A complex kind of party

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THE RISE OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE
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What exactly *is* Christian Democracy? For British politics, the question has become more pressing since Chris Patten remarked that he saw his kind of Conservatism as closely related to this Continental creed, and since the then newly promoted Prime Minister John Major went to Bonn to tell an audience at the Christian Democrats' Konrad Adenauer Foundation that he saw Britain as being "at the heart of Europe". Christian Democracy, from evoking the picture of Don Camillo vying with the Communist mayor for control of wayward Italian villagers, now seems to loom up, for some, as the political creed underlying the controversial projects of Jacques Delors, including the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty. It also seems to have some connection with the ambiguous and elusive concept of "subsidiarity".

It is time for a comprehensive re-evaluation of Christian Democracy as a political force in Europe. The standard histories in English, by Michael Fogarty and Ronald Irving, were published some decades ago; and the techniques used by political scientists to assess the nature of political parties – their strengths and weaknesses, their social and ideological foundations, the options pursued and not pursued by their leaders – have been developed and refined in recent years. *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe* by Stathis Kalyvas goes far towards unravelling what he calls the central "puzzle of contemporary Christian Democratic parties, which retain a religious label and some awkward links to religion and the church but have become secular parties thriving in a secular environment – without, however, having evolved into typical conservative parties". As the author rightly insists, all these different strands in the puzzle – in particular the complex relationships between confessional parties, clericalism and conservatism – can only be understood by examining the precise circumstances in which Christian Democratic parties emerged in nineteenth century Europe.

Dr Kalyvas focuses on how exactly the organization of political Catholicism was stimulated by the assault of modernizing liberal states ("liberal" being defined very loosely) against the influence of the Church. He concentrates essentially on the period from Bismarck's determined *Kulturkampf* of the early 1870s to the spectacular conflict between Church and State in France thirty years later, though he also takes in comparable issues arising a few years earlier (for instance in Belgium and Austria), and he explains why the Partito Popolare in Italy was only founded as late as 1919.

The essential point to emerge is that the Christian Democratic parties, far from being simply the political agents of the beleaguered Church in its fight against governmental anti-clericalism, took on an autonomous life at a very early stage. Even where they originated as mass movements that were encouraged by the Church in order to fight for religious control of education and related causes, their leaders, responding to the contemporary widening of the parliamentary franchise, quickly turned them into basically political forces, whose relations with the Vatican or with the national hierarchy often became very tense indeed. By the same token, although the "natural" place of Christian Democrats in the party-political spectrum has usually appeared to be distinctly right of centre, they have never been simply the tools, or even automatically the allies, of the existing conservative forces – which in many cases, indeed, they successfully challenged for parliamentary power.

The central section of this book, in which the author demonstrates how and why Christian Democrat parties in Western Europe emerged with their own specific characteristics, and a characteristic relationship to the Church which originally inspired them, is authoritative and convincing. It includes an important chapter on why France, alone among Europe's predominantly Roman Catholic countries, failed to produce a substantial and durable Christian Democratic party. The powerful influence of monarchism (including boulangism) is well analysed – though the author writes off the Fourth Republic's ill-fated Mouvement Républicain Populaire rather too easily (it retained considerable power until at least 1954, rather than expiring in 1951, as he suggests).

The last two chapters, in which the author extends his thesis about the Church's normally distant relations with Christian Democracy in a survey of the twentieth century, and speculates very sweepingly about this movement's overall relationship with democracy, are less satisfactory. This may be because the author's "rational choice" approach, while it is fruitful in analysing a specific decision, such as the decision whether or not to found a new party, is much less relevant for interpreting the complex relationships between organizations over lengthy periods of time. The assertion that both Christian Democratic and Social Democratic parties, early on, only "decided to participate in the electoral process after painful and divisive debates" is seriously misleading. Traditional historians, and others, may also be put off by the way in which long sections of the book are based on extensive quotations from secondary authorities, often prefaced by the maddeningly ambiguous phrase, "According to X, . . .". Dr Kalyvas has worked most thoughtfully, and his main conclusions are highly interesting and significant.