Foreword

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I am delighted to contribute a Foreword to this important book, which derives from a conference held in Porto, Portugal, in September 2021. The theme of this meeting was the regulation of religion in Europe seen from a multiplicity of perspectives: legal, social, historical, political and cultural. An interdisciplinary group of scholars came together to consider the theoretical and practical considerations of regulating religion, raising questions of immediate importance for the good governance – one could almost say the wellbeing – of European societies.

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, this part of the world has been exposed to contrary pressures with respect to religion. On the one hand, Europe – and in particular Western Europe – is noticeably secular in global terms. Much has been written about the secularization process in its European forms and whilst there is considerable and continuing discussion about the detail, there is little doubt about the overall picture: not only is Europe unusually secular, it is becoming more so. At the same time, however, Europe is becoming markedly more diverse, a process brought about by immigration. Clearly the movement of people lies at the core of these changes, but it is important to note an associated shift in academic thinking. In the early post-war decades (beginning in the 1950s), new arrivals in Europe were very largely categorized in terms of their race or ethnicity, generating significant – but *secular* – discussions about racial, ethnic and national issues. Towards the end of the century, however, the debate turned increasingly to questions of religion – a shift that discomfited many of Europe's secularists and the professions of which they were part. New questions arose: how were European societies to accommodate religious rather than ethnic differences and how were legal scholars, secular social scientists, politicians and policy-makers to address both the theoretical and practical questions that followed?

In short, an unexpected reversal was taking place. Scholars accustomed to talking in terms of the privatization of religion – seeing this, correctly, as the consequence of secularization – were increasingly obliged to note the rising profile of religion in *public* debate, despite the falling indicators of religious activity. Put differently, two rather different things were happening at once: continuing and undisputed secularization alongside insistent, and at times heated, exchanges about the place of religion in late modern societies. Even more difficult was the

growing awareness that the former (secularization) was eroding the knowledge, vocabulary and sensitivities demanded by the latter (the increasingly visible presence of religion in the public sphere). What was to be done?

This, very briefly, is the overall picture. The significance of the following chapters lies in addressing the detail as scholars from many disciplines attempt both to understand and to resolve the demanding questions that arise in relation to the regulation of religion across European societies, taking into account the distinctive histories, confessional backgrounds and particular aspirations of each case. One point, however, becomes clear very quickly: easy generalizations are best avoided if progress is to be made in understanding both the theoretical implications of the regulation of religion and its practical consequences. The Introduction to this volume sets out the steps in the argument presented in this book which moves from a theoretical overview to a series of fascinating case studies. I recommend these very warmly: every one of them merits close and careful attention.

To conclude this Foreword, I will – if I may – sidestep a little, taking a concept from my own work to demonstrate how its meaning and application have evolved as the European context developes. The concept in question is what I have termed 'vicarious religion' – an idea that derived from the marked difference between the hard and soft indicators of religious life in much of modern Europe. My argument found its focus in the relationship between a continuing but relatively restricted community of Christian believers who expressed their faith in more or less regular church-going, and a much larger penumbra who retained some sort of belief, and who wished from time to time to make contact with the institutions with which they identified.

The notion of 'vicarious religion' pivots on the idea that the smaller group is doing something on behalf of the larger one, who are aware (if only implicitly) of this relationship. For example, churches and church leaders perform ritual on behalf of others; church leaders and churchgoers believe on behalf of others; church leaders and churchgoers embody moral codes on behalf of others; and churches can at times offer space for the 'vicarious' debate of unresolved issues in modern societies. It is worth noting that all of these functions have in common the typically European perception of the church as a public utility: that is, an institution (or more accurately a cluster of institutions) that exists to make provision for a population living in a designated place, local or national, and that are found wanting if they fail to deliver.

Some 20 years later, I was taken aback to find a rather different use of my ideas. Getting to know the rapidly expanding literature on populism across Europe and the place of religion in this, I found more than occasional references to 'vicarious religion' deployed in ways that I did not intend and do not like. As

I used this term in 2000, it captured an investment in the historic churches of Europe, understanding these as institutions that operated on behalf of a wider constituency who were appreciative of what the churches were doing, but were themselves largely, if not totally, inactive. Both the concept itself and the constituency that I had in mind were entirely benign and would, I thought, be unlikely to outlast the generation born in the aftermath of World War II. I was wrong, in so far as the debate has taken an unexpected turn: no longer do the Christian churches necessarily represent a cherished and somewhat wistful connection to the past; they have become instead a potent means to resist outsiders, notably Muslims.

Interestingly, for many authors the link is found precisely in the disconnect between belief and belonging: without a firm base in theology – or, as Max Weber put it, a religious ethic – Christianity, together with the heritage that it represents, is vulnerable to misuse, as will be made clear in the chapters that follow. Its re-modelling as 'culturalized religion', or 'Christianism' works well in some cases (see, for example, the chapter on Denmark), but all too often it introduces a more negative feature: the deployment of a Christian heritage to exclude rather than include, at times aggressively. It is, finally, powerful evidence of the *point du départ* of this Foreword: to understand the regulation of religion in Europe in the early decades of the twenty-first century, it is necessary to pay attention to *both* the continuing – some would say remorseless – process of secularization *and* to growing religious diversity. The chapters that follow should be read with this in mind.