

# The Religious Issue in the European System of Values

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With the main aim of exploring and explaining the reality of the European value system today, Grace Davie presents an overview of the way in which religion has been present in societies across Europe through the history of the last century. A major issue which Davie highlights is that on the one hand there are relatively high levels of secularity in most if not all of the continent, but on the other hand, a noticeable resurgence of religion in the public debate, a factor which has a significant impact on the shaping of perceptions across the Region.

There are two ways of looking at the religious situation in Europe: the first considers the features that are common to the continent as a whole; the second looks at the characteristics of different regions and different countries. Both aspects are important in terms of the data gathered by the Anna Lindh Foundation, which reveal both commonality and difference. This article will start by outlining a range of factors that must be taken into account when looking at Europe as a whole; the crucial point to grasp is that they push and pull in different directions. The second section will develop a series of variations within Europe based on (a) the different confessional blocs (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant); (b) the contrasts between West Europe and the parts of the continent that were under communist domination from 1948 to 1989; and (c) a range of demographic variables.

The concluding section of the article points to the current paradox: on the one hand are the relatively high levels of secularity in most if not all of Europe, but on the other is the noticeable resurgence of religion in public debate. The reasons for the latter require careful thought since they relate in particular to the growing presence of Islam in Europe. A preliminary point is important. The manner in which these patterns translate into values is not straightforward. It would be a mistake simply to 'read-off' values from religious profiles. Indeed it is quite clear from the data gathered for this project that the relationships between these variables are complex, and depend among other things on the long term trajectories of each country.

## Factors for Understanding the Place of Religion in Europe

There are six very different factors, which – taken together – contribute to a better understanding of the place of religion in modern Europe. These factors change and adapt over time. Currently they are interacting in new ways to produce distinctive formulations, some of which are unexpected.

The six factors are:

1. The role of the historic churches in shaping European culture. This is easily illustrated in the sense that the Christian tradition has had an irreversible effect on time (calendars, seasons, festivals, holidays, weeks and weekends) and space (the parish system and the dominance of Christian buildings) in this part of the world.
2. An awareness that the historic churches still have a place at particular moments in the lives of modern Europeans, though they are no longer able to discipline the beliefs and behaviour of the great majority of the population. Despite their relatively secularity, Europeans are likely to return to their churches at moments of celebration or grief (whether individual or collective).
3. An observable change in the churchgoing constituencies of the continent, which operate increasingly on a model of choice, rather than a model of obligation or duty. As a result, membership of the historic churches is changing in nature; increasingly it is chosen rather than inherited, though more so in some places than in others.
4. The arrival into Europe of groups of people from many different parts of the world. This is primarily an economic movement, but the implications for the religious life of the continent are immense. The growing presence of Christians from the global South together with significant other faith communities has altered the religious profile of Europe. Quite apart from this, some of these communities are – simply by their presence – challenging some deeply held European assumptions, notably the notion that religion should be considered a private matter. In this context, the strong affirmation of respect for other cultures that can be found in this enquiry is very welcome.
5. Rather different are the sometimes vehement reactions of Europe's secular elites to this shift: i.e. to the increasing

significance of religion in public as well as private life. Such elites did not anticipate a change of this nature.

6. A gradual, but growing realisation that the patterns of religious life in modern Europe should be considered an 'exceptional case' – they are not a global prototype. This point is very apparent in the data gathered by the Foundation. Europeans quite clearly think that religion is a more important variable for the raising of children in the countries bordering the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea than it is for the raising of children in Europe.

## Regional Differences and Demographic Variables

The first major split in the Christian world occurred in the 11th century, when the continuing tensions between Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity could no longer be contained. The reasons for such tensions were both doctrinal and ecclesiological. This division still resonates in the sense that Orthodox (Eastern) Europe and Catholic (Western) Europe have been on separate tracks for the best part of a millennium. Such differences are not easily overcome.

The second division concerns Western Europe only and occurred considerably later, at the time of the Reformation. As a result, West Europe divided itself (more or less) into a Catholic South and a Protestant North, with a range of 'mixed' countries in between. The crucial point is the following: boundaries gradually emerged all over Europe dividing one nation from another, one region from another and one kind of Christianity from another. And boundaries imply dominance as well as difference. Majorities and minorities were, and still are, created depending on the precise location of the line in question. It is quite clear, moreover, that majorities and minorities behave differently with respect to their value systems: the former are much more likely to take their religious inheritance for granted; the latter know that they will have to work hard to sustain theirs. This contrast is strongly supported by the data sent to me.

A second point is also important. Broadly speaking, both

Catholic and Orthodox countries maintain higher levels of practice than the Protestant parts of the continent, though there are important exceptions to this rule. In terms of religious activity, for example, France looks more like its Protestant neighbours than its Latin counterparts, though Spain is catching up fast. Interestingly, Sweden (the country most often cited as the most secular in the world, never mind Europe) shows more commitment than the other European countries in this sample to the importance of religious beliefs in the raising of children, though not in personal beliefs. This is especially true of younger people.

Europe was differently divided following World War II, as each of the victorious parties claimed their spoils. The Baltic States, Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and (until 1948) Yugoslavia fell under Soviet control. The implications for religion were considerable. The ideology that pervaded the Soviet bloc was aggressively secular. Public displays of religiousness were considered a threat to the regime and were suppressed, more brutally in some cases than others. Exactly what happened in each of the countries listed above varied; equally different were the effects of Soviet policies on religious vitality. An interesting debate in this respect concerns the relative importance of long-term factors (the *longue durée*) vis-à-vis the shorter, but at times devastating, communist experience.

Gender is normally considered a crucial variable in mapping religious behaviour – in terms of practice, belief and behaviour. It emerges as dominant in a wide range of empirical enquiries (for example those carried out under the auspices of the European Values Study). Interestingly, in the data gathered by the Anna Lindh Foundation, such differences do not translate themselves into the recognition of religious belief as either important for the individual or for the upbringing of children. Nor is it possible to see any consistent connection between the significance of religious beliefs and those who work at home or in other categories of employment.

Age is a second factor to take into account, whether this is considered as a life-cycle variable or as a cohort variable. For the most part the data presented here affirm that younger

## Morocco - Debates on Religion and Power

Under the title of 'Ibn Rochd', the Arab philosopher who had a significant influence in the West, a series of meetings and discussions were organised on the interrelation between political and religious power. Intellectuals, academics, artists, students and a large public audience were invited to think about several key questions on this matter including: How could these two spheres of religion and power be irremediably intertwined in the public space? How can we modernise without secularising? How can we manage fundamentalism? During the meetings, literature and philosophy texts were also read to the audience, and, in the evenings, films and theatre plays were presented with the aim of further enriching the theme. Participants at the event included 'young thinkers' who were selected among students from ten schools following a contest on topic of 'Reason and Liberty', and the aim is to repeat this process every two years, with partners including ICRA, the National Bibliotheca in Morocco, the National Institute of Management Studies, and the French Institute in Rabat.

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people/ younger generations are less attached to religious beliefs than older ones, but there are some interesting exceptions, especially in relation to the importance of religious beliefs in the raising of children (see the note about Sweden, above). Levels of education can also have an effect on attitudes to religious beliefs, but the patterns are not consistent across all countries. The same is true with respect to place of residence.

### Religion Re-enters the Public Space

Bearing all these points in mind, it is the unpredictability of the present situation which is most striking. In much of Western Europe, two things are happening at once. On the one hand there are higher levels of secularity than there are in other parts of the world – a situation that leads inevitably to a decline in religious knowledge as well as in religious belief. No longer is it possible to assume a degree of religious literacy across the continent as younger generations in particular resist the faith of their parents and grandparents. At precisely the same moment, however, religion has re-entered the public space, provoking considerable debate in both the continent as a whole and in its constituent nations. And despite the respect for other cultures evidenced in these data, the resulting discussion is, all too often, both ill-informed and ill-mannered.

Why is this so? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the public debate about religion in Europe is disproportionately related to the presence of Muslims in most European societies. Statistics regarding this phenomenon are difficult to establish, but most commentators agree that currently around 5% of the European population is Muslim, remembering that this figure varies considerably from country to country. This is not a large percentage, but Muslim communities in Europe are relatively visible given both their provenance and their lifestyle, which includes the public as well as private practice of their religion.

The need for mutual respect is evident: on the one hand European populations must learn to accommodate minorities that make new and different demands on their host societies;

and on the other the Muslims must find ways of living in a diaspora. Neither is easy. Many Europeans, for example, have difficulty in accepting that debates about minorities must engage religious as well as ethnic differences. Muslims, conversely, need to establish precisely what it means to be a Muslim in Europe – religion, in other words, must be separated from culture. Either way, Europe needs to be seen in its global context. New forms of religiousness are coming in from outside, that is clear.

Equally important, however is the growing awareness among Europeans that their own situation may not be typical of the world as a whole, a point that is clearly reflected in this enquiry. In terms of perceptions, respondents in Europe were agreed that the religious beliefs were more important for those on the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean than they were for themselves. In short, Europeans are beginning to realize that Europe is secular not because it is modern, but because it is European. It is equally true that some Europeans welcome this insight; others are disconcerted by it.

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## Czech Republic - Conference on Perception towards Islam

Hosted at Brno University, the conference 'Islam in the Czech Republic' aimed to promote links between local students and the country's seventy different religious groups. The event, a first of its kind, was jointly organized by different associations of the country's Islamic communities, and involved in the opening sessions experts in presenting an insight into the national perceptions towards Islam. The debate also drew on the experiences of Czech Muslims who were brought up in mixed marriages, as well as newly converted Czech Muslims, and discussion areas included sharing perspectives on the future development of Islam within the country. Among the consistent points raised during the conference were the need to combat stereotypes deemed to be 'reinforced in the national media' and the role of Islamic communities in contributing to a comprehensive strategy for intercultural dialogue. In order to multiply the reach and impact of the initiative, the Czech-Arabian society has disseminated conclusions to libraries, universities and the wider public, and supported follow-up projects.

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