

Convergences independently from religiosity level

Shana COHEN

The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey has generated data correlating Euro-Mediterranean populations' level of religiosity and religious affiliations with attitudes towards people of other faiths and cultures at a moment of political volatility and increasing public suspicion of diversity. Through this article, Shana Cohen explores the relation between religiosity and openness to diversity on both sides of the Mediterranean. Through Survey responses, the author noticed a strong association of improving interfaith relations with the state and concludes by making recommendations of actions towards such improvements.

The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Intercultural Trends Survey, commissioned by the Anna Lindh Foundation and carried out by Ipsos, has generated data correlating Euro-Mediterranean populations' level of religiosity and religious affiliations with attitudes towards people of other faiths and cultures at a moment of political volatility and increasingly public suspicion of immigrants and religious diversity.

The European Survey data challenges this anxiety, as religious and very religious respondents often demonstrate the same positive attitude towards intercultural encounters as their non-religious counterparts (religiosity was measured using an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 'Not at all religious' to 10 'Very religious'). For analysis purposes, respondents were grouped in three categories: 'very religious' (scores 8 to 10), 'somewhat religious' (scores 3 to 7) and 'non-religious' (scores 0 to 2). Though southern and eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries are for the most part much less diverse than their European counterparts, respondents in the SEM appear to share comparable appreciation of tolerance and inclusion as social values. They also agree largely on the interventions necessary for fostering tolerance, namely through education and the public sphere rather than restricting expression of diversity to the private sphere.

Beyond public discourse and political views, the data also contradicts policy analyses of integration in Europe that have conveyed alarm concerning continued segregation between communities and the lack of social cohesion. Though the UK is not included in the Survey, the Casey Review (2016) on factors for failed integration in the UK attributes a lack of social cohesion to 'high levels of social and economic isolation in some places and cultural and religious practices in communities that are not only holding some of our citizens back but run contrary to British values and sometimes our laws' (Casey, 2016). Yet, despite the alarm about segregation, the Survey data suggests that the majority of European

and SEM citizens value cultural and religious diversity, with 71% of European respondents and 72% of SEM respondents strongly agreeing or somewhat agreeing with the statement that diversity is important for prosperity. Conversely, 62% of respondents in Europe disagreed with the statement that diversity constitutes a threat to stability. Amongst SEM countries, those with an experience of conflict between populations of different religions perhaps predictably viewed diversity as more of a threat.

In general, the responses indicate a desire for a more coherent narrative of public good in a diverse society and public policies that encourage citizens across faiths and beliefs to interact. The responses thus support the argument of influential cultural theorists and philosophers that multi-culturalism has become too simplified as a policy framework. Rather than equate multi-culturalism primarily with freedom of expression, or more banally, the capacity for cultural traditions to exist alongside each other, the concept represents the engagement of citizens of diverse backgrounds with the same political processes, rights and institutions. Criticizing arguments that multi-culturalism has spurred segregation and division, the philosopher Will Kymlicka writes, 'The key to citizenisation is not to suppress these differential claims but to filter and frame them through the language of human rights, civil liberties and democratic accountability. This is what multi-culturalist movements have aimed to do' (Kymlicka, 2012). His statement corresponds with the Survey data, in that across belief and faith, respondents pointed toward institutions and organisations that implement rights and reflect political values as critical influences on attitudes and behaviour toward others.

Supporting diversity in Europe

In Europe, the shared emphasis on public institutions and public life contrasts with distinctive views on personal relations, such as intermarriage, having neighbours of other faiths, or children having friendships

Chart 8.1

Europeans' views about actions that can help people live better together in multi-cultural environments



with other children of different faiths. In response to promoting attitudes of tolerance, 79% of European respondents who are very religious and 88% of non-religious respondents answered they would not mind at all if their children attended school with someone of a different cultural background.

Moreover, 86% of non-religious respondents in Europe do not mind at all having a neighbour of another faith, whereas 75% of the very religious respondents do not mind at all. Perhaps more importantly, regarding both questions about personal relations and public life, the somewhat religious respondents appeared to offer the weakest affirmation of diversity. For instance, 74% of the somewhat religious respondents did not mind at all a neighbour of a different faith. The figures were lower than the other two categories, even if not by much, for intermarriage and school friendships as well (Chart 8.1).

In general, the Survey data indicates high levels of support amongst the very religious, somewhat religious and non-religious respondents for interventions aimed at integrating diversity within public life and institutions. Amongst European respondents, the most widely supported intervention across religious and non-religious groups is in education.

When asked about various interventions to support a multi-cultural environment, very religious and non-religious respondents believed ensuring learning about cultural diversity within schools was the most effective method. Amongst European respondents declaring themselves very religious, 57% said it was a very

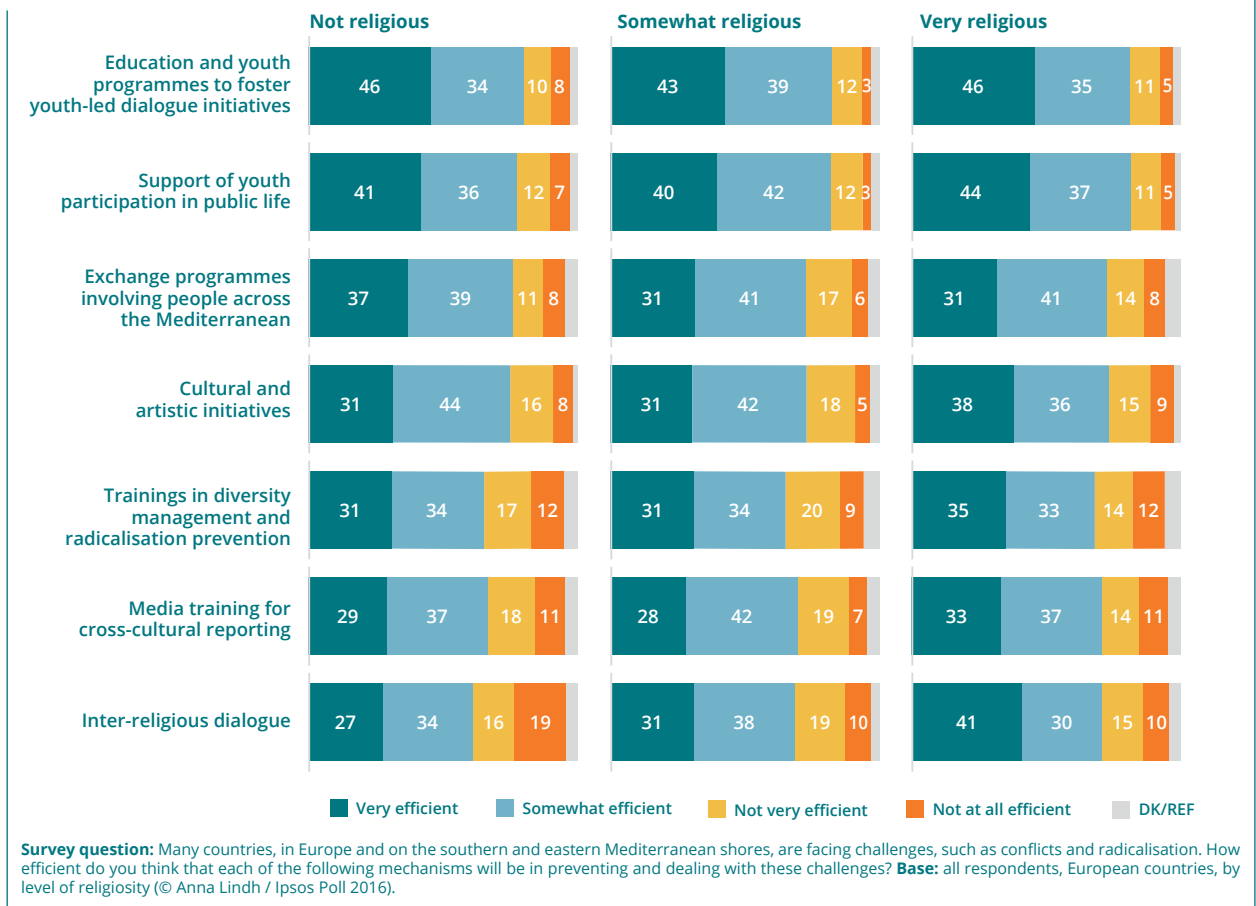
effective method, more than for other interventions, such as cultural diversity in the workplace or in public spaces. At the same time, 62% of non-religious respondents viewed school as a very effective site for intervention, again, more than for other interventions. A smaller percentage of very religious respondents, 46%, felt that education could also prevent radicalization but the percentage was still greater than for other interventions, such as artistic and cultural initiatives, which addressed challenges like conflict (38%).

Beyond education, youth participation in public life was also considered amongst all respondents, regardless of religiosity, to be a very effective method of preventing radicalization. Among non-religious respondents in Europe, 42% regarded youth participation as very effective, and amongst very religious respondents, 44% (Chart 8.2).

The minimal difference between respondents who declare themselves non-religious versus somewhat religious or very religious, evokes a larger argument in Europe, namely that belief itself has less influence than citizenship on the understanding of public good and state responsibility regarding the development of a cohesive, integrated society. The percentage of very religious in Europe supporting education was almost the same as those who were not religious, or 46%. In another example, 46% of non-religious respondents, 43% of somewhat religious respondents, and 46% of very religious respondents agreed that education and youth programmes to foster dialogue were very effective in discouraging radicalization and other challenges.

Chart 8.2

Europeans' views about efficiency of mechanisms to prevent and deal with conflicts and radicalisation



Religiosity and diversity in SEM countries

In some SEM countries, negligible differences in views between religious and non-religious respondents may reflect the substantial influence of religion and related cultural and social values in the public sphere and the level of diversity itself on how diversity is perceived. In contrast, in the SEM countries such as Israel and Palestine, the level of religiosity amongst respondents appeared to have a clearer impact on perceptions of intercultural encounters (Chart 8.3). This may indicate the tensions the political influence religion has in these countries and likewise, the politicization of secularism. For instance, in Algeria, there was no difference between non-religious and very religious respondents (both 73%) who stated they did not mind 'at all' their children attending school with someone of a different background. On the other hand in Israel, non-religious respondents (45%) were far more tolerant of their children attending a mixed school than very religious respondents (14%).

The varied importance of religious and secular beliefs in the different SEM countries to public life appears to be reflected in how respondents in these countries viewed the effectiveness of different interventions to

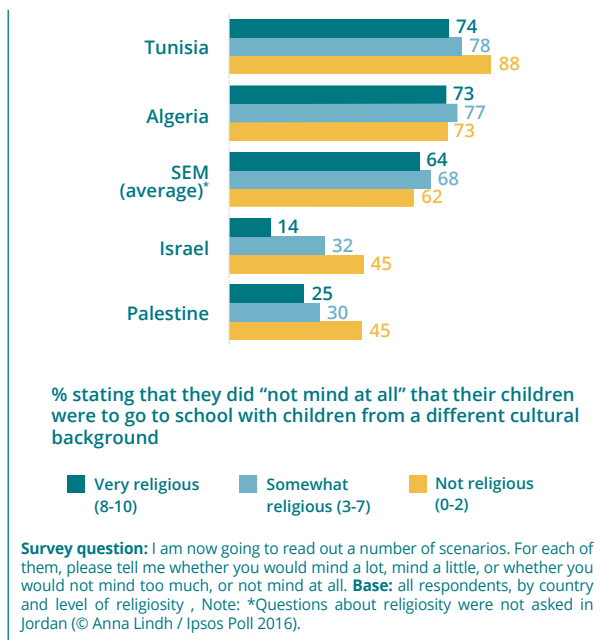
foster a multi-cultural environment. In Algeria again, non-religious and religious respondents (72% and 75%) expressed similar views as to the effectiveness of interventions like education and interfaith dialogue. In contrast, in Israel, 48% of non-religious respondents deemed education to be 'very efficient' in the prevention of radicalisation whereas only 26% of very religious respondents held this view. At the same time, the substantial difference between Algeria and Tunisia on the one hand, and Israel and Palestine on the other, in their overall support for initiatives to counter radicalisation indicates a potentially more profound distinction. Perhaps unsurprisingly, because of the conflict, there was significantly more confidence amongst North African respondents in the potential of education and dialogue to counter radicalisation than amongst respondents in the Middle East.

Assigning the state responsibility for social harmony

Across both SEM and European countries, respondents expressed a preference for education, workplace and neighbourhood as sites for intercultural and interfaith interaction rather than more directed settings, or interfaith dialogue, media training, artistic and cultural

Chart 8.3

Tolerance towards groups with a different cultural background and level of religiosity in SEM countries



initiatives, and exchange programmes. The latter methods still receive support, but not as much as the others, indicating again the role citizens, regardless of belief or even nationality, feel public institutions and governments should assume in developing better relations between diverse groups. For example, 81% of respondents in Europe and 86% of respondents in SEM countries deemed education to be 'very efficient' or 'somewhat efficient' as a preventative measure to tackle conflict and radicalisation, and 80% of European respondents and 85% of SEM respondents viewed youth participation in public life as 'very efficient' or 'somewhat efficient'.

Inversely, respondents expressed the most reservation about restricting cultural practices to the private sphere in order to help people live together better in a multi-cultural environment. In both European countries and SEM countries, far fewer respondents regarded this option as efficient in comparison to other interventions. SEM respondents in general were more favourable to training, cultural and artistic initiatives and inter-religious dialogue than their European counterparts, but across both groups of countries, these interventions scored less well than those explicitly associated with public institutions and public life. For instance, 66% of European respondents and 75% of SEM respondents felt training in diversity management and radicalisation prevention would be 'very efficient' or 'somewhat efficient'. Though still high, these percentages indicate a stronger association of improving interfaith relations with the state.

Actions beyond interfaith dialogue

What can be concluded from the data that can inform future policy directions address cultural and religious diversity and practical initiatives to overcome tensions and promote greater understanding? Perhaps one of the most telling patterns in the data is the stronger response to the question about tolerance towards other cultures, with the exception of marrying someone of another faith, than to the questions about preventing challenges or helping people live together in a multi-cultural environment. In both European and SEM countries, and across non-religious and religious populations, respondents appeared to react most favourably to relational rather than preventative or policy-oriented language. The support for intervention into public life also suggests a desire for a framework for improved social relations.

For policymakers, the implications are that investment in learning about diversity, public programmes to bring youth of different backgrounds together, greater public discussion of religion and belief, and enforcement of equal rights within public institutions will increase opportunities for constructive interaction and ideally encourage a sense of belonging and collectiveness across different ethnic and religious groups. In terms of practical initiatives, investment in more specific programmes, such as interfaith dialogue, may be less productive, even for those who are religious. Respondents in Europe who were very religious did agree that interfaith dialogue was very effective by 13 percentage points more than non-religious respondents but the percentage was still noticeably lower than for education and youth-led dialogue (41% and 46%, respectively).

Whether in the countries included in the Survey or beyond, interfaith dialogue is conventionally and unsurprisingly led by religious leaders and institutions, such as the Catholic Church. It is therefore often limited in its reach, or to members of a particular religious institution or those who are religious. To bring together citizens across faiths and beliefs, the Survey data suggests that programmes oriented towards youth and the general public, such as multi-cultural events, may yield more significant results for fostering tolerance and respect for diversity. This finding, and the data more generally, means that it is up to governments to become more thoughtful about the relations they want to foster between individuals and groups of different faiths and beliefs, how public institutions should cultivate tolerance and better relations, and the effect participation in public life should ideally have on individual and collective behaviour and values.

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