

The origins of Christian democracy (Catholic non-papal tradition)

Introduction

There are several ongoing political debates about the status and nature of Christian democracy. One of the finest examples is related to Viktor Orbán's concept of Christian democracy in Hungary. Right after his second re-election in 2018, Orbán gave an interview about the plans of his upcoming governance (Orbán, 2018). While elaborating on the relation of Fidesz and its Christian democrat partner, KDNP, Orbán highlighted that his government's spiritual nature is Christian democrat, and they wish to build this kind of democracy, opposed to *liberal democracy*¹. According to this standpoint, the dignity of human beings is the most essential, the branches of power are separated, freedom is an unconditional value, family is too a value, global ideologies are rejected, it puts faith in the vitality of the nation, and wishes to halt the influence of supranational financial and political empires in Hungary. There are other elements as well (concerning women's equal rights, fight against anti-Semitism, and full employment) which altogether formulate a *Christian democratic* worldview and *system*, said Orbán (2018). In the past three years, Orbán and several other Fidesz/KDNP politicians tried to re-introduce the term into the political and intellectual agenda (e.g. Orbán, 2019; Kovács, 2020; Hölvényi, 2021). Naturally, Orbán's conception and its Hungarian implementation received several critical comments from domestic (e.g. László, 2018; Balázs, 2020) and international authors, political scientists (e.g. Müller, 2020). In the past few months, the European debates about the representation of "true" Christian democratic principles intensified after Fidesz quit the European People's Party (Deutsche Welle, 2021).

Without investigating the theoretical validity and political relevance of these debates, it is clear that Orbán (2018) was right in two general statements when he shared his views about Christian democracy: first, Christian democracy has a strong *European tradition*; second, there is a significant ongoing *intellectual-spiritual debate* about *illiberal democracy*, *liberal democracy*, and *Christian democracy*. Accepting these two arguments and arguing that there is a lack of historical knowledge in the case of Christian democracy in the public sphere, this article wishes

¹ After his re-election in 2014, Orbán gave a speech at Tusnádfürdő and introduced *illiberal democracy* as an alternative to *liberal democracy* (Orbán, 2014). Until 2018, he used this concept instead of *Christian democracy*.

to introduce the reader to the origins of Christian democracy, more specifically to its Catholic non-papal tradition. Before looking at the origins, a short insight into the concept of Christian democracy will be provided. For a comprehensive introduction to the Catholic papal tradition of Christian democracy, including an elaboration on IX. Pius' and XIII. Leo's ideas, see András Jancsó's [article](#).

Definitions and conceptualizations of Christian democracy

In the scientific literature, there are several definitions and conceptualizations of Christian democracy. A decade ago, Stathis N. Kalyvas and Kees van Kersbergen suggested that “until recently, political scientists tended to deny any distinctive character to Christian democracy. The name itself was seen as a bizarre but ultimately inconsequential label for “plain vanilla,” middle-of-the-road, conservative parties, primarily characterized by pragmatism and opportunism” (Kalyvas – van Kersbergen, 2010, p. 185). The authors also mention that although this view is still present in some scientific handbooks, several authors were able to conceptualize Christian democracy as a distinct phenomenon. For instance, Irving listed certain principles which differentiate Christian democracy, such as Christian commitment to elementary human rights, liberal democratic values, class, and transnational reconciliation, while van Kersbergen highlighted integration, (class) compromise, accommodation, and pluralism (Kalyvas – van Kersbergen, 2010, p. 187).

Still, even if these distinctive marks, characteristics are found (in which, commonly there is divergence), it is not clear what Christian democracy is or “where should we find it”: is it a movement, an ideology, or a belief? Just like in any other mature scientific field, it depends on what the researcher focuses on. According to the Encyclopædia Britannica, it is a “political movement that has a close association with Roman Catholicism and its philosophy and social economic justice” (Munro, 2009). The handbook of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung on Christian democracy refers to it as a *movement* as well when it writes that “Christian Democracy is a political movement that originated in Europe – specifically in the countries of Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, and Switzerland – during the mid-19th century. Organisationally, the movement was rooted mainly in the cultural and charitable Catholic associations and worker's unions out of which political parties would form later on” (KAS, 2010). Though there are similarities, several authors (e.g. Allum, 1997; Frey, 2009; Euchner-Preidel, 2016; Dostal, 2019) focus more on the Christian democratic *party politics*. It is not accidental, in the second part of the 20th century, several Christian democratic parties (e.g.

CDU/CSU in Germany, *Democrazia Cristiana* in Italy, or *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* in France) and politicians (like *Alcide De Gasperi*, *Robert Schuman*, or *Konrad Adenauer*) had a huge impact on domestic and European politics.

While it would be advisory to conceptualize Christian democracy as an *ideology*, in the scientific literature only a few researchers emphasize the *ideological character* of Christian democracy; Carlo Invernizzi Accetti's (2019) book is probably the most comprehensive examination of the topic. Naturally, there are several more interpretations, John Bruton calls it a "true value system" that is "distinct from a mere means of realizing values (like socialism or the free market)" (Bruton, 2012, p. 182). Moreover, Christian Democracy can even be conceptualized as an ideal-typical model to investigate the question of whether the European Union is secular or not. In his article, Invernizzi Accetti argued that "Christian Democracy" „will be assumed to consist in a specific mode of inclusion of religion within the sphere of institutionalized politics, based on the assumption that Christian values and beliefs are both the intellectual foundation and the ultimate telos of the democratic form of government" (Invernizzi Accetti 2017, p. 671).

This article does not focus on definitional questions, but it argues that the two parts of "Christian democracy" are inseparable from each other. Christian democracy is not a compromise or a *modus vivendi* between Christian principles and a distinct (either liberal or progressive) political perspective or practice; it is primarily *Christian*: it is based on *Christian traditions* and deduces a distinct *perception of democracy*. As it appears in some definitions, Christian democracy is strongly connected to Roman Catholicism, and specific papal encyclicals (e.g. the *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 and *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931). Still, it is essential to underline that Catholic non-papal representatives were significant facilitators of the Christian democratic movement as well; this overview will focus on these two latter aspects. Although Christian democracy is not exclusively a continental European phenomenon², probably this area has the richest historical roots.

Necessary distinctions: Christian socialism and Christian democracy

Though the zenith of Christian democratic party politics was from 1945 until the 1980s, it has deep historical roots. The complex political, economic, socio-demographical, and cultural

² For instance, thanks to Michael Fleet's (1985) it is possible to get an insight to the Chilean Christian democracy, while John Keating (1996) wrote a highly informative article on British Christian democratic ideas and movement focusing on the 1930s.

changes of the former decades resulted in the appearance of two vital issues in the 19th century: the social question, and a bit later, the democratization. The several negative effects and injustices of the industrial revolution turned the attention of the intellectuals towards social issues; socialism began to be formulated in several ways, for instance in utopian socialism, social Marxism, or – what is related to this article – Christian socialism. Christian socialism and Christian democracy are not necessarily controversial but frequently there are differences.

According to Enyedi and Körösényi (2001), Christian socialism stems from the 19th-century conservative-paternalist thought; the wealthy layers and the state are responsible to protect, aid the weak and vulnerable. Yet, this social sensitivity does not mean that democratic political rights (such as the right to vote) should be extended or spread. Moreover, it is reconcilable with the support of old ruling layers, especially the protection of the Catholic Church's privileges. Instead of horizontal distinction of the society (which was the basis of Marxist thought), Christian socialism was a proponent of social and political corporatism, which meant vertical (vocational) differentiation. Until the end of the Second World War, Christian politics were not liberal democracies, but promoted systems that had strong central power, respected the natural communities (religion, profession, family), and disqualified party competitions.

Christian democracy is a more modern and democratic phenomenon than Christian socialism, it is based on parliamentary government and representative democracy. Its proponents wished to provide democratic rights to the rural masses, it was against the rule of urban elites and the elitism of liberalism. Christian democracy strongly favored the right to property and accepted the will to organize institutions to defend their material interest. It represented those layers that were not considered by liberalism and socialism and tried to take a middle road between individualism and collectivism. However, it has its substantive *Christian values*, like *personalism, solidarity, subsidiarity*, and its social viewpoints that highlight *organic social structures* (Enyedi – Körösényi, 2001).

Catholic non-papal tradition (Lamennais and Ketteler)

The reformation and the French Revolution shook the world of the Catholic Church for centuries and the Church did not wish to join the tendencies of modernism (including rationalism, socialistic ideas, and democratization). As Gabriel Almond suggested, the “Catholic Church was deeply embedded in the social structure of the ancient regime. It resisted each step in the long and costly process of social, political, and spiritual emancipation” (Almond, 1948, p. 735). In predominantly Catholic areas like Italy, France, Austria, Spain, and

Portugal, the Church was highly linked to *medievalism*, was identified with Catholic authoritarian dynasties, and the aristocracies that were against the extension of freedoms towards the middle and lower classes. Although some nationalist ideas were accepted, it rejected the liberalizing tendencies of the French Revolution. This resulted in serious and dramatic consequences: the (commercial, industrial, and professional) middle classes turned away from the ritualism of the Church and got under the influence of rationalism, deism, and atheism; while the working classes – as they did not receive understanding from it – became hostile towards the Church (Almond, 1948).

Until the end of the 19th century, there was no unified and forceful reaction towards the above-mentioned issues from the Church, generally *Rerum Novarum* (1891) is depicted as a turning point. However, from around the middle of the 19th century, there were several Catholic representatives (for instance priests, bishops, or laymen) who wished to provide answers to these vital social and political questions. In the next pages, two influential Catholic historical figures (Lamennais and Ketteler) and their corresponding ideas will be presented in order to understand the origins of Christian democracy. Though several contextual differences occurred in the past one and a half-century, I contend that most of these arguments are useful if someone wishes to formulate a robust and original Christian democratic perspective today.

Félicité de Lamennais (1782-1854)

In the French-speaking territories, forceful responses were given to the inventive ideas of the Enlightenment and French Revolution. For instance, one of the outstanding writers, philosophers of this era, *Joseph de Maistre* (1753-1821) “was a prophet of absolute monarchy in Church and State, and a fanatical opponent of everything that the French Revolution represented: in 1819 he expounded that 'Christianity rests wholly on the Sovereign Pontiff' and 'all sovereignty is infallible in nature'” (MacCulloch, 2009, p. 594). As a representative of *intercessory conservatism*, de Maistre supported state intervention to defend traditional values and advised to aid the poor to eliminate the social and economic conditions that induce revolutions. De Maistre promoted governments that would fit the utilitarian expectation (which aims to reach “the greatest possible sum of happiness and strength, for the greatest number of men, during the longest possible time”), but rejected that only one ideal form of government would fit all people (Spellman, 2011, p. 116). Naturally, there were other leading figures of

these anti-revolutionary ideas³, for instance, the French conservative (and romantic) writer, *François-René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand* (1768-1848). Chateaubriand influenced several contemporary intellectuals to turn away from the deism and atheism of the Enlightenment by his extensive defense of the Catholic faith. Moreover, he is a crucial character of the conservative tradition since he was able to present that conservatism is not an anti-thesis of change, but it is a kind of aesthetic and spiritual revival (Scruton, 2018). Although these – and other authors like *Loius de Bonald* (1754-1840) – were significant authors of the Catholic revival, a slightly younger and probably less well-known personality, *Hugues Félicité Robert de Lamennais'* (1782-1854) ideas were substantially more relevant for *liberal Christianity*, *Christian socialism*, and – last, but not least – *Christian democracy*.

Lamennais was born in 1782, Bretagne, opposed to Chateaubriand and Bonald he did not have the experiences of an adult about the first period of the French Revolution (basically, until the Napoleonic regime). Although it is usually mentioned that he lost his faith at a young age and was a rationalist, from around his early twenties he returned to the Church and began to investigate theological questions (in 1816 he was ordained a priest). In his first significant writings, in short, *Réflexions*⁴ (1808) and *Tradition*⁵ (1814) he condemned Gallicanism which aimed to restrict papal authority in France. For his ultramontanist arguments, Lamennais suffered atrocities from the Napoleonic state authorities. In 1817, Lamennais wrote the first volume of *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion* (*Essay on Indifference in Matters of Religion*) which made him famous in Europe (altogether he wrote four volumes). In these writings, Lamennais argued for the necessity of religion, supported the educational privilege of the Church, and aimed to contribute to the revival of the Catholic religion to tackle the indifference of his era.

Tamás Nyirkos (2011) highlights that one of the key notions of Lamennais was the question of *authority*. The French theologian argued that reformation (which was treated as the antecedent of the French revolution) changed an essential idea concerning the source of authority: from God's mind it placed authority to the human mind. Nyirkos suggests, that the essence or notion of authority was not questioned by Lamennais, it was just transposed from an external instance to the human mind. In these years, Lamennais doubted that human sense would fit the definition

³ Although there are significant differences between the terms, generally “conservatism”, “traditionalism”, “clericalism”, “monarchism”, “counter-enlightenment”, “royalism”, “ultra-royalism” or “ultramontanism” are assigned to these authors.

⁴ *Réflexions sur l'état de l'église en France pendant le 18ième siècle et sur sa situation actuelle*

⁵ *De la tradition de l'Église sur l'institution des évêques*

of authority and argued that Christian societies are built on three authorities: God, Jesus Christ, and the Church. According to Lamennais, the early modern philosophical systems are nothing else than the denial of these three authorities, they are atheist, deist, or heretic (Nyirkos, 2011, p. 103).

Approaching the revolutionary year of 1830, Lamennais began to stress the question of freedom, democracy, and the importance of organizations when he argued that “salvation will come and can come only from the really Catholic party, when it will organize itself (quotes Kalyvas, 1996, p. 132). Together with his disciples, partners such as *Henri-Baptiste Lacordaire* and *Comte Charles de Montalembert*, Lamennais launched the *L’Avenir* (“The Future”). *L’Avenir* is generally treated as the first modern Catholic newspaper, which – as its sub-title “God and Liberty” suggests – was the primal source of liberal Christian views. Nyirkos argues that this terminology might be equivocal, and the editorial introduction might help to see more clearly because it differentiates two kinds of liberalism. The first is the legacy of the destructive philosophies of the 18th century that abhors Catholicism and represents intolerance and suppression, while the second – which is growing stronger and will replace the former – only wishes to separate the church and the state (Nyirkos, 2011, p. 108). On the columns of the *L’Avenir*, Lamennais began to promote the freedom of education, the freedom of the press, the freedom of association, and freedom of worship, which were all connected to the rights of the Church. However, as Nyirkos emphasizes Lamennais got suspiciously close to revolutionary rhetoric and began to articulate profane demands: universal suffrage and the abolition of governmental centralization⁶.

Based on an overview of the history, and contemporary historical events (such as the Belgian Revolution), the French writer began to feel that the spread of Christianity is parallel to the historical progression. Just like how a child grows up to become an adult, the time for the Christians to be liberated has arrived; and the fight for freedom might justify violence. One of the main problems here was the fact that Lamennais identified the people with the Church and then with Jesus Christ, and the greatest goods became to be attributed to human endeavors (Nyirkos, 2011). To sum it up, Lamennais attacked the monarchy, questioned the authority of the Church (although as an ultramontane he did not intend to), promoted liberal views, and called for democratic changes. While Lamennais (and his fellows) did not wish to distance

⁶ Or as Molette argued, Lamennais “went so far as to ask Catholics to leave behind them exclusively religious affairs and position themselves on the “political and social level” (quotes Kalyvas, 1996, p. 119).

themselves from the Catholic teachings and did not treat Catholicism and their demands controversial, the conservative French clerics called for the condemnation of their ideas.

In these times the Church was suspicious of influential lay Catholics and obstructed any attempts at autonomous Catholic political activity and one of the first-rate examples was Lamennais' case (Kalyvas, 1996). In 1832, Pope Gregory XVI condemned religious pluralism – without mentioning Lamennais – in his first encyclical titled the *Mirari vos*. First, Lamennais wished to remain in the bond of the Church but his notorious book published in 1834, entitled *Paroles d'un croyant* (“Words of a Believer”) attacked the papacy and the European monarchs⁷. In return, the Pope condemned his teachings directly with the encyclical *Singulari Nos* (its subtitle was the “*On the Errors of Lamennais*”). In his late writings, Lamennais responded to the question of authority; in short, instead of God, the Church, and the State he found the source of the authority in the collective tradition of humanity⁸ (Nyirkos, 2011).

Lamennais continued his elaborations on several topics, like philosophy and metaphysics, and for a short period, tried to implement his radical ideas as a politician and political thinker in events of the 1848 revolution. Lamennais died in 1854 Paris, but his main ideas were already known across Europe. In 1830, Belgian Catholic traditionalists, who were supporting the Belgian revolution in the hope of fully developing their Catholic faith through the liberties of the new Constitution were “deeply inspired by the thought of Félicité de Lamennais” (Beyen, 2019, p. 180). Margot Lyon (1967) mentions that one of Lamennais' and Lacordaire's disciples, Frederick Ozanam, who was a professor of commercial law at Lyon university, was the first who used the expression “Christian Democracy”. He wrote “I believe in the possibility of a Christian democracy”; and he suggested: “let us give up our repugnances and resentments and turn towards that democracy, that people that does not know us; let us help them, not only with those alms that make men obliged to many, but with our efforts to obtain for them institutions that will set them free and improve them.” (quotes Lyon, 1967, p. 71). The influence of Lamennais' thought was huge not just in his life, but in later Catholic thought as well. His lamentations on philosophical and theological problems were fruitful for later authors, while his elaboration on the papal supremacy in his early years was suitable to justify the doctrine of papal infallibility at the end of the 19th century. Concerning Catholic political thought, he is treated as one of the first representatives of Christian socialist and Christian democratic ideas,

⁷ The *Paroles* was banned by most of the European monarchies. Subsequently, the liberal political oppositions (for instance the Hungarians) translated and spread it as fast as they could.

⁸ Or in other words, in the common consent of mankind.

principles. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's handbook on Christian democracy published in 2011 still refers to Lamennais' significance when it writes that "his main achievement was the early recognition of the increasingly important role of the people as political actors and the realisation that the social question would be the main issue with regards to the socio-political order of the 19th century" (KAS, 2011, p. 13).

Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler (1811-1877)

The German-speaking territories were not exempt from the political and religious conflicts of the 19th century which mainly stemmed from the socio-economic and political revolutions of the era. Naturally, a couple of politicians, churchmen, and philosophers were part of the first Christian Socialist then Christian democratic project from the second part of the century, *Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler* is acknowledged as one of the most significant agents of the process.

Ketteler was born in 1811, Münster, as the sixth child of a noble family. First, he was educated by the Jesuits, then turned to the field of law but in 1844 he was ordained a Catholic priest and in 1850 – partly thanks to the advice of Pope Pius XI – was made bishop of Mainz. From the beginning of his priesthood, Ketteler was committed to turning towards the poor. Throughout his life, Ketteler founded several institutions that served the lower layers: for instance in 1848 he established a hospital in Beckum which he named after Saint Elisabeth. Three years later – together with a French noblewoman, Stephanie Fredericke Amalie de la Roche von Starckenfels – he established the Congregation of Divine providence for women who wished to give their earthly life to God. The Sisters performed educational activities as well.⁹ Both institutes are still working.

Ketteler was not just a Churchman who was open to "the social question" but a notable figure of German politics as well. He was elected to the *Frankfurt National Assembly* in 1848. The laws surpassed in December guaranteed civil liberties but did not touch on social questions. Therefore, the Catholic representatives formed a union of fractions with the name of "*Catholic Club*" and managed to reach a decision that added a general provision about ecclesiastical liberties into the Imperial Constitution (Székely, 2007). In 1848-1849 Lamennais was present at the first *Katholikentag* as well where he gave a highly influential speech about the poverty of the society.

⁹ Later Ketteler organized other religious-educational and political associations as well.

In 1849 Ketteler organized the first Catholic worker's union, later he was also called Arbeiterbischof. His main ideas concerning the question of workers were presented in his book entitled *Die Arbeiterfrage und das Christentum* ("The Labor Question and Christianity") published in 1864. In this writing, Ketteler urged Catholics to form Christian unions with Church leadership, settled with the state, to counterweight the social democrats and liberals. Based on Lassale's ideas and principles of Christian faith he visioned associations of producers (*Produktiv-Assoziationen*) that include the employers as well. In his speeches, he emphasized the necessity of wages to rise, working hours to decrease, free days to be guaranteed, child labor, and factory work of young ladies and mothers to be prohibited. These were not just demands from a social program, he urged active participation of the Church in spheres that the state also wanted to control (Székely, 2007, p. 211).

In 1862 Ketteler wrote his book entitled *Freiheit, Autorität und Kirche* ("Freedom, Authority and the Church") in which he explicated the theoretical foundation for Catholics towards state power and argued for the separation of the Church and the state. To be more accurate, Ketteler did not want an entirely separate Church and state (he could not imagine this phenomenon) but wanted the Church to be free from state interference (Fazekas, 2012). Ketteler defended constitutionalism and wished to use political and communicational channels that were in the interest of Catholics. He adopted a liberal legal approach (e.g. he demanded legal guarantees by the state, differentiation between constitutional and private law, an independent judiciary, creation of Supreme Court) and rejected absolutism and police state; in short, he wanted to live in a 'state based on the rule of law' and 'self-government' (KAS, 2011, p. 13-14). Still, Ketteler was not a supporter of liberalism and liberal individualism; in contrast to the civil liberties (which carried the sins of individualism), he supported the old, corporate conception of liberty and favored constitutional changes in order to guarantee the freedom of the Church (Fazekas, 2012).

The conflict of the Church and the state intensified into the *Kulturkampf* in Germany which took place in the 1870s between Bismarck and the representatives, supporters of the Catholic Church. Catholics became a minority in the protestant-dominated German Reich and Bismarck aspired to reduce the power of the Church. Ketteler joined the "cultural struggle" when the Catholic members established the *Zentrum* party (Centre Party) in the Assembly. Against the Chancellor's idea of a centralized political system, the Centre Party favored federal structure and more independence to the federal states. However the original reason of the clash was the unsettled relationship between the church and the state; Bismarck wanted a secular state

monopoly on education, while the Centre Party, the Catholic Church, and the Catholic lay organizations demanded the independence of the Catholic Church institutions to be guaranteed, in other words, they wanted the educational system not to be changed. Although Bismarck had the power to expulse the Jesuit order, to ban sermons and processions, and suspend the Church legislation on marriage, the struggle toughened the political role of Catholicism and the position of the Centre Party in Germany (KAS, 2011, p. 14).

Ketteler accepted the authority of the papal state¹⁰ and wanted to defend its sovereignty, but he was highly attentive to the social problems of the masses. He was a skillful organizer who managed to build organizations and institutes that served the purpose of the Church both in religious and political affairs. Thanks to his speeches, brochures, and pastoral letters, Ketteler was well-known in Catholic and non-Catholic circles (Fazekas, 2012). He died in 1877, but – just like in the case of Lamennais – his influences are far-reaching. As a leading character of early Christian Socialist thought Ketteler's ideas are treated to be present in the first systemic doctrinal elaboration of the workers' case, the *Rerum Novarum*. Moreover, the social and political activism which resulted in several established organizations projected the importance of the association of the masses; this idea was later crucial for Christian democracy.

Conclusion

After a short introduction to a current political issue related to Christian democracy (Viktor Orbán's conception of Christian democracy), this article gave an overview of the common definitions and conceptualizations of Christian democracy. Then, as a necessary distinction, the differences between Christian socialism and Christian democracy were presented. The main ambition of the article was to offer an examination of the origins of the non-papal Christian democratic tradition. For this, two prominent Churchmen, *Lamennais* and *Ketteler*, and their main corresponding ideas were investigated. Although both historical personalities had specific characteristics and talents (e.g. bravery, creativity, activist attitude, theological knowledge, religious devotion) in my point of view, the moral of the story is that there are some crucial historical situations where it is possible to reconcile seemingly antagonistic ideas.

¹⁰ Ketteler was present at the *First Vatican Council* (1869-1870) and was against the doctrine of *papal infallibility* but he accepted it after the law entered into force. He was a skillful mediator (or buffer) between the "ultra-conservative" Vatican and the German Catholics who accepted liberalizing tendencies. For an interesting and detailed analysis on the question and on political Catholicism see Fazekas (2012).

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