particularly smooth or easy. The Community institutions themselves were highly inexperienced, their goals and methods of operation still highly contested, not least by the very governments that had set them up. An understanding of how they operated, whom to contact, and what level of interaction was either possible or desirable, was extremely limited throughout Western Europe of the 1950s and 1960s, meaning that when interaction did happen between the ECSC and/or EEC and wider society, it often took some time to have any real effect. Despite the important Catholic roots of the integration process, the Roman Catholic Church was no exception to this rule.

Piers Ludlow is a Reader in the Department of International History at the LSE and Head of the LSE IDEAS Cold War Studies Programme. He is an expert in the history of Western Europe since 1945 and in the origins and early development of the European integration process in particular. His two monographs to date have been Dealing With Britain: The Six and the First UK Application to the EEC (Cambridge University Press, 1997) and The European Community and the Crises of the 1960s: Negotiating the Gaullist Challenge (Routledge, 2006). Two more are in the pipeline, one a detailed study of the Roy Jenkins’s presidency of the European Commission, the other a broader overview of how high level dialogue between the US and its main European partners evolved in the course of the Cold War.

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