Is secular–religious party competition moving online? Digital religious profiles of candidates running for the European Parliament

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New digital technologies alter various societal spheres, including the landscape of religion and politics. "Christianity influencers," faith tweets, digital chaplaincy and online Islamic hate speech are notable examples in place. The rapidly growing body of scholarship known as *digital religion studies* explores the extent to which traditional religious practices are being adapted to digital environments. However, while this nascent field profits from interdisciplinary perspectives, the political dimension of this transformation is still underdeveloped. Specifically, it is unclear how political actors refer to religion during online campaigning across Europe and whether the existing patterns reflect "classical offline divides" between secular and religious parties. This paper contributes to this gap by providing first-hand empirical evidence of online references to religion by candidates running for the European Parliament in 2019 in four countries (Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses of European politicians' X (formerly Twitter) profiles. Overall, religion plays a subordinate role in online political campaigning; however, there is substantial country variation, indicating a higher salience of religion in Swedish and Dutch campaigns in comparison to German or British online discourses. Furthermore, candidates from political parties with religious roots are more likely to refer to religion than those from more secular parties, reflecting traditional secular-religious divisions. The paper advances existing research on religion and party politics through its fresh perspective on religion outside classical arenas of political conflict and inside important alternative venues of political competition.

KEYWORDS

religion, social media, secular-religious party competition, European Parliament, elections

1 Introduction

The prevalence of "Christianity influencers," faith tweets, digital chaplaincy and online Islamic hate speech highlights the way in which digital technologies have changed the landscape of religion and politics. *Digital religion studies*, a rapidly growing area of scholarship, explores the extent to which traditional religious practices are being adapted to digital environments (Campbell and Evolvi, 2020, p. 6; Campbell, 2007; cf. also Neumaier, 2022, Schlag and Radde-Antweiler, 2024) and benefits from interdisciplinary perspectives. However, the political dimension of this transformation remains underdeveloped, particularly with

regard to how political actors refer to religion during online campaigning and whether such references mirror "classical divides" between secular and religious parties. While political science literature has long addressed the role of religion in party competition, particularly in the context of the popular secularization thesis (e.g., Engeli et al., 2012; Kortmann, 2019; van Kersbergen, 2021; Ozzano, 2021; Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2021), most of this research remains focused on offline contexts, especially at the European level (cf. Foret, 2014, 2015a,b; Euchner and Herrmann, 2023). Hence, the key research questions of this paper are as follows: (1) How relevant is religion in online campaigning for European politicians? (2) Which political actors make references to religion, and in which manner? and (3) How can we explain variation among them?

This paper explores these research questions based on first-hand empirical evidence of the communication behaviour of candidates running for the European Parliament (EP) in 2019 and articulating themselves on X (formerly Twitter). Our dataset covers 97,306 tweets by 853 candidates from Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), the Netherlands and Sweden [included in the dataset established by Stier et al. (2020)]. The study uses a mixed-methods approach and analyses the tweets via a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analyses.

In summary, our analyses indicate that religion plays a subordinate role in online political campaigning at the European level, with only about 1.25% of all tweets containing religious references. Nonetheless, there is substantial country variation with Swedish and Dutch campaigns referring to religious content more regularly than their German or British counterparts. Furthermore, candidates from political parties with religious roots are more likely to refer to religion than those from more secular parties, providing the first evidence for the persistence of classical conflict lines between religious and secular parties in the digital sphere. The qualitative analysis indicates that topics such as Muslim migration and Islamophobia are less dominant than expected in Germany and the UK; more prominent are general discussions about the relation between politics and religion and the role of religion in the EU. These findings contribute to existing research on religion and party competition by evaluating popular propositions regarding the secular–religious divide outside traditional settings of political conflict and within alternative arenas that are likely to dominate future political communication.

In terms of structure, the next section explores the key literature streams this paper relies on and aims to integrate (i.e., research on digital religion, religion and politics as well as religion and party competition). Thereafter, we elaborate on our theoretical framework, the research design, data and methods, before presenting our main findings. We conclude with a discussion of the results and reflections on future directions for the newly established transdisciplinary angle combining digital religion and political science research.

2 State of the art: digital religion meets politics

2.1 Digital religion

The study of digital religion first emerged alongside studies of the internet in the 1990s and early 2000s and was referred to as the study of "cyber-religion" (Campbell and Evolvi, 2020, p. 6; Campbell, 2007).

This term has been used to describe the manifestation of religious worship, gatherings and communities on various online platforms (cf. Schlag and Radde-Antweiler, 2024; Neumaier, 2022). At that time, religious leaders were reflecting on the extent to which they needed to adapt to, or take control of the internet in order to regain authority (Campbell and Bellar, 2022, pp. 2–3). A central question was also whether the internet primarily encouraged religious diversity and dialogue or re-created religious biases and boundaries in a different setting (ibid., p. 3). During the mid-2000s, the wealth of existing websites was augmented by the creation of new social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter/X. Scholars also began to switch from using the term "cyber-religion" to "virtual religion" in order to describe the spread of new digital spaces which did not have an offline counterpart. By the 2010s, religion online was no longer a novelty (ibid., p. 4). The term "digital religion" was suggested as a more comprehensive way to describe and investigate the intersection between religion and digital media (ibid.; Peterson, 2020). Specifically, Campbell (2013, p. 1) describes digital religion as a "framework for articulating the evolution of religious practices online which are linked to online and offline context simultaneously." Utilising this new framework, interdisciplinary teams of sociologists, communication and religious studies scholars have attempted to answer various questions including "Does technology shape religion (and vice versa)?," "How can scholars measure the impact of digital culture on religion?," and "How do religious leaders and believers approach the internet?" (Campbell and Evolvi, 2020, p. 6). The interdisciplinary research institute "UFSP Digital religion" at the University of Zurich or research groups at the University Bochum are prominent examples in place, exploring practices like digital spiritual care, religious chatbots or "blessing robots" (e.g., Schlag and Radde-Antweiler, 2024; Peng-Keller and Winiger, 2024; Dürscheid, 2024; Neumaier, 2022).

One central finding in this research area is that religion becomes "networked." In other words, peoples' religious engagement within computer networks is creating new patterns of spiritual practices described as "networked religion" (Campbell and Bellar 2022, p. 6). Campbell (2007) and Campbell and Bellar (2022, p. 6) argues that "[w]hen people go online, religion changes. People are weaving together a variety of religious experiences. They're creating networked personal religion instead of belonging to only one denomination or congregation." She stresses that the network image helps explain the complex interplay and negotiations occurring between the individual and the community, new and old sources of authority, and public and private identities.

While this young field profits from these interdisciplinary collaborations, the political dimension of this transformation is still underdeveloped. For instance, we know very little about how digital religion influences formal state–church relationships. Will states respond to newly created religious online communities, and if so, with which governance tools? In what ways do religious welfare organisations adapt to cope with the new conditions of digital welfare markets? What are the consequences of these changes for the well-known principle of subsidiarity? Finally, how are political actors adjusting religious practices and communication in the digital age? While this project aims to provide the first evidence for the very last question, the remaining questions will hopefully be tackled by alternative interdisciplinary teams of political science and religious studies scholars in the near future.

2.2 Religion and politics

The study of "religion and politics" is rather nascent among political scientists (Wald and Wilcox, 2006). It constitutes a disciplinary niche, bringing together scholars specialised in comparative politics, public policy analysis, political theory and international politics, among others. Hence, the most common angles include the examination of religion as a source of war and terrorism, as a driving force of (morality) policy-making or as the cornerstone of party-political divides. Thus, phenomena like religious voting (e.g., Montero et al., 2023), the decline of Christian Democracy (van Kersbergen, 2021; Duncan, 2006), the rise of right-wing populists and its relationship with religion (Minkenberg, 2021; Haynes, 2021; Ozzano, 2021; Steven, 2023; Tepe, 2022), as well as the relationship between religion and morality policy-making (Euchner, 2019) exemplify one of the most common scientific topics under study within this disciplinary niche. Analysis of politicians' individual religious beliefs and communication behaviour during political campaigning is much rarer, especially in Europe, not only because religious identity is often considered to be a private matter and in some countries is strictly separated from state matters (cf. France) but also because data gathering (both online and offline) is extremely difficult. While offline religious profiles of European politicians have been provided in some single, highly interesting projects (for the EP, see Foret, 2015a, Foret, 2015b (ed.), Foret, 2023 (ed.), Euchner and Herrmann, 2023), online religious profiles have not yet been systematically assessed (there have, however, been some online profiles for the US; see, for example, Bramlett and Burge, 2021; Gade et al., 2021). The only subgroup of research that touches on this topic includes scholarship dealing with the social media behaviour of right-wing populist actors and online Islamic hate speech (cf. Schwörer, 2018; Marchetti et al., 2022; Schwörer and Romero-Vidal, 2020; Giorgi, 2022).

2.3 Religion and party competition

Despite being a relatively new area in the context of political science studies, religion has played a relevant role in party competition literature for several decades. The renowned theory of party cleavages established by Lipset and Stein (1967) explains the historical and sociological roots of political party systems in Western democracies and the relevance of religion within this process. Besides a centre-periphery, urban–rural and class (left–right) cleavage, the authors stress the divide between state and church as an additional aspect shaping the emergence of party systems. Specifically, conflicts regarding secularisation and the role of religion in public life divide people and institutions and have motivated the creation of Christian Democratic or religious parties on the one hand and secular and liberal parties on the other hand. Rokkan and Lipset argued that by the 1920s, party systems in Western Europe had largely "frozen." This means that the major political cleavages and the corresponding party alignments had stabilised and would persist, even as societies modernised. Today, we observe a mixed picture: there are still some dividing lines in voter behaviour and party competition, though new issues (e.g., environmentalism, immigration) have created additional or cross-cutting cleavages (cf. Norris and Inglehardt, 2019; Kriesi et al., 2008). In line with the theory of secularisation, which proposes

a decreasing relevance of religion in society, we can also observe that religion is also becoming less relevant in politics and party competition. This is manifested in the shrinking relevance of the religious-secular divide among parties and voters and empirically reflected in the decline of Christian Democratic parties, which have encountered significant intra-party conflicts in terms of religious beliefs and values (Euchner and Preidel, 2016, 2018; Duncan, 2006). Nonetheless, a new player is "bringing religion back in" to party competition in Europe: right-wing populist and conservative parties (cf. Schwörer, 2024 – this issue). According to Marzouki et al. (2016), these parties "hijack" religion or (mis)use religious narratives to "feed" their illiberal political aims. Especially at the EU level, religion serves as a "vector of 'scandalisation'", with which controversies are created in order to sharpen the political profile of one group vis-à-vis its competitors. Thus, in line with the post-secularisation thesis, religion has gained new attention in party competition literature. Despite this, the routines, forms and dynamics of this religious influx within the existing party structure are still not fully clear, especially given the slow shift from offline to online competition. This transformation of political communication brings in new complexity but also provides an opportunity to dig deeper into the more individualised use of religion by political actors. While the digital religion literature provides clear evidence of a more individualised nature of believing and belonging (cf. discussion on "networked religion"; Campbell, 2023), the political science literature so far falls short in terms of conceptualising and assessing these forms at the individual and party-political levels (cf. Rodenhausen forthcoming – this issue).

This paper intends to contribute to the existing gaps (1) by developing a stronger theoretical dialogue between both disciplines (online religious studies and political science studies) which aims to produce a more careful and differentiated conceptualisation of the religious profiles of politicians, and (2) by compiling and analysing a large dataset of religious references made by candidates running for the 2019 election to the EP. In doing so, we are one of the first studies collecting, systematising and assessing the online religious profiles of politicians.

3 Theoretical framework: religious–secular party cleavages and online campaigning in second-order elections

EP elections constitute second-order elections, meaning that they are less salient for the larger electorate and somewhat different in terms of their party-political dynamics (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt et al., 2020). They are less aligned with EU politics than one might intuitively expect and always need to be interpreted in the context of national politics (Braun, 2021; de Vries, 2018). In line with this, the political agenda of the large European party groups like the EVP (Group of the European People's Party) and the SVP (Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament) are largely unknown to the national electorate. Thus, candidates running for EP elections are generally judged based on the profile and reputation of their national party in the home country. Accordingly, regardless of their context (offline or online), campaigns refer to European (transnational) topics but often contextualise these topics in terms of national

socio-cultural singularities and consequences, as well as national party politics (de Vries, 2018; Braun and Schmitt, 2020). Therefore, religious references are more intuitive for some European candidates than others depending on the religious profiles of national parties, national voters or prevailing state–church regimes (Foret, 2023; Euchner and Herrmann, 2023). In contrast to many national political institutions, however, there is a consensus among European elites that religion and politics should be separated (Foret 2015a, p. 60–62, Foret 2014, p. 131). According to Foret (2015a, p. 282), there is a "very weak and diffuse place of religious belonging and practice in the selection of supranational rulers" (e.g., MEPS, commissioners, judges etc.); consequently, religious identity is no longer a criterion for the capacity to hold public office. While the religious inspirations of the founding fathers of the EU are well-documented (see Foret, 2015a, pp. 43ff; Hien, 2019), secularisation and the decline of church members have been the dominant themes among the majority of European countries. Furthermore, more individualised approaches to spirituality that avoid traditional faiths and create flexible ways to relate to belief are commonplace in many European countries; these trends are particularly visible in online communication (Campbell, 2023) and according to Foret (2015a, p. 60) are also "lived" by elites within the EP.[1] Against this background, we propose the following general expectation:

> *Expectation 1a*: Religion plays a subordinate role in online campaigning among prospective MEPs.

Yet, as argued above, the religious profile of the national party might influence the campaigns of individual candidates running for the EP. In some countries, classical secular-religious divides within party systems might be still vivid due to considerable amounts of religious voters and the support of long-established political parties with religious roots, such as Christian Democrats. Germany, the Netherlands or Spain, for instance, are known for historically strong secular-religious party conflict structures (cf. Engeli et al., 2012). Furthermore, more individualised ways of referring to and speaking about religion are likely to be visible in online campaigns. In contrast to written forms of offline campaigning (e.g., via posters, flyers or party manifestos), online campaigning via social media offers more flexibility when discussing individual values and beliefs. Accordingly, references to religion might be more likely despite the rather "secular profile" of politics in the EP. Therefore, we also have the following expectation:

> *Expectation 2:* Members of national parties with religious roots are more likely to refer to religion in online campaigning than members of parties with secular roots.

Additionally, we expect candidates of right-wing populist parties to refer more often to religion in online campaigning than other candidates as they regularly instrumentalise religion for illiberal and nationalist ideas, creating in-group and out-group distinctions (cf.

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1 Although these dynamics may have changed slightly following the elections in 2024 and the strong support for populist right-wing parties, the general picture across all elites should remain stable.

Minkenberg, 2021; Haynes, 2021; Ozzano, 2021; Rosenberg, 2023; Steven, 2023; Tepe, 2022). Typically, migration and EU enlargement are relevant and contested topics in election campaigns at the EU level. References to the Christian roots of the EU might be stressed to argue against any enlargement involving the integration of non-Christian majority countries (e.g., Turkey, Serbia) or countries dominated by other Christian confessions (e.g., Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine). Stricter migration regimes and anti-Islam rhetoric aiming to limit the number of Muslim refugees might be alternative lines of discourse relating to religion. Accordingly, we propose the following:

> *Expectation 3:* Candidates of parties using anti-Islam rhetoric are more likely to refer to religion in online campaigning than members of other parties.

4 Research design, data and methods

4.1 General approach

We employ a mixed-methods approach to answer our research questions, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis methods. Furthermore, we integrate deductive and inductive approaches to knowledge creation. While deductive procedures are primarily applied to respond to research questions 1 (relevance of religion) and 3 (explanation of the variation in religious references among politicians), inductive procedures become relevant in the context of research question 2 as they will allow us to systematise the ways in which politicians refer to religion during their campaigns.

4.2 Case selection: online campaigns for the 2019 EP elections in four member states

To analyse religious communication among political actors in the digital sphere across Europe, we focus on the online election campaigns of politicians from four member states (Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom) running for the 2019 EP elections. As explained above, we decided to study EP elections instead of national elections; however, it is important to note that these elections do not work independently from national elections, which have considerable consequences for the strategic behaviour of political parties. For instance, we know that the level of emphasis on EU issues differs at the different levels of governance because less is at stake in EP elections; as a result, parties do not need to strategically deemphasise potentially conflictive EU issues. Moreover, political parties always try to be credible to their voters and, therefore, try to avoid changing their positions on specific issues over different elections. Accordingly, a focus on electoral campaigns for the EP is particularly attractive and comes with many methodological and theoretical benefits. First, a systematic comparison of political parties and actors across Europe is possible without any comprehensive control of country-specific or temporal alternative explanatory factors, which is necessary when comparing party-political behaviour during national campaigns taking place at very different points in time. Second, in terms of theoretical accounts, it is possible to consider and interpret the impact of varying state–church relationships (i.e.,

collaborative regimes, separatist regimes) and societal secularisation decrees among voters on party-political behaviour in terms of religion.

We limit the analysis to candidates from four member states (Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Sweden). Due to the highly innovative analytical and methodological angle being applied, there are very few validated dictionaries in terms of "religion & politics"; however, a validated dictionary is essential for a reliable automated analysis of tweets. Most existing dictionaries are in English and directed at the US context, and – to our knowledge – there are only two dictionaries including alternative European languages (Frey et al., 2023; Schwörer, 2024). Despite the limited selection of countries, we still have a very rich dataset including a total of 853 candidates and 97,306 tweets. Additionally, we cover countries with different church-state regimes (e.g., cooperative in Germany, "accommodative" in the Netherlands, and state–church traditions in the United Kingdom and Sweden until 2001; Fox, 2015, p. 45) and varying majority religions (e.g., Anglicans in the United Kingdom, Lutheran-Protestants in Sweden, and an equilibrium between Catholics and Protestants in Germany and the Netherlands). This variety in religious opportunity structures allows us to generalise the findings across a large set of member states.

4.3 Quantitative analysis: dictionary approach, variables and operationalisation

We make use of the "Political Campaigning on Twitter During the 2019 EP Election Campaign" dataset produced by Stier et al. (2020). This allows us to study the use of Twitter/X by candidates from all European member states running for the 2019 European elections. Specifically, the study period is between 23 April and 30 May 2019, roughly 5 to 6 weeks. In addition, the focus is on candidates whose parties received more than 2% of the national votes. Compared to accessing the Twitter/X API or scraping the tweets from candidates' profiles, we do not need to worry about missing data. Overall, the dataset includes more than 500,000 tweets by 6,506 elite actors, meaning candidates and *Spitzenkandidaten*. Although this has definitely changed in more recent times where we can observe a much more differentiated world of online communication, during the 2014 and 2019 EP elections Twitter/X was still one of the most widely used social media channels for political campaigning in Europe (Nulty et al., 2016).

The final dataset consists of 853 candidates in Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Sweden. In total, these candidates have generated 97,306 tweets. Note that we have excluded retweets from the analysis. However, a significant proportion (65,252 tweets) comes from the UK. 9,419 tweets are from German candidates, 9,186 from Dutch candidates, and 13,449 from Swedish candidates.

4.3.1 Dependent variable

Our dependent variable is the share of tweets for each candidate over the entire election campaign that contain religious references. We apply the multilingual dictionary by Frey et al. (2023) to detect religious terms in candidates' tweets. The dictionary can be applied to text in German, English, Dutch, and Swedish. The English dictionary terms can be found in the Appendix A.1. In order to avoid a high number of false positives, we additionally used a generative large language model for zero-shot text classification, Open AI's

gpt-4o-mini-2024-07-18, to classify the tweets returned by the dictionary approach. As the dictionary has been developed for the analysis of parliamentary speeches, it can return quite a high number of false positives in the social media context. For example, the German word "Kreuz" can have the meaning of crucifix but also be used in the election context by asking voters to cast their votes in the EU elections. The large language model eliminates such false positives. Due to language capabilities, we opt for a closed-source model. We aim to ensure some reproducibility by setting a low temperature and a seed. Further, we compared the model's performance to manual coding decisions by a student assistant. Specifically, we compare coding decisions for a subset of German and British tweets. Krippendorff's Alpha is 0.65 and the simple agreement is 0.83 for 245 British tweets. For 80 German tweets, Krippendorff's Alpha is 0.62 and simple agreement 0.84. The prompt for the classification task can be found in the Appendix A.2.

4.3.2 Further variables

The dataset includes three further variables that are relevant to our analysis: gender (binary), incumbency status (binary) and list placement (numeric). In addition, the dataset provides an identifier that allows us to add party-level data from the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), which provides information on the general left–right position of each party as well as ratings for religious principles and anti-Islam rhetoric. All three variables range between 0 and 10, with higher values indicating more right-leaning positions, stronger religious principles and stronger anti-Islam rhetoric, respectively. Finally, we have added a categorial country variable.

4.4 Qualitative content analysis: procedure and coding scheme

Besides a quantitative analysis of the communication behaviour on Twitter/X of prospective MEPs, we also explore tweets qualitatively. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of a selected set of tweets by German and British candidates. The candidates from those countries were selected due to our comprehensive language and socio-cultural knowledge, which is essential for fine-tuned analyses of religious references as symbolic meanings and metaphors are prominent. Overall, 322 tweets—245 from British candidates and 77 from German candidates—were manually coded. In the British case, each tweet was randomly selected. In the German case, we were able to code a much higher share of the sample due to the limited number of total and relevant tweets. With the support of the software MaxQdA, all selected tweets were carefully read and classified into overarching coding categories as well as sub-codes. This procedure followed an inductive logic.

Table 1 summarises the coding scheme developed based on the coding of all tweets. Some exemplary tweets and their coding categories are offered in Table A.4 in the Appendix. We distilled seven overarching categories into which all tweets with religious references could be subordinated: (I) religion and politics (e.g., European Community, democracy, religion–politics relationship, migration), (II) believe system and religions (i.e., Islam, Judaism, Christianity), (III) religious ethics (e.g., values, religious eschatology, interreligious dialogue, gender diversity, morality policy), (IV) religious prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Islamophobia, Antisemitism, a position

TABLE 1 Coding system.

Category	Sub-category
I Religion and politics	European Community
	Democracy
	(National) Religion–politics relationship
II Belief system and religions	Christianity
	Islam/Islamism
	Judaism
	Alevism
	Atheism
III Religious ethics	Values
	Religious eschatology
	Morality policy
	Women's rights/Gender equality
	Gender diversity
	Migration
IV Religious prejudice and discrimination	Religious affiliation
	Islamophobia
	Antisemitism
	Position against Antisemitism
	Anti-Christianity
	Promotion of religious tolerance
V Religiously motivated terror	Terror/Violence
	Vandalism
VI Religious institutions in transition	Secularisation
	Internal reforms
	Interreligious dialogue
VII Humorous reflection/Sarcasm	

Source: Own compilation based on $n = 322$ tweets (245 from British and 77 from German candidates).

against Antisemitism, promotion of religious tolerance, etc.), (V) religiously motivated terror (e.g., terror/violence, vandalism), (VI) religious institutions in transition, and (VII) humorous/sarcastic references to religion.

5 Empirical analysis

The empirical analysis is structured in line with the two methodological approaches: first, we provide some quantitative insights regarding the salience of religion in online campaigns for EP candidates; and second, we explore selected tweets on a qualitative basis.

5.1 Salience of religion in online campaigns and variation among candidates

As described in the methods section, the empirical analysis relies on 97,306 tweets by 853 candidates running for EP in

Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Roughly 1.25% of these tweets contain a religious term defined by the dictionary and validated by the large language model (Germany: 0.9%, Netherlands: 2.85%, Sweden: 2.38%, UK: 0.84%; for all terms included in our dictionary, see Appendix A.1). This is a small share, signalling that religion is not a key topic in electoral campaigns for the EP and reflecting the general trend towards secularisation in Europe. Thus, our first expectation is supported. This subordinate role of religion in political online campaigning is also in line with the recent research on religion in "offline political arenas" of the EP (cf. Foret, 2015a, 2015b; cf. Special Issue by Foret, 2023). This study indicates that although religion has "limited salience in the functioning of the EP and in the practices of its members," it may function as "a symbolic marker of distinction between and within existing belongings, and leads to a fragmentation rather than to the polarisation of clear-cut coalitions shaped by religious beliefs or issues" (Foret, 2023, p. 345). Additionally, "the capacity of religious actors or issues to expand the debate about European integration is not demonstrated" (ibid). In other words, despite religion's marginal salience in the functioning of the EP it seems to be an important symbolic factor indirectly structuring politics, albeit in a less clear-cut way than typically assumed in the literature on national campaigns and secular–religious party conflicts (cf. Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2021).

In light of this discussion, the following analysis will describe the distribution of tweets with religious references among national party groups. Figure 1 displays the relationship between secular/religious-oriented political parties (cf. CHES project) and the share of tweets with religious terms. Parties are coloured by country. Note that the Brexit party, Change UK, and the Independents are not included in the graph since the CHES project's 2019 expert survey did not cover these parties. This first visual inspection provides insights at both the country and party levels. Overall, the range of the share of religious terms in candidates' tweets is highest among Dutch parties.

At the party level, we see some evidence that parties with religious roots have a higher usage of religious terms in their tweets (cf. expectation 2). The cases of the Reformed Political Party (SGP) in the Netherlands, the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union (CSU) in Germany and the Christian Democrats (KD) in Sweden illustrate this well. However, it is clear that there are also parties with lower scores on the religious principles scale compared to their respective national competitors that have produced a significant number of tweets including religious terms. Examples include the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands and the Sweden Democrats (SD), indicating that, while they are less clear-cut than one might expect, classical religious-secular party conflicts are somewhat visible in online campaigning at the European level.

Figure 2 addresses this observation by highlighting the relationship between anti-Islam rhetoric and the share of tweets with religious terms at the party level across the four nations. Both the Party for Freedom (PVV) and the Sweden Democrats (SD) display high levels of anti-Islam rhetoric, which seems to be reflected in the higher share of tweets with religious terms produced by members of these parties. The Forum for Democracy (FvD) also scores highly for anti-Islam rhetoric but ranks among closer to the average for Dutch parties. Similarly, Alternative for Germany (AfD) scores highly for
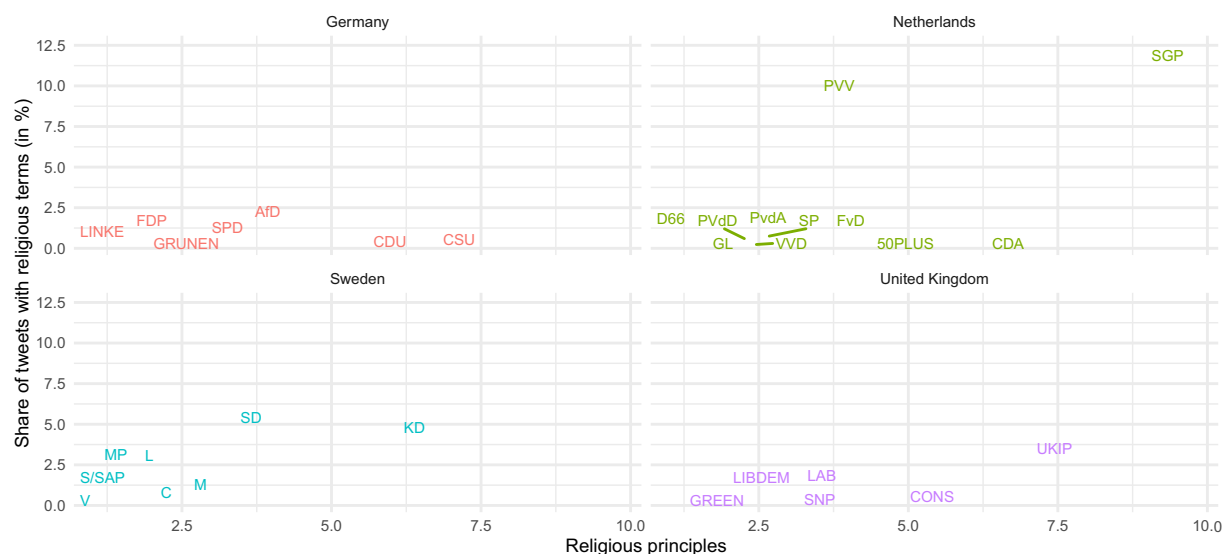
FIGURE 1
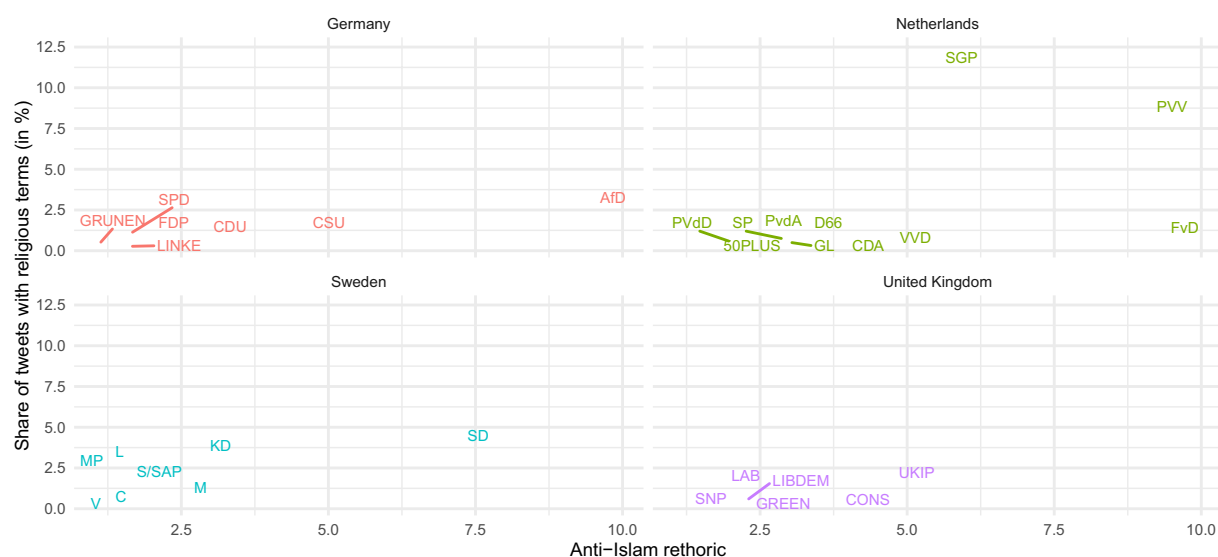The relationship between religious principles and share of tweets with religious terms.

FIGURE 2
The relationship between anti-Islam rhetoric and share of tweets with religious terms.

both variables. Consequently, at the party level there is support for expectation 3.

Figure 3 focuses on the individual level, i.e., the candidates themselves, and therefore explores this study's key topic of whether candidates refer to religion during online campaigns for EP elections and how they do so (research question 2). The boxplot is complemented with the actual data points, each of which represents a candidate. For most parties, there are clusters. There are, however, substantial intra-party variations as illustrated by the distribution among candidates from the Dutch Reformed Political Party (SGP) and the Swedish Christian Democrats (KD). Further, a considerable number of candidates do *not* use religious terms at all in their online communication on Twitter/X. An overview of absolute number of tweets at party level can be found in the Appendix. In order to provide

FIGURE 3
Candidates' share (in %) of tweets with religious terms by party.
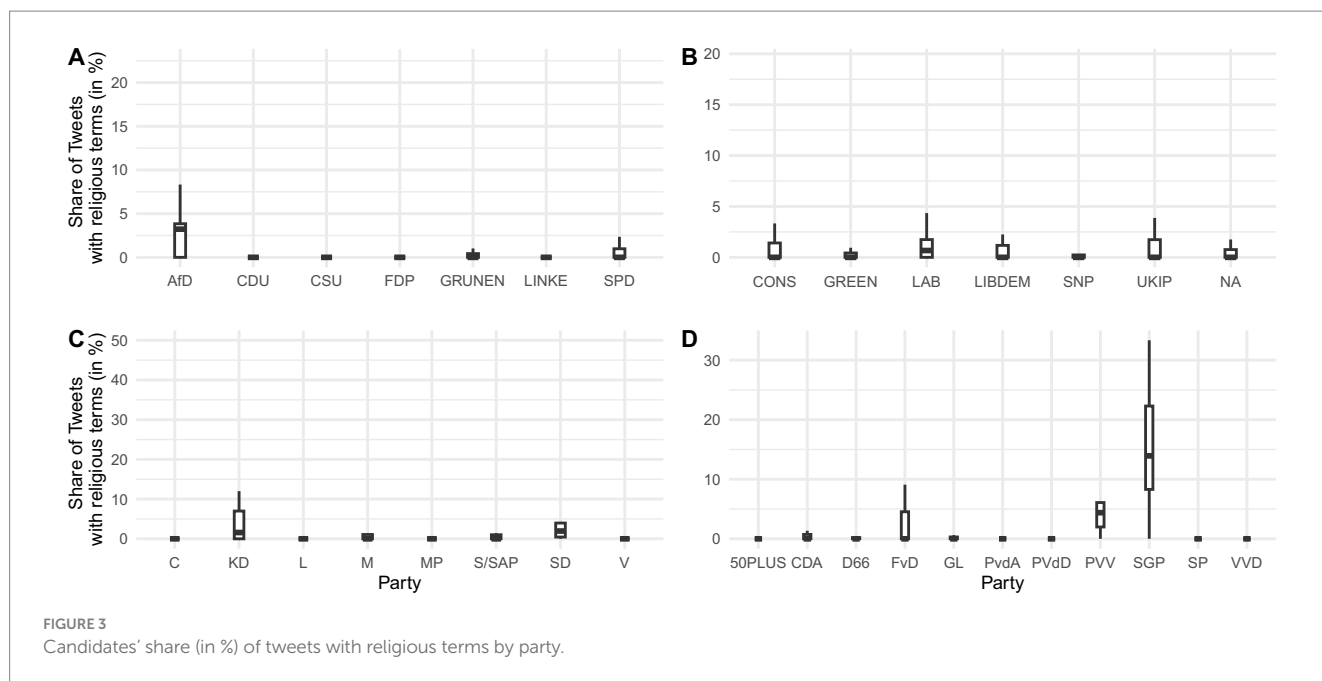
more solid answers to our second research question, we run multivariate OLS regression with the following form:

$$Share\ religious\ terms_i = X_i + Y_j + country + \varepsilon$$

The share of religious terms at the individual level is predicted (a) by a set of individual-level variables including gender, incumbency status and list place, (b) by a set of party-level variables, namely how the candidate's party scores on the CHES items regarding religious principles and anti-Islam rhetoric, and (c) by controlling for country. The full model and a set of regression diagnostics can be found in the Appendix. Our results indicate statistically significant effects for candidates running in the Netherlands and Sweden compared to candidates running in Germany. Being a candidate in one of these countries is associated with a higher likelihood of using religious terms in online communication. Furthermore, if a candidate's party has stronger religious principles or anti-Islam rhetoric, that individual is more likely to include religious terms in his or her tweets (see Figure 4).

5.2 Contents of religious references during online campaigning

Having discussed the "religious references" of candidates running for the EP in a more abstract sense in the previous section, in this subchapter we provide a more detailed assessment of the content of these references. What are German and British candidates talking about when referring to religion?

In both countries, the two most prevalent coding categories include "religion & politics" and "believe system and religions" more generally, followed by "religious ethics" and "religious prejudice and discrimination" (cf. Tables 2, 3). More specifically, the candidates often referred to religion when talking about the history and future of the EU, when discussing the (formal) relationship between religion and politics,

and/or when describing the "religious profile" of their opponents. Christianity and Judaism as well as religious values are further themes dominating the online discourse in both countries. As the emphasis of topics (sub-categories) varies somewhat between the two nations, we present the discourse separately by country in the following passages.

5.2.1 References to religion by German candidates

German candidates most often referred to religion when aiming to highlight or critically discuss the relationship between religion and politics in the national context. However, the relevance of religion for the EU is often also stressed. This is particularly the case for candidates from the Christian Democratic Union, which is a party with religious roots. For example, Dr. Andreas Schwab posted: "EVP-Wahlkampf bei der JU: Eine Kirche in jedem Dorf https://t.co/bDUhgWehDr via @faznet @EPPGroup." (translated by DeepL, 2024: "EPP election campaign of the JU: A church in every village.") In other words, a candidate from the Christian Democrats in Germany stressed the role of churches in support of the electoral competition of the EVP, the main religious party group in the EP. An alternative tweet by Manfred Weber, member of the Christian Democratic Union and speaker of the EPP, argues in English:

> "Christian democrats are the founding fathers of the EU. Now the time has come again to defend the European idea against nationalists and egoists. We need to strengthen our democratic process and introduce an independent rule of law mechanism." (Manfred Weber, CSU)

Candidates from the Social Democrats, a secular-oriented party, also referred to religion in their online campaign but these references are different in tone. They informed their followers about religious events and their speeches at those events with European references:

> "Wenn man die Herausforderungen sieht, die vor uns liegen, ist für mich die Antwort klar: #MehrEuropa! Hier der Artikel der @
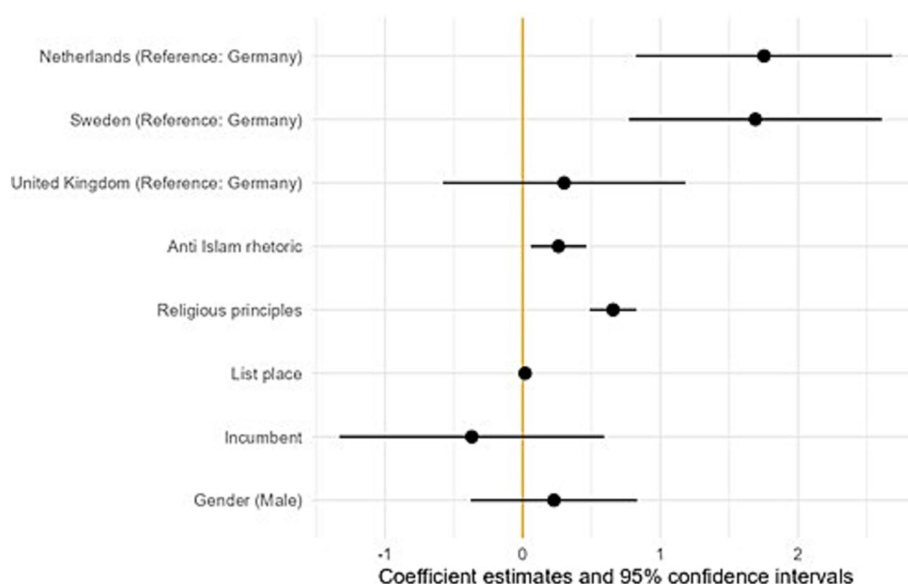
FIGURE 4
Model plot. Share of tweets with religious terms as dependent variable. The full model is presented in the Appendix.

SiegenerZeitung zum Event des Christlichen Jugenddorfwerks vergangenen Montag." https://t.co/F91UYoYVR2#Europaistdie Antwort (Birgit Sippel, SPD)

Translated: "Looking at the challenges that lie ahead, the answer is clear to me: #MoreEurope! Here is the article from the @ SiegenerZeitung on the event organized by the Christian Youth Village last Monday." (by DeepL, 2024)

A third example in this line includes a tweet by the German candidate, Arne Lietz, from the Social Democrats. During a visit to a Jewish cemetery he stressed Europe's origin as a great peace project and the current threats to that project, including xenophobia and right-wing extremist formulations and demands:

"Jüdischer Friedhofsbesuch in Halberstadt: Europa sei ein großes Friedensprojekt, so Lietz, das gerade in Gefahr gerate. Ausgrenzung, Ausländerfeindlichkeit und rechtsextremistische Formulierungen und Forderungen würden aktuell wieder hoffähig." https://t.co/L8H7ifXCUD@SPDEuropahttps://t.co/ GsLqEoJ2pz (Arne Lietz, SPD)

Translated: "Jewish cemetery visit in Halberstadt: Europe is a great peace project, says Lietz, which is currently in danger. Exclusion, xenophobia and right-wing extremist formulations and demands are currently becoming acceptable again." (by DeepL, 2024)

Lietz's tweet also exemplifies how religion intersects with European and local politics. When reporting on local political events in their constituencies, candidates' responses may be influenced by their own religious roots and the characteristics of their electorate. At the same time, they will link these events to larger European phenomena, for example, the founding history of the EU.
"Classical conflicts" between secular and religious-oriented parties are also evident. For example, Reinhard Bütikofer from the German

Greens criticised Annegrate Kramp-Karrenbauer from the Christian Democrats for not being "familiar with the Bible":

"Da hat @AKK ein böses Eigentor geschossen: Mangelnde Bibelfestigkeit, gepaart mit Selbstgerechtigkeit von alttestamentarischen Ausmaßen, wem soll das gefallen? Sie sollte mal Psalm 1,1 lesen: Wohl dem, der … nicht sitzt, da die Spötter sitzen." (Reinhard Bütikofer, GRUENE)

Translated: "@AKK has scored a nasty own goal: A lack of biblical rigor, coupled with self-righteousness of Old Testament proportions, who's supposed to like that? She should read Psalm 1: 1: "Blessed is he who… does not sit where scoffers sit." (by DeepL, 2024)

The following tweet by an Alternative for Germany candidate also aims to highlight secular–religious divides, arguing that the party acts in accordance with God's mission, unlike other actors. Using references to religion to exclude and differentiate is a typical strategy of right-wing political parties, also in other countries:

"Zumindest sind wir mit Gott und der Geschichte im Reinen. Anders gesagt: Der Erfolg der AfD ist nur IHR (Theodizee-) Problem, nicht unseres. Verstehen Sie den Post als Erinnerung daran. Nobiscum deus." (Dr H.-T. Tillschneider, AfD)

Translated: "At least we are at peace with God and history. In other words, the success of the AfD is only THEIR (theodicy) problem, not ours. Take the post as a reminder of that. Nobiscum deus." (by DeepL, 2024)

In terms of the second overarching category "believe system and religions," the discourse among German candidates primarily refers to Christianity, which is the majority religion in Germany, while Islam

TABLE 2 German candidates' references to religion.

Category	Sub-category	Number of assigned codes	Percent of assigned codes	Percent per category
I Religion & politics	**European Community**	21	**14.58**	**31.9**
	Democracy	6	4.17	
	Religion–politics relationship	19	**13.19**	
II Belief system and religions	**Christianity**	21	**14.58**	**27.1**
	Islam	8	5.56	
	Islamism	3	2.08	
	Judaism	6	4.17	
	Alevism	1	0.69	
	Atheism	0	0.00	
III Religious ethics	Values	16	11.11	**15.3**
	Religious eschatology	0	0	
	Moral policy	1	0.69	
	Women's rights/gender equality	1	0.69	
	Gender diversity	1	0.69	
	Migration	3	2.08	
IV Religious prejudice and discrimination	Religious affiliation	3	2.08	13.2
	Islamophobia	5	3.47	
	Antisemitism	0	0	
	Position against Antisemitism	2	1.39	
	Anti-Christianity	3	2.08	
	Promotion of religious tolerance	6	4.17	
V Religiously motivated terror	Terror/Violence	6	4.17	4.2
	Vandalism	0	0	
VI Religious institutions in transition	Secularization	1	0.69	4.2
	Internal reforms	1	0.69	
	Interreligious dialogue	4	2.78	
VII Humorous reflection/Sarcasm		6	4.17	4.2
Total		144		≈100

A total of 77 tweets from German EU parliamentarians in German and English were analysed. Of these, 27 lacked a discernible religious reference. The remaining 52 tweets could be coded multiple times (cf. 'Number of tweets' = 144). Differences in percentages are due to rounding. Source: Own compilation. The most important sub-coding categories are marked in bold.

and Judaism are mentioned more seldom. Within the third most prominent category, "religious ethics," explicit references to religious values seem to dominate. Surprisingly, these references were not made primarily by candidates from the Christian Democratic parties but by candidates running for the Greens, the Liberals or the Social Democrats. The following tweet by Birgit Sippel of the Social Democrats exemplifies this trend:

"Die geretteten Menschen konnten endlich an Land. Aber: #Seenotrettung ist kein Verbrechen und darf nicht kriminalisiert werden! Alle #EU-Mitgliedstaaten müssen sich ihrer humanitären und christlichen Verantwortung stellen. #EUWakeUp @solidarityatsea #EuropaistdieAntwort." (Birgit Sippel, SPD)

Translated: "The rescued people were finally able to get ashore. But: #sea rescue is not a crime and must not be criminalized! All #EU member states must face up to their humanitarian and Christian responsibility." (by DeepL, 2024)

A further example is the following post by Karoline Preisler of the Liberals:

"@heinrichpreibs1 @EKD Ich bin Christ und kann daher die AfD nicht wählen. Verantwortung, Nächstenliebe, Demut und Chancengerechtigkeit sowie die Ablehnung von Hass und Ausgrenzung sind christliche Themen, die mir bei der AfD fehlen. 2. Mose 23,2 Du sollst der Menge nicht auf dem Weg zum Bösen folgen." (Karoline Preisler, FDP)

Translated: "@heinrichpreibs1 @EKD I am a Christian and therefore cannot vote for the AfD. Responsibility, charity, humility and equal opportunities as well as the rejection of hatred and exclusion are Christian themes that I find lacking

TABLE 3 British candidates' references to religion.

Category	Sub-category	Number of assigned codes	Percent of assigned codes	Percent
I Religion & politics	European Community	7	2.17	**19.9**
	Democracy	7	2.17	
	Religion–politics relationship	**50**	**15.48**	
II Belief system and religions	Christianity	20	6.19	**27.6**
	Islam	21	6.5	
	Islamism	9	2.79	
	Judaism	**36**	**11.15**	
	Alevism	0	0	
	Atheism	3	0.93	
III Religious ethics	**Values**	**31**	**9.6**	13.3
	Religious eschatology	1	0.31	
	Moral policy	1	0.31	
	Women's rights/gender equality	16	4.95	
	Gender diversity	4	1.24	
	Migration	2	0.62	
		4	1.24	
IV Religious prejudice and discrimination	Religious affiliation	15	4.64	**20.7**
	Islamophobia	7	2.17	
	Antisemitism	**9**	**2.79**	
	Position against Antisemitism	**20**	**6.19**	
	Anti-Christianity	4	1.24	
	Promotion of religious tolerance	12	3.72	
V Religiously motivated terror	Terror/Violence	11	3.41	4.6
	Vandalism	4	1.24	
VI Religious institutions in transition	Secularization	5	1.55	7.5
	Internal reforms	3	0.93	
	Interreligious dialogue	16	4.95	
VI Humorous reflection/Sarcasm		21	6.5	6.5
Total		323		100

A total of 245 tweets from England EU parliamentarians were analysed. Of these, 127 lacked a discernible religious reference. The remaining 118 tweets could be coded multiple times (cf. 'Number of tweets' = 323). Differences in percentages are due to rounding. Source: Own compilation. The most important sub-coding categories are marked in bold.

in the AfD. Exodus 23: 2 Thou shalt not follow the multitude in the way of evil." (by DeepL, 2024)

Furthermore, Jutta Paulus of the Greens stressed the relationship between religious values and ethics:

"@pedromiramis Dazu braucht es keine Religion. Anstand reicht." (Jutta Paulus, GRUENE)

Translated: "pedromiramis You don't need religion for that. Decency is enough." (by DeepL, 2024)

Although Islamophobia and religious-related terror are further topics relevant for German candidates in the context of online electoral campaigns, they are subordinate to other topics (see Table 2).

5.2.2 References to religion by British candidates

Moving on to British candidates running for the EP election, religion was most often referred to when speaking about the general relationship between religion and politics (in about 15% of all assigned codes) and hardly mentioned in relation to Europe, despite the prevalence of Brexit during this election. As shown in Figure 2, candidates representing UKIP and the Conservatives regularly referred to religion during the study period. In our qualitative analysis, Labour candidates also made religious references regularly. Indeed, the electoral campaign for the 2019 EP election was a "religiously related scandal" for the Labour Party and its leader Jeremy Corbyn, who was held responsible for alleged incidents of antisemitism within the party by different candidates and his team. In October 2020, one and half year after the EP elections, Jeremy Corbyn was even suspended from the party over his inappropriate reaction to a highly critical report on Antisemitism, who "found Labour responsible for

unlawful harassment and discrimination during Mr. Corbyn's four-and-a-half years as leader." (BBC, 2020):

> "@lenirtpls @prime666 @lkraftman @robdelaney @OwenJones84 @UKLabour @YoungLabourUK @YoungLabWomen @ClareHymer @LabGND @LabourStudents @LabourDesign @EmilyThornberry @JonAshworth @PeoplesMomentum I'm not Jewish. But I think voting Labour today sends the wrong message about labour antisemitism. We shouldn't tolerate racism when we cast our vote." (Frances Weetman, UK Change)

> "@DrStedx @bookmonstercat1 @tazbuckfaster I resigned my labour membership over Corbyn's othering of British Jews and you think that I'd claim European Jews aren't European? Give me a break." (Frances Weetman, UK Change)

> "Fully back London Conservatives' call for Labour mayor Khan to condemn Jeremy Corbyn's foreword for an antisemitic book. Will Khan do the right thing and standup for Jewish Londoners - stand up to comrade Corbyn?" https://t.co/9lA4M9VHOe (Amandeep Singh Bhogal, ACRE)

> "@SussexFriends @RabbiAndreaZan @Debslyons @lloyd_rm @capedjoosader @GnasherJew @LabourAgainstAS Thank you - I do hope to be able to continue to serve in public life, and speak out against #Antisemitism, if elected to the European Parliament on the 23rd as a #ChangeUK representative. I hope friends in the Jewish community will consider me when casting their votes." (Warren Morgan, UK Change)

Besides this very specific event sharpening the divide between secular and religious party political actors in the UK, there were further comments on the British state–church relationship and how specific candidates positioned themselves within that context. Judy Moore (UKIP), for instance, stressed a closer dialogue between Muslim organisations and the Houses of Parliament:

> "Tonight at The palace of Westminster, The Political and Secular Islam Movements with MP Ian Paisley JR and Imam Seyran Ates." https://t.co/wjwoAzXuhy (Judy Moore, UKIP)

Moreover, Andrew Graystone (Change UK) suggested reforms in terms of the political power and funding of the Anglican Church:

> "@midiclorian @alex44334433 @JayneOzanne @churchofengland @BBCNews I agree completely Miriam. But I'm afraid that the Archbishop's Council resolved in September NOT to allow independence in managing safeguarding failures. Perhaps it would help if @CofE worshippers agree to withhold cash until the church agrees to independent management?" (Andrew Graystone, Change UK)

The state–church relationship and religious values were also discussed in relation to the upbringing of children. For example, Nora Mulready of Change UK made the following argument through multiple tweets:

> "@sunny_hundal On the quote about children and loyalty to the secular state, I think it is wrong, in fact it's demonstrably wrong.

> It's pessimistic about the spiritual appeal of the liberal, secular philosophy when contesting for hearts/minds/loyalty against a conservative religious upbringing." (Nora Mulready, Change UK)

> "@sunny_hundal Also suggests deeply religious ("pious") people will inevitably raise children who are inherently hostile to secular state, which is also demonstrably not the case, shown by 1000s of 2nd gen citizens (like me) who came from religious culture & live v happily in UK melting pot." (Nora Mulready, Change UK)

In line with a religious ethics understand also visible in the German electoral campaigns, UK change candidates ask for more "honesty in political discourse" by all kind of political actors, independent of their religious imprint:

> "Jesus. What an astonishing error. This had to be pursued. We can't let the politics of misrepresentation go unchallenged anymore. Left, right, liberal, conservative, religious, secular, whatever - all must stand up for honesty in political discourse. Bottom line." #ChangePolitics (Nora Mulready, UK Change)

Parallel to some German Christian Democrats, Margaret Ferrier of the Scottish National Party (SNP), a party with social democratic roots, highlighted the decay of many (small) churches and acts of vandalism:

> "@ArchdiocGlasgow It seems no place of worship is immune to this kind of mindless attack. Many churches leave their doors open to allow entry for prayer or quiet reflection. It's been noticeable over the last few years that many are now locked and it's precisely to avoid this kind of incident." (Margaret Ferrier, SNP)

In summary, in both countries, political candidates discussed different aspects of how religion and politics should interfere, with the underlying conflicts between secular and religious parties visible in both nations. However, British electoral discourse seems to have been heavily influenced by a specific scandal, with various members of the Labour Party being accused of Antisemitism. Thus, Judaism played a much stronger role in the online campaign in Britain in comparison to Germany. Second, while pro-European statements in Germany prevailed, especially in relation to religious references, such a pattern is absent in the British discourse; this is less surprising given that the context of Brexit, with the UK's formal withdrawal from the EU taking place several months after the election in January 2020.

5.3 Digital religion "lived" by politicians: do politicians refer to their religious identity and changed practices?

This section aims to discuss political communication more in line with digital religion studies and the idea of "networked religion and community," as well as convergent practices in digital spaces. As indicated in the previous section, the electoral campaigns in both countries were dominated by discussion about the relationship between state and religion, while candidates' own religious identities, practices or values were secondary. These findings may be due to the social media platform selected because Twitter/X content is generally

more likely to involve business and politics rather than one's private life. Nonetheless, there are a few examples that display how politicians position themselves in religious online discourse, e.g., stressing (their own) religiosity, mentioning important religious holidays or talking about religious (offline) events.

A couple of politicians explicitly mentioned their religious identity in order to defend certain statements. Surprisingly, these discussions are not dominated by Christians and there are examples from politicians belonging to minority religions, such as Jews or Sikhs.

> "@SikhFedUK I am a Sikh who is standing for Change UK in the upcoming EU elections in the West Midlands. If politicians of all sides engage with minorities everyday, not just at elections, these mistakes will happen less. #ChangeUK" (Amrik Kandola, UK Change)

> "@nicolelampert @EuanPhilipps As a British Jew it does not concern me that Corbyn's written a foreword to a book with antisemitic threads. What concerns me is that despite so many examples of his involvement in antisemitic-racist situations, people still support him. It should be a worry the many not the few." (Lance Forman, Brexit Party)

> "What does my Jewish identity have to do with my candidacy? More here. Thank you @DLF for this report with exciting questions. More here. Thank you @DLF for this report with exciting questions" @GreenePankow @Greene_Europe @e_ueberschaer https://t.co/Z0Rv6ye1Gu (SergeyLagodinsky, GRUENE, translated by DeepL, 2024)

> "@heinrichpreibs1 @EKD I am a Christian and therefore cannot vote for the AfD. Responsibility, charity, humility and equal opportunities as well as the rejection of hatred and exclusion are Christian themes that I find lacking in the AfD. Exodus 23: 2 Thou shalt not follow the multitude in the way of evil." (Karoline Preisler, FDP, translate by DeepL, 2024)

References to religious holidays are also common. Michael Kusznir from the Scottish Conservative Party (ACRE), for instance, posted the following:

> "Wishing all @AberdeenMuslims #RamadhanKareem during this holy month of #Ramadhan.
> Visited @MasjidAlhikmah_ at Doors Open Day (an impressive turnaround from empty building!) although Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque is next level. Pictures cannot do its scale and presence justice." https://t.co/aVVtp81yh6 (Michael Kusznir, ACRE)

Similarly, Labour Party candidate Zarah Sultana commented:

> "✦ It's my favourite time of the year - Ramadan Mubarak everyone! ✦ May this blessed month fill our households with love, light, peace and blessings. May our fasts, prayers and acts of worship all be accepted. 🕋 #Ramadan" https://t.co/eUK66SSyVN (Zarah Sultana, Labour Party)

In addition to Muslim holidays, there are also references to important dates for the Jewish community. This is exemplified in a tweet by Labour Juli Ward:

> "The date of #YomHaShoah was chosen to mark the anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising when Jewish inhabitants fought against the Nazis. In our last plenary session @ European Parliament we wore yellow daffodils to commemorate their courage & #Holocaust" https://t.co/CbFW8PMpok (Juli Ward, Labour Party)

Finally, colloquial formulations such as "thoughts and prayers" are also present in online communication, and have become characteristic of political communication via social media compared to alternative written statements (e.g., position papers, press releases) by parties or individuals. Examples include a statement by Alvin Shum, a Labour Party candidate:

> "Thoughts and prayers to @EofELabour staff who have locals, Europeans and now Parliamentary by-election to fight." https://t.co/CjfAd9HPVu (Alvin Shum, Labour Party)

6 Discussion and conclusion

This study bridges digital religion and political science scholarship by investigating how political actors refer to religion during online campaigning, and whether these patterns reflect 'classical divides' between secular and religious parties. We explored 846 candidates running for the EP-elections in 2019 in four countries (i.e., the Netherlands, Germany, United Kingdom and Sweden) and their communication on Twitter through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis with AI-techniques to validate our dictionary on "religion & politics." The key research questions we investigate are: (1) How relevant is religion in online campaigning for European politicians?, (2) Which political actors make references to religion, and in which manner?, and (3) How can we explain variation among them?

Overall, our findings confirm the marginal role of religion in online political campaigning at the European level. Only about 1.38% of all tweets relate to religion. Yet, there is substantial country variation, indicating higher salience of religion in Swedish and Dutch campaigns than in German or British online discourses. This finding is surprising considering that Sweden tends to have lower religiosity levels than Germany or United Kingdom [cf. World Value Survey by Inglehart et al. (2014)], and rather secular social spheres, where, for instance, limited number of religious organizations are involved in social service delivery (Mettang et al., 2024). In the context of morality politics, Sweden (and the United Kingdom) is even discussed as "secular world," where secular-religious cleavages are less relevant (Engeli et al., 2012). An additional interesting finding is that Antisemitism is a key topic in the electoral campaign in the UK, and less so in other countries like Germany, despite its historical legacy and increasing number of incidences. A public scandal on Antisemitism within the Labour party has driven this pattern, illuminating how antidiscrimination discourses offers new paths on how religion enters political discourse in more secular societies.

A second finding is that candidates from political parties with religious roots are more likely to refer to religion than candidates from

more secular parties, providing first evidence for the persistence of 'classical conflict lines' between religious and secular parties even in the digital sphere. The qualitative analysis indicates that some of these tweets are articulated to offend opponents (e.g., criticizing colleagues for unethical behaviour which violates religious values or for insufficient "religious expertise" despite the membership in a religious party). Most prominent, however, are general discussions about the relation between politics and religion today and religious values. Surprisingly, topics such as Muslim migration and Islamophobia are less dominating the online discourse at the EU level than expected. Furthermore, candidates from right-wing political parties characterized by a strong anti-Islam rhetoric are not significantly more prone to refer to religion than other politicians.

Third, reports on personal religious behaviour are rarer among politicians. However, participation in religious events, such as worship services and holiday celebrations, is fairly common.

Taken together, this study makes three key contributions. First, it advances research on religion and party competition by evaluating secular-religious cleavages within alternative arenas of competition (i.e., social media) and at the EU-level. We show that secular-religious conflicts are secondary but remain vivid, even in rather "secular" country contexts in Europe, and not necessary dominated by anti-Islam discourse as one might expect in campaigns for the EP. Yet, strong intra-party variation is visible, resulting into two parallel discourse lines: one which is more offensive and explicitly criticizes "religious" opponents; the other one seems to be initiated by religious candidates following a rather "peaceful"-style of discourse (e.g., pointing to religious services, religious values), aligning with van Kersbergen's (2008) idea of an "unsecular approach."

Second, this study forges a much-needed connection between digital religion and political science research, which have so far remained relatively disconnected. This study illustrated that religion is not very relevant in online campaigns for the EP, yet, it is also not absent. Religious-secular conflict lines are visible in the digital sphere. However, a stronger individualization of "lived religion" in the online space is not visible for politicians, or at least intentionally expressed. They connect to and refer to "classical" religious authorities and traditions across a larger set of religions (e.g., Christianity, Judaism or Islam). This observation might be related with their "vote-seeking" incentives, aiming to persuade large numbers of voters instead of building (religious) online communities.

Third, this paper contributes methodologically by validating and refining a multilingual dictionary on "religion and politics" in four different languages (English, Swedish, Dutch and German), on which future research may built on to explore religious references in further countries, national elections or even offline settings (e.g., parliamentary sessions).

Yet, this study is certainly not without weaknesses. First, the focus on tweets does eventually bias our study results as Twitter/X is known to be used in professional contexts. Instagram, Facebook or TikTok are more common platforms to give insights into the private life or issues of politicians (e.g., favorite meals, children, pets etc.). As religion is often seen as "private matter," we might eventually underestimate the role of religion through the focus on Twitter/X. Second, a more extended analysis in quantitative terms (i.e., more countries) and in qualitative terms (i.e., deeper insights into

specific online discourse, e.g., re-tweeting etc.) would have been an asset but is beyond the scope of the project.

Accordingly, future avenues to go include first more in-depth, culture-sensible qualitative analyses of key religious discourses in electoral campaigns, preferably in collaboration with religious studies scholars (e.g., focusing on humorous/sarcastic tweets). Second, a comparison between social media platforms and a large set of country cases would be another fruitful way to advance the dialogue between digital religion and political science scholarship.

Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found at: https://search.gesis.org/research_data/SDN-10.7802-1.1995?doi=10.7802/1.1995.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the participants or participants legal guardian/next of kin was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

E-ME: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DB: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2025.1548602/full#supplementary-material

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