# European Union debates nod to God: Talks on constitution stalled

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In Poland, where Catholicism prevails, religious law holds a firm grip on the civil realm. But in France, where most people are Christian but secularism is sacrosanct, the government is battling its burgeoning Muslim population of 5 million over a proposed ban on overt displays of religious devotion.

In Turkey, a secular state made up primarily of Muslims, officials hope to join a European Union that is devoid of explicit references to a Christian God.

As the European Union moves forward with long-term plans to broaden its membership, its leaders are struggling to encompass more ethnicities and religions under one banner than at any time since the Roman Empire.

One of the most heated arguments in the effort to create a pan-European constitution centers on whether it should mention God or religion in its preamble. Talks meant to complete the constitution stalled in December over a disagreement on how much voting power each country would hold. “We are seeing the tectonic plates of the world’s three major religions rubbing up against each other and shooting up sparks,” said Graham Watson, Liberal Democrat member of the European Parliament for South West England.

“Europe was founded to stop rival tribes from feuding and ethnic cleansing leading to war; we’ve got to remain vigilant on these issues,” Watson said in a January interview in Strasbourg, France, the home of the European Union Parliament. Disagreements pitting religious beliefs against secular values—affecting issues ranging from stem cell research and abortion to freedom of expression—are likely to multiply as the 15-nation European Union prepares to accept ten more countries in May, growing in representation from 370 million people to 450 million.

The constitutional project, years in the making, is meant to simplify European Union law, which consists of a complex series of disparate treaties, and lay out the union’s

shared beliefs and values.

Meeting at the European Union Parliament for the final session last year, both sides of the religion debate put forth their positions.

One camp contended that Europe's Christian heritage provides it with common cultural underpinnings, and that ignoring religion would rob a unified Europe of its soul. Leading the argument are the Poles—devout Catholics now that communism no longer dictates decisions—with support from Catholic countries such as Italy, Spain and Ireland, as well as from Christian Democratic parties across the continent. In addition, Pope John Paul II has lobbied for a clear reference to God and to the Christian faith.

"The preamble should not divide, it should join Europe," said Edmund Wittbrodt, a Polish observer appointed to the parliament in the year before Poland officially joins the European Union. "I think the best solution is openness like it is seen by Pope John Paul II. He shows that different religions can get along together. That's the only solution for Europe and the whole world," Wittbrodt said.

On the other side are adherents of the idea of a secular, humanist Europe. "I thought we had agreed 250 years ago with Montesquieu and Jefferson that a separation between church and state was one of the fundamentals of democracy," said Watson, tying Britain's position to the French political philosopher and the American writer of the Declaration of Independence. The French, in particular, are set against mention of religion in the constitution. They defend their hard-won separation between church and state, which they view as part of their national identity, solidified by a 1905 law created after a struggle against the Catholic Church.

The European Union slogan, "Unity through diversity," rings true for Watson. While he holds Christian beliefs and recognizes the importance of religion in society, he says, he opposes mentioning God in the preamble because it could alienate some Europeans. "Europe was created by people of different faiths," he said, adding, "A reference to God or a Judeo-Christian God would appear to us to be too limited."

Maurizio Turco, an Italian parliamentary minister, says the inclusion of God is immoral and represents the Catholic Church's attempt to "lock the door against Turkey." The main problem is that the Catholic Church wants to "impose its morality on everyone," he said. "The main point of religions is that they want to lobby the states to make religious sins into crimes."

At the crux of the debate is the question of how to incorporate Muslims. Growing groups of Muslims live in many of the member countries, and their absorption has proven problematic at times. In France, for instance, Muslim girls' practice of wearing head scarves to school offends the French interpretation of the separation between personal observance and civic secularism.

The Muslim portion of Europe's population, now estimated at 6 percent, would increase dramatically with the addition of Turkey and some of the Balkan states. To some European nationalists, that threatens a demographic upheaval, especially in Christian countries where fertility rates are flagging.

Turkey's candidacy is expected to come up for review this summer. Opponents could seek to plant Christianity in the constitution as a way to discourage Muslims from wanting to join the European Union, Watson said. That might satisfy German Christian Democrats, for instance, who worry that European family reunification policies would allow Muslim immigrants to flood Germany, overwhelming the native-born population.

But Richard Corbett, a British socialist who helped write the constitutional draft, wants to offer a more inclusive Europe for new members: "It's a bit late to suddenly turn around and say they're not really European because they have a different religion." –*Rebecca Goldsmith*, *Religion News Service*