
The Religious Situation in Europe

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This essay is divided into three parts. First, I offer a very general and therefore somewhat superficial overview of the contemporary religious situation in Europe. In the second part, I offer a series of arguments why the paradigm of secularization is not very helpful in trying to explain the complex religious situation in Europe today, and why we need to look at the secularization of Western European societies with new eyes and with new perspectives, which can only come from a more comparative historical and global perspective. Finally, I offer some suggestions as to why the expectation that religion would become increasingly privatized and therefore socially irrelevant has not proven right and why, on the contrary, we are now witnessing the fact that religion is once again becoming an important public issue in Europe.

Overview of the religious situation in Europe

First of all, it is important to emphasize that there is not one single and uniform religious situation in Europe. There are multiple, very diverse and ambiguous religious situations and trends throughout Europe which one should avoid characterizing in simple terms. I can only indicate here some of the most obvious differences. Former East Germany is by far and by any measure the least religious country of all of Europe, followed at a long distance by the Czech Republic and the Scandinavian countries. At the other extreme, Ireland and Poland are by far the most religious countries of Europe with rates comparable to those of the United States. In general, with the significant exceptions of France and the Czech Republic, Catholic countries tend to be more religious than Protestant or mixed countries (former West Germany, Netherlands), although Switzerland (a mixed and traditionally polarized country comparable to Holland) stands at the high end of the European religious scale, with rates of belief similar to those of Catholic Austria and Spain and with rates of participation and confessional affiliation similar to Poland and Ireland. In general, former communist countries in East

and Central Europe, with the exception of Poland and Slovakia, have rates of religiosity lower than the European mean average, a position occupied by Britain and former West Germany. But many of the former Communist countries, most notably Russia, and even more so Ukraine, which does not appear in this survey, have experienced remarkable religious growth since 1989.

In order to understand the complexity of the religious situation in Europe, it is helpful to distinguish between three different levels of analysis, namely religion at the level of individual religiosity, religion at the participatory associational level of religious communities, and religion at the confessional level of affiliation, identification or membership in churches or in imagined religious communities.

Individual religiosity

With the exception of former East Germany, where only one fourth of the population believes in God, and the Czech Republic, where the number of believers is less than 50 per cent, the majority of Europeans in every other country still affirm 'belief in God'. Former East Germany is actually the only country of Europe in which a majority of the population, 51 per cent, confesses to be atheist. The Czech Republic is the European country with the second highest number of atheists, but the proportion is significantly lower, reaching only 20 per cent. In any case, the range of belief and unbelief in Europe is significantly wide. At the high end, over 90 per cent of the population in Poland, Ireland and Portugal declare themselves believers. In the Scandinavian countries, France, the Netherlands and Russia, the number of believers drops to a percentage in the 50s. Britain and former West Germany, with 69 and 65 per cent respectively, occupy the European middle. But the number of those who believe in a Judaeo-Christian personal God is much lower, dropping on the average over 20 percentage points in each country.

Somewhat surprisingly, the number of those who pray several times a month and, even more so, the number of those who believe in religious miracles are in many countries higher than the number of those who believe in a 'God who is concerned'. As was to be expected, the number of those who claim to have had a personal religious experience is much lower still, but the range of variation between the most and the least religiously musical populations of Europe is much smaller. Former East Germany is once again at the very bottom. Only 10 per cent of its population claims to have had some deep personal religious experience or the experience of religious transcendence. But surprisingly this figure is not so distant from that in the majority of European countries, or even in such supposedly 'religious' countries as Ireland or Poland, where only 13 and 16 per cent respectively claim to have had a personal religious experience.

Arguably, Italy, 31 per cent of whose population claim to have had a religious experience, is the country with the most religiously musical population of all

Europe. Only in five other European countries does the proportion of those who claim a similar religious experience surpass 20 per cent. Surprisingly, in this small group of countries with the highest level of experiential individual religiosity, one finds France with 24 per cent and the Netherlands with 22 per cent, two countries that in every other respect are supposedly among the most secularized of Europe. In any case, both percentages are still higher than the number of professed atheists in both countries, which are respectively 19 and 17 per cent of the French and Dutch populations. Former West Germany and Britain occupy again the European middle ground; 16 per cent of their population claim to have had a religious experience, while those who declare themselves atheists are respectively 11 and 10 per cent.

In summary one may say that although a majority of the population in most European countries still maintains some kind of general belief in God, the depth and extent of individual religiosity in Europe is rather low in so far as those who profess belief in a personal God, those who pray with some regularity and those who claim to have had some personal religious experience are a small minority in most European countries. In this respect, unlike in the United States where one finds high levels of individual religiosity even among the unchurched, a majority of the population in most European countries can be characterized as simply secular and non-religious. On the other hand, majorities of people in most European countries, with the exception of former communist countries and Denmark, believe in 'life after death' and this belief actually appears to have increased in the last decades among the younger cohorts, arguably a clear indication of strong hope for transcendence even in secularized Europe.

Participation in collective congregational religion

Evidence of the drastic secularization, or at least of the 'Entkirchlichung' (unchurching), of most European societies is more pronounced when one looks at rates of regular church attendance, at least two or three times per month, and at the proportion of those who claim never to attend church. Only in three European countries, Ireland, Poland and Switzerland, do the majority of the population claim to attend church regularly. Less than 20 per cent of the population in the majority of European countries attends church regularly, while in former East Germany, Russia and the Scandinavian countries the proportion of regular churchgoers decreases to the single digits. Inversely, the proportion of those who never attend is less than 10 per cent in Poland, Ireland, Switzerland and Portugal, while it is 50 per cent or more in ascending order in France, Britain, Russia, the Netherlands and former East Germany.

This is probably the indicator of religiosity that has experienced the most drastic and dramatic decline throughout most European societies since the 1950s. There are, however, very significant differences in church attendance

Table 1. *Belief in God in Europe (%)*

Country	Belief in God	Theist	Not atheist or agnostic	Belief in a God who is concerned	Pray several times a month	Belief in religious miracles	Personal religious experience	Atheist
Cyprus	96	85	96	71	55	89	10	1
Republic of Ireland	95	80	95	76	84	72	13	2
Poland	94	78	94	73	79	60	16	2
N. Ireland	92	79	93	73	70	68	26	3
Portugal	91	78	95	74	62	79		2
Italy	86	73	91	56	65	69	31	4
Spain	82	65	85	44	48	46	19	9
Austria	80	52	87	41	51	65	17	6
Switzerland	73	45	83	49	52	60	23	4
Slovakia	72	57	80	57	52	53	26	11
Latvia	71	39	80	46	35	35	15	9
Britain	69	50	76	37	37	42	16	10
Former W. Germany	65	45	78	37	41	39	16	11
Hungary	65	51	75	29	37	30	17	13
Slovenia	62	39	73	27	32	53	15	17
Bulgaria	60	35	75	37	26	29	16	17
Norway	59	44	77	36	29	40	16	10
Netherlands	57	42	70	32	39	37	22	17
Denmark	57	34	70	38	21	25	15	15
Sweden	54	26	65	23	20	27	12	17
France	52	39	63	29	30	37	24	19
Russia	52	32	63	29	18	38	13	19
Czech Republic	46	31	66	23	26	32	11	20
Former E. Germany	25	17	36	14	14	39	10	51

Greeley, 2003, p. 3.

between Protestants and Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Europe. Catholics have the highest level of regular church attendance (43 per cent) and the lowest proportion of those who never attend (12 per cent), while Orthodox Christians have the lowest proportion of regular churchgoers (only 8 per cent) and a significantly high proportion of those who never attend (25 per cent).

Table 2. *Percentage claiming no religious affiliation by country and year*

<i>Country</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>Second generation with no religious affiliation</i>	<i>Loss since childhood</i>
W. Germany	11 %	15 %	4 %	9 %
E. Germany	64 %	68 %	48 %	46 %
Britain	33 %	45 %	9 %	33 %
N. Ireland	9 %	10 %	1 %	1 %
Austria	10 %	12 %	2 %	8 %
Hungary	5 %	27 %	9 %	11 %
Italy	6 %	8 %	7 %	-1 %
Republic of Ireland	2 %	6 %	0	6 %
Netherlands	55 %	58 %	22 %	43 %
Norway	6 %	10 %	3 %	6 %
Sweden		29 %	9 %	15 %
Czech Republic		45 %	33 %	5 %
Slovenia	11 %	24 %	13 %	10 %
Poland	3 %	6 %	5 %	5 %
Bulgaria	13 %	13 %	10 %	-7 %
Russia	68 %	35 %	31 %	-40 %
Spain		14 %	2 %	10 %
Latvia		36 %	26 %	4 %
Slovakia		16 %	10 %	2 %
France		47 %	14 %	31 %
Cyprus		0 %	0	0
Portugal		8 %	1 %	6 %
Denmark		12 %	4 %	2 %
Switzerland		9 %	2 %	3 %
Total		23 %	11 %	15 %

Greeley, 2003, p. 56.

Among Protestants the two figures are very close: 25 per cent attend regularly and 21 per cent never attend. European Muslims have very high rates of mosque attendance (40 per cent), as well as the highest proportion of those who never attend (29 per cent), which is understandable since attendance at Friday prayers is not a traditional religious obligation for Muslims, although it is becoming increasingly customary.

The data on drastic decline in church attendance across Europe constitute the strongest evidence for the defenders of the traditional theory of secularization.

When compared with the very different evidence of continuing vitality in congregational, associational religion in the United States across all denominations – Protestant and Catholic, Jewish and Muslim, and now Hindu and Buddhist – it is evident that this is the fundamental difference between American and European Christianity. The voluntary associational congregation, as Tocqueville already saw clearly in the 1830s, forms the basis of the competitive system of American denominationalism, and is the foundation of the generalized and vibrant associationalism of American civil society. European Christianity, for all kinds of reasons, never made the full historical transition from territorial national churches based on the territorial parish or *Pfarrgemeinde* to competing denominations of civil society based on voluntary religious congregations, the model of the modern *Gemeinschaft*. Even in Great Britain, the European country closest to the United States in this respect, the vibrant system of religious congregations that existed within both churches and sects, across England, Scotland and Wales, basically collapsed in the 1960s, contributing to what Callum G. Brown has dramatically characterized as ‘the death of Christian Britain’.

It is not processes of modernization and urbanization that explain this collapse, since British Christianity, like American Christianity, had already made a successful transition to modern, urban industrial centres by the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, as long as we continue perceiving the process of Christian European secularization as a slow, accumulative and progressive process of decline that accompanies general processes of modernization, we will fail to seek a more persuasive explanation for the drastic secularization of Western European societies since the 1960s. Along with the Netherlands, Britain presents perhaps the most dramatic example of a relatively sudden and precipitous decline of church attendance as well as of church affiliation, in contrast to the Scandinavian countries and former West Germany, which still preserve a relatively high level of church affiliation, along with very low church attendance. The high percentage of those who have lost their religious affiliation since childhood, 43 per cent in the case of the Netherlands and 33 per cent in the case of Britain, which are comparable to the high figures of the highly secularized former East Germany (46 per cent) and France (31 per cent), are evidence that the collapse was almost a single-generation phenomenon. But in the case of former East Germany, as also in the case of the Czech Republic, one encounters a second generation without religious unaffiliation to add to the large numbers of the previous generation brought up with no religious affiliation: 48 per cent of former East Germans and 33 per cent of Czechs. Along with France, former East Germany and the Czech Republic are the most secular of all European societies. These are the countries in which religion as a chain of collective memory is clearly disappearing. But it should be obvious that in all

Table 3. Church attendance by study and year: two or three times a month or more (%)

	<i>EVS</i> 1981	<i>EVS</i> 1990	<i>ISSP</i> 1991	<i>ISSP</i> 1998
W. Germany/Former W. Germany	19	18	15	17
E. Germany/Former E. Germany			4	(flawed)
Britain	14	14	17	17
N. Ireland	51	50	56	51
Austria			26	33**
Hungary	11	21**	19	20
Italy	32	38**	49	44*
Ireland	82	81	75	73
Netherlands	25	20*	21	18
Norway	5	5	10	7
Sweden	6	6		8
Czech Republic				12
Slovenia				23
Poland			67	61*
Russia			5	5
Spain	40	29*		36
Latvia				12
Slovakia				41
France	10	10		13
Cyprus				8
Portugal				41
Denmark	2	2		7
Switzerland				64

Greeley, 2003, p. 70.

three cases these processes of secularization cannot be understood simply in terms of processes of modernization, but should rather be viewed in terms of the particular historical dynamics of state, church and nation. I assume few people would be inclined to attribute the higher levels of secularization of former East Germany, compared with those of former West Germany, to the fact that former East Germany is a more modern society, unless of course one is willing to argue that secularity itself is evidence of modernity.

Indeed, in order to understand the significant internal variations in patterns of secularization throughout Europe, not only between former East and West Germany, but also among other European societies which are similar in many

Table 4. Church attendance by study and year: percentage never attending

	<i>EVS</i> 1991	<i>EVS</i> 1998	<i>ISSP</i> 1991	<i>ISSP</i> 1998
W. Germany	23 %	23 %	21 %	20 %
E. Germany			60 %	flawed
Britain	48 %	47 %	36 %	54 %*
N. Ireland	12 %	13 %	14 %	24 %*
Austria			21 %	20 %
Hungary	51 %		32 %	30 %
Italy	22 %	16 %**	13 %	19 %*
Ireland	4 %	4 %	5 %	5 %
Netherlands	41 %	43 %	54 %	60 %
Norway	38 %	40 %	34 %	34 %
Sweden	38 %	48 %		28 %
Czech				48 %
Slovenia				30 %
Poland			3 %	4 %
Russia			67 %	55 %**
Spain	26 %	30 %*		20 %
Latvia				33 %
Slovakia				24 %
France	59 %	52 %**		50 %
Cyprus				15 %
Portugal				8 %
Denmark	45 %	44 %		29 %
Switzerland				5 %

Greeley, 2003, p. 71.

Table 5. Church attendance by religion

	<i>% attending two or three times a month</i>	<i>% never attending</i>
Protestant	25 %	21 %
Catholic	43 %	12 %
Orthodox	8 %	25 %
Islam	40 %	29 %
None	2 %	75 %

Greeley, 2003, p. 72.

other respects – for instance between Poland and the Czech Republic (two similar Slavic East European Soviet-type Catholic societies), or between France and Italy (two similarly modern Latin Catholic societies), or between the Netherlands and Switzerland (two highly modern bi-confessional Calvinist-Catholic societies) – it should be obvious that one should look less at levels of modernization, which explain very little, and more at historical patterns of relations between church, state, nation, and civil society.

Imagined communities: national churches, confessional states and secular civil religions

Grace Davie has characterized the contemporary European pattern of relatively high levels of individual religious belief in combination with relatively low levels of church attendance as ‘believing without belonging’. But the inverse pattern, namely high levels of confessional affiliation with low levels of belief and/or participation (which has been characterized by Danièle Hervieu-Léger as ‘belonging without believing’), is equally widespread across Europe. The Lutheran Scandinavian countries are the most dramatic illustration of this pattern, but in some respects it is also typical of former West Germany. The Scandinavian countries evince the lowest levels of church attendance in Europe, comparable only with former East Germany. Only 2 per cent of Danes, 5 per cent of Norwegians and 6 per cent of Swedes attend church with some regularity. The levels of individual belief in God, just a slight majority of the population, and of occasional prayer (in the 20 per cent range), are also among the lowest in Western European societies, comparable with those in the Czech Republic and France. Yet the Scandinavian countries show surprisingly high levels of religious affiliation, when measured by the small proportions of those who declare no religious affiliation, which are similar to the proportions one finds in much more religious Catholic countries (Italy, Portugal, Austria, Spain) or in more religious mixed countries (Switzerland or former West Germany). Only 10 per cent of Norwegians and 12 per cent of Danes declare no religious affiliation. Curiously, the number of professed atheists in Denmark is higher (17 per cent), implying that close to one third of Danish atheists still view themselves as members of the Danish Lutheran Church. The percentage of Swedes with no religious affiliation is much higher (29 per cent), but still significantly lower than the percentages in Britain (45 per cent), France (47 per cent) and the Netherlands (55 per cent). In short, the overwhelming majority of Scandinavians consider themselves members of their national churches, despite the fact that many of them have no religious beliefs and practically never attend church.

This is the phenomenon that Dave Grace has aptly characterized as ‘vicarious’ religion, namely the notion that religion is performed by an active

minority on behalf of the wider population, who implicitly not only understand but approve of what the minority is doing. Church leaders and churchgoers, the religiously musical as it were, perform rituals as well as actually believing on behalf of others. Moreover, national churches are still viewed as public goods to which every citizen should have the right of access, when occasionally needed, for high festivities, rites of passage and especially in times of national crisis or disaster. This is particularly the case in the Scandinavian countries or in former West Germany, countries in which a majority of the population still voluntarily pay a relatively high church tax. But the same pattern of strong identification and low participation is found across Orthodox societies. The Catholic pattern is more mixed. One finds, on the one hand, the paradigmatic pattern of Poland and Ireland that combines very high identification with the national church along with very high participation. On the other hand, there is the Latin pattern, exemplified by France and Spain, in which the Catholic church itself becomes not so much the symbolic institution of national integration confronting an illegitimate foreign state, but actually the institution allied with an illegitimate national state and thus the catalyst of a profound national cleavage between embattled and highly mobilized clerical and anti-clerical national camps. Other Catholic societies fall somewhere in between the two extremes, while Italy actually partakes of both. Due to the particular belated process of national unification and the role first of the Papal States and then of the Vatican, some regions of Italy retain a resemblance to the Irish-Polish model, while others are closer to the Latin model.

Even these few references to various national patterns should serve to illustrate the fact that the variations in levels of religiosity across Europe can be explained better in terms of the very diverse and historically changing patterns of fusion and dissolution of religious, political and national communities, that is, of the imagined communities of church, state and nation, than in terms of indices and levels of modernization, that is, of socio-economic development, or of levels of urbanization, education, and so on. Nonetheless, there is also a strong correlation between levels of modernization and levels of secularization. That is, some – but not all – of the most secularized countries of Europe are also among the most modern. This explains the tendency of the secularization theory to explain patterns of secularization in terms of levels of modernization, as if secularization necessarily followed modernization, in the sense that modernization itself is the cause or precipitator of secularization. Such an assumption, which is already problematic in terms of the internal variations we have examined within Europe, becomes even more untenable the moment one adopts a global comparative perspective.

European secularization from a global comparative perspective

From a global comparative perspective it is becoming increasingly evident that European patterns of secularization are exceptional, rather than being the model that other societies are likely to resemble as they modernize. There has been an extraordinary reversal in the debates on secularization in the last decade. Until very recently most discussions of secularization had assumed that European religious developments were typically or paradigmatically modern, while the persistence of religion in modern America was attributed to American 'exceptionalism'. America was the exception that confirmed the European rule, a convenient way of not having to put into question the European rule. Progressive religious decline was so much taken for granted that what required an explanation was the American 'deviation' from the European 'norm'.

Under conditions of globalization it has become increasingly evident that the Eurocentric view that modern Western European developments, including the secularization of Western Christianity, are general universal processes is no longer tenable. The more one adopts a global perspective, the more it becomes obvious that the drastic secularization of Western European societies is a rather exceptional phenomenon, with few parallels elsewhere other than in European settler societies such as New Zealand, Quebec or Uruguay. The collapse of the moral authority and of the plausibility structures of some of the national Christian churches in Europe is so extraordinary that we need a better explanation than simply referring to general processes of modernization. By offering a pseudo-general explanation of a particular historical development, we impede the possibility of developing a more convincing explanation of what is indeed a truly significant and undeniable phenomenon, namely the increasing secularization of many Western European societies since the late 1950s.

But the alternative theory being promoted by American sociologists of religion is also rather unpersuasive. It turns the American paradigm of free competitive religious markets into a general rule, claiming that free religious markets in and of themselves are the independent variable and the primary explanatory key to religious growth and vitality everywhere. Consequently, the theory explains the secularization of European societies as the result of monopolistic or oligopolistic religious markets. But the American paradigm of free religious markets is also unable to explain the internal variations of religious vitality within Europe; for instance, the persistence of high religiosity under monopolistic conditions in Poland and Ireland, or the drastic decline in religiosity under relatively free and competitive conditions in Wales or in other parts of Britain. In my view, the American paradigm cannot even offer a very convincing explanation of the peculiar and rather exceptional system of American denominationalism.

Instead of offering a comparative historical explanation, it tries to generalize its valid insights concerning American religious patterns into a universal theory of religious markets.

There is a sense in which both European secular developments and American religious developments are unique and exceptional. In this respect, one could certainly talk, as Europeans have done for decades, of 'American exceptionalism', or one could talk, as has become fashionable today, of 'European exceptionalism'. But both characterizations are highly problematic, if it is implied, as it was in the past, that America was the exception to the European rule of secularization, or if it is implied, as it often is today, that secular Europe is the exception to some global trend of religious revival. When it comes to religion, there is no global rule. All world religions are being transformed radically today, as they were throughout the era of European colonial expansion, by processes of modernization and globalization. But they are being transformed in diverse and manifold ways.

Analytically, therefore, there can be no substitute for serious comparative historical analysis. One should begin by recognizing and exploring the multiple and diverse patterns of secularization within Western European Christianity. Only then can one proceed with the task of contrasting these Western European Christian developments with other non-Western, non-European, or non-Christian developments. This essay is obviously not the place to attempt such a gigantic task. This is rather the task collectively addressed by the contributors to this volume, and by the conference in which it originated, with the kind of accumulated historical, civilizational and interdisciplinary expertise which no single scholar could possibly dream of achieving. I would only like to stress, against the simplifications of my own discipline, sociology, that we can only hope to make sense of the complex religious situation of Europe today by freeing ourselves from the assumptions of the traditional theory of secularization and by looking at the European experience of secularization with fresh eyes and with a comparative, historical and global perspective.

Let me simply offer a series of programmatic statements in this respect:

a) It has been generally recognized that the historical patterns of secularization in Western Europe are themselves somehow related to internal dynamics of institutionalization and transformation of Western European Christianity. At the very least, one must recognize that the category of the *saeculum* itself is a medieval Christian theological category, which itself served to structure the discourse and the institutional dynamics of European Christendom first and of European secularization later. Such recognition is important, irrespective of whether one sees the dynamic of secularization as the internal transformation or transvaluation of Christian theological categories into secular realities or

alternatively one sees the dynamic patterns of secularization as the triumphal and legitimate emancipation of these secular realities from theological and ecclesiastical control. I am not interested at this point in evaluating the greater or lesser validity of the competing perspectives, Hegelian, Nietzschean, Weberian, Schmittian, Parsonian, Voltairian, Comtean, Blumenbergian or Habermasian, but simply to point to the particular Christian–*saecular* dynamic. Other world religions and other axial civilizations had different patterns of institutionalization or dynamic tensions between religion and world, or between immanence and transcendence.

b) By referring to Western Christendom, I want to emphasize that such a dynamic of secularization is not a dynamic intrinsic to Christianity as a religion, or to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, whatever this may mean, or to some Judaeo-Christian-Graeco-Roman synthesis, since one cannot find such a dynamic in older Eastern forms of Christianity (Alexandrian, Antiochean, Byzantine, etc.) which could claim a deeper continuity with more primitive forms of Christianity or with the Graeco-Roman civilization. Socio-historically speaking Western Christendom only became institutionalized in the eleventh century with what Harold Berman has analysed as the ‘papal revolution’. This means that it is a dynamic intrinsic to Latin, but not to Eastern Orthodox, Christendom. The Investiture Conflicts are the manifestation and crystallization of this particular dynamic tension, which will repeat itself in other secular spheres, such as in the medieval universities, and in economic ethical debates. One does not encounter such dynamic tensions or conflicts in Eastern Christianity.

c) If the institutional, theological and discursive legacy of medieval Christendom is shared by all Western European, i.e. Catholic and Protestant, societies, internally the dissolution of the system of medieval Christendom associated both with the Protestant Reformation and with the emergence of the European system of sovereign territorial states will serve to open up new multiple and diverse patterns of secularization across Western Europe. Here, one can fortunately build upon the classic comparative analysis initiated by David Martin in his *General Theory of Secularization*. Protestantism itself in its various confessional forms, diverse patterns of state formation, diverse patterns of state–church–sect relations, and the ensuing religious markets (monopoly, duopoly, pluralist, etc.) are some of the independent variables which contribute in manifold ways to diverse patterns of secularization across Europe.

d) To this one should add, again following David Martin, the crucial relevance of the Enlightenment and of the various socio-political and ideological-cultural movements deriving from it. It is, however, imperative to view the Enlightenment

not as a single and uniform movement but as multiple and diverse movements. In its relation to new patterns of secularization, it is important to distinguish at least between the British, French and American Enlightenment as well as to distinguish the related yet separate and long-lasting tradition of the German *Aufklärung* as it became institutionalized in German philosophy and theology and in the *Geisteswissenschaften*.

Nevertheless, one could argue that what makes the general European situation unique and exceptional when compared with the rest of the world is precisely the triumph of secularism as a teleological theory of religious development that has its origins in the Enlightenment critique of religion. The ideological critique of religion developed by the Enlightenment and carried out by a series of social movements throughout Europe from the eighteenth to the twentieth century has informed European theories of secularization in such a way that those theories have come to function not only as descriptive theories of social processes, but also and more significantly as critical-genealogical theories of religion and as normative-teleological theories of religious development that presupposed religious decline as the telos of history.

Three dimensions of the Enlightenment critique of religion were particularly relevant: the cognitive critique of religion as a primitive, pre-rational worldview to be superseded by the advancement of science and rational thought; the political critique of ecclesiastical religion as a conspiracy of rulers and priests to keep the people ignorant and oppressed, a condition to be superseded by the advancement of popular sovereignty and democratic freedoms; and the humanist critique of the very idea of God as human self-alienation and as a self-denying other-worldly projection of human aspirations and desires, a critique which postulated the death of God as the premise of human emancipation. Although the prominence and pertinence of each of these three critiques may have changed from country to country, each of them in various degrees came to inform modern European social movements, the political parties associated with them and European theories of secularization.

In this respect, theories of secularization in Europe have functioned as self-fulfilling prophecies to the extent to which a majority of the population in Europe came to accept the premises of those theories as a depiction of the normal state of affairs and as a projection of future developments. The premise that the more modern and progressive a society becomes the more religion tends to decline assumed in Europe the character of a taken-for-granted belief widely shared not only by sociologists of religion but by a majority of the population. The postulate of progressive religious decline has become part of the European definition of the modern situation, with real consequences for church religiosity.

In my view, this is one of the key factors in explaining the drastic and precipitous decline of religious practices in post-Second World War Europe,

a decline that should not be understood as simply the final cumulative effect of a long-term process of progressive decline correlated with processes of modernization. The forced secularization from above instituted by communist regimes is an altogether different phenomenon, although the Marxian critique of religion is of course itself closely related to the Enlightenment critique. The other equally influential factor was probably the institutionalization of welfare states across Western Europe, insofar as these entailed a transference of collective identification from the imagined community of the national church, or of the confessional community in multi-confessional contexts, to the imagined community of the nation-state. This is perhaps the most plausible explanation for the two most dramatic cases of decline, namely Britain and the Netherlands. In the case of Britain we have a clear transference of identification from the churches of England, Scotland and Wales to the United Kingdom. In Holland the drastic secularization is undoubtedly related to the collapse of the polarized secular/religious multi-confessional life-worlds. Though perhaps less dramatically, the same process took place in former West Germany. Outside Europe, Quebec offers equally dramatic evidence of this transference from the Catholic Church as the traditional carrier of Quebecois national identity to modern secular separatist nationalism. The cantonal structure of Switzerland and to a certain extent its neutrality and somewhat provincial isolation from the rest of Europe have probably protected the Swiss churches from similar secularizing consequences.

The culture of the 1960s itself and the critique of all types of institutional authority, as a general global modern phenomenon, was probably an additional crucial contributing factor to the drastic processes of European secularization. But it is instructive to compare the different effects that similar processes had in secular Europe and in religious America. All the processes and movements of the 1960s – the counter-culture, the student rebellion, the revolution in gender/sexual roles and norms – were certainly as radical and, probably, even more anti-establishment in puritan Protestant America than anywhere in Europe. The close association of those movements with the anti-Vietnam War movement and with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements makes the 1960s one of the most radical and transformative decades in the history of the United States, comparable only to the Revolution and War of Independence and to the Abolition movement and the Civil War. Yet, as so often happens in American history, all these movements were intimately associated with and even carried by religious movements and groups. Unlike in Europe, where such movements contributed to further secularization, in the United States they contributed not so much to secularization as to a new radical transformation of American religion, which has been likened to a new Great Awakening. To exemplify this one only needs to enumerate the explosion of new religious movements of all kinds, the

proliferation of 'invisible religions' of self-expression and self-realization along with the triumph of the therapeutic and the institutional professionalization of all kinds of pastoral care of the soul, the dimensions of the New Age movement, the increasing Islamization of the African-American community along with the incorporation of immigrant Islam as an American religion, the Protestantification of American Latinos and the the Latin Americanization of American Catholicism, the increasing presence of immigrant Buddhism and immigrant Hinduism as parts of the normal American religious environment, and of course the public re-emergence and the public mobilization of Protestant fundamentalism.

By the end of the century, an increasing number of Americans, roughly 20 per cent, will also reject organized 'religion', but not by converting to secularity as in Europe, but rather in the name of a broader, more eclectic and more ecumenical 'spirituality' which is supposed to offer a surer and more authentic path to the inner self and to the sacred. It is a movement from 'denomination' to 'individual mysticism', not to irreligion. This fifth of the population forms the new self-denominational category of 'spiritual but not religious'. One can safely assume, moreover, that an even larger number of Americans experience similar spiritual journeys while still belonging to traditional denominations or by joining all kinds of new religious communities. Not accidentally, the 'baby boomers' have been rightly characterized as a generation of 'seekers' who have brought a further vanishing of the boundaries between religion, spirituality and secularity within as well as outside religious denominations. Such a phenomenon has actually always been somewhat typical of American religion. Indeed, it has led many European observers and defenders of the theory of secularization to dismiss the phenomenon of American religious vitality as irrelevant and as invalid counter-evidence to their theory, because by their European ecclesiastical standards it is no longer 'authentic' religion.

It is true that similar religious trends have existed throughout Western Europe since the 1960s, with new processes of religious individuation, as well as new 'invisible religions' of self-expression: the same new religious movements and cults, the presence of Eastern religious traditions and spiritualities, the New Age and reinvented pagan religions. Moreover, institutional religion in Europe, Catholic as well as Protestant, is also in flux and in motion. As Danièle Hervieu-Léger has shown, 'the pilgrim' and 'the convert' are also prominent 'seekers' in the European religious landscape. Yet all these religious phenomena have a much weaker presence and public resonance in Europe than in the USA. A majority of Europeans have converted to modern secularity and tend to look down upon those who are still, or newly, religious. There is an element of at least implicit conversion in the process of secularization insofar as it is a conversion to modernity, the will to be modern enlightened Europeans. In this respect, it entails the semi-conscious affirmation of secularity and the abandonment of

traditional religion as something that modern mature Europeans have overcome and outgrown.

This is in my view the explanatory key in accounting for the exceptional character of European secularization. It also explains why churches and ecclesiastical institutions, once they ceded to the secular nation-state their traditional historical function as community cults, that is, as collective representations of the imagined national communities and carriers of the collective memory, also lost in the process their ability to function as religions of individual salvation. Crucial is the fact that individuals in Europe, once they lose faith in their national churches, do not bother to look for, or actually look disdainfully upon, alternative salvation religions. In a certain sense, the explanation lies in the fact that Europeans continue to be implicit members of their national churches even after explicitly breaking away from them. It is this peculiar situation that explains the lack of religious demand and the absence of a truly competitive religious market in Europe. The culprit is not so much the monopolistic laziness of the churches protected by state regulation, as the American supply-side theory of religion tends to argue, but the lack of demand for alternative salvation religions among the unchurched, even in the face of new enterprising yet generally unsuccessful religious suppliers.

A post-secular Europe? The return of religion to the public sphere of European societies

If my interpretation is correct, it would explain why religion has again become a contested public issue in Europe. It is perhaps premature to speak of a post-secular Europe, but certainly one can sense a significant shift in the European *Zeitgeist*. This volume and the conference from which it emanates are themselves indications of new currents in intellectual and public opinion. When, over a decade ago, I first developed the thesis of the de-privatization of religion as a new global trend, the thesis did not find much resonance in many parts of Europe, certainly not in Germany. The privatization of religion was simply taken too much for granted both as a normal empirical fact and actually as the norm for modern European societies. The concept of modern public religions was still too dissonant and religious revivals elsewhere could simply be explained, or rather explained away, as the rise of fundamentalism. But in the last years there has been a noticeable change in attitude and attention throughout Europe. Even Jürgen Habermas speaks now of 'religion in the public sphere', and every other week one learns of a new conference or of the establishment of a newly funded research project on 'religion and politics' or on 'religion and violence' or on 'conflict and dialogue' between the world religions.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the resonance of the

discourse of the clash of civilizations have certainly played an important role in focusing European attention on issues of religion. But it would be a serious error to attribute this new attention solely or even mainly to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the threats and challenges which it poses to the West and particularly to Europe. Internal European transformations have also contributed to the new public interest in religion. General processes of globalization, the global growth of transnational migration and the very process of European integration are presenting crucial challenges not only to the European model of the national welfare state, but also to the different kinds of religious–secular and church–state settlements that the various European countries had achieved in post-Second World War Europe.

The process of European integration, the eastward expansion of the European Union and the drafting of a European constitution have triggered fundamental questions concerning both national and European identities and the role of Christianity in both identities. What constitutes ‘Europe’? How and where should one draw the external territorial and the internal cultural boundaries of Europe? The most controversial, yet rarely openly confronted – and therefore most anxiety-producing – issues are the potential integration of Turkey and the potential integration of non-European immigrants, who in most European countries happen to be overwhelmingly Muslim. But the eastward expansion of the European Union, particularly the incorporation of an assertive Catholic Poland, and the debates over some kind of affirmation or recognition of the Christian heritage in the preamble of the new European constitution, have also added unexpected ‘religious’ irritants to the debates over Europeanization.

There is a certain irony in the whole debate, since the initial project of a European Union was fundamentally a Christian-Democratic project, sanctioned by the Vatican, at a time of a general religious revival in post-Second World War Europe, in the geopolitical context of the Cold War when ‘the free world’ and ‘Christian civilization’ had become synonymous. But this is a forgotten history that secular Europeans, proud of having outgrown a religious past from which they feel liberated, would prefer not to remember. ‘Religious’ issues serve as irritants to secular Europeans precisely because they serve to fuel ‘the glimmering embers’ of Christian identity, while at the same time confirming the widely shared assumption that it is best to banish religion from the public sphere in order to tame the passionate conflicts and irrational attitudes which religion is assumed to bring into politics.

It is indeed astounding to observe how widespread throughout Europe is the view that religion is intolerant and the source of conflict. The overwhelming majority, practically over two thirds of the population in every Western European country, agrees that religion is ‘intolerant’, and a majority in every Western European country, except Norway and Sweden, shares the view that ‘religion

creates conflict'. Interestingly enough, the Danes distinguish themselves clearly from their fellow Lutheran Scandinavians in both respects. They score higher than any other European country, as high as 86 per cent, on the view that religion creates conflict, and score the second highest (with 79 per cent), after the Swiss and tied with the British, on the belief that religion is intolerant. Given their high scores on most religious indicators, the Swiss response is also interesting.

Along with most other former communist countries, the Poles score well below the Western European average on both issues. It is not surprising, therefore, that the evangelical task which Pope John Paul II assigned to his fellow Poles, to join the European Union with the mission of re-Christianizing secular Western Europe, is viewed differently in Poland and in the rest of Europe. The Polish Episcopate has accepted enthusiastically the papal apostolic assignment and has repeatedly stressed its goal of 'restoring Europe for Christianity'. While it may sound preposterous and irritating to Western European ears, such a message has found resonance in the tradition of Polish messianism.

Western European observers are accustomed to discount manifestations of Polish religious effervescence and Polish messianism as annoying and hopelessly anachronistic, if not reactionary, expressions of the Polish romantically heroic, yet desperate, penchant for resisting the march of history. It happened during the nineteenth-century Polish uprisings and it happened during the period of the Solidarity movement. Polish and Western European developments appeared seriously out of synch. Yet in both cases the Poles confounded the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. The rise of Solidarity and its role in the eventual collapse of the Soviet system radically altered the march of history and global geopolitical configurations. The repeatedly demonstrated power of renewal of Polish Catholicism, which should not be confused with a residual and recessive tradition, has confounded sceptics and critics before. It could happen again.

Given the loss of demand for religion in Western Europe, the supply of surplus Polish pastoral resources for a European-wide evangelizing effort is unlikely to prove effective. But Poland could still have an important role to play by simply showing that a modern and fully integrated European country can still continue to be a deeply religious one and thus proving the secularization thesis wrong on European soil.

While the threat of a Polish Christian crusade awakens little fear among secular Europeans confident of their ability to assimilate Catholic Poland on their own terms, the prospect of Turkey joining the European Union generates much greater anxieties among Europeans, Christian and post-Christian alike, but of the kind which cannot be easily verbalized, at least not publicly. The paradox and the quandary for modern secular Europeans, who have shed their traditional historical Christian identities in a rapid and drastic process of secularization that has coincided with the success of the process of European integration, and who

therefore identify European modernity with secularization, is that they observe with some apprehension the reverse process in Turkey. The more 'modern', or at least democratic, Turkish politics become, the more publicly Muslim and less secularist they also tend to become. In its determination to join the EU, Turkey is adamantly staking its claim to be, or its right to become, a fully European country economically and politically, while simultaneously fashioning its own model of Muslim cultural modernity. It is this very claim to be simultaneously a modern European and a culturally Muslim country that baffles European civilizational identities, secular and Christian alike. It contradicts both the definition of a Christian Europe and the definition of a secular Europe. Turkey's claim to European membership becomes an irritant precisely because it forces Europeans to reflexively and openly confront the crisis in their own civilizational identity, at a moment when the EU is already reeling from a series of compounded economic, geopolitical, administrative, fiscal and legitimization crises.

The spectre of millions of Turkish citizens already in Europe but not of Europe, many of them second-generation immigrants, caught between an old country they have left behind and their European host societies unable or unwilling to fully assimilate them, only makes the problem the more visible. *Gastarbeiter* can be successfully incorporated economically. They may even gain voting rights, at least on the local level, and prove to be model or at least ordinary citizens. But can they pass the unwritten rules of cultural European membership or are they to remain 'strangers', ultimately *Fremdarbeiter*?¹ Can the European Union open new conditions for the kind of multiculturalism that its constituent national societies find so difficult to accept? The question of the integration of Turkey in the EU is inevitably intertwined, implicitly if not explicitly, with the question of the failed integration of Muslim immigrants and, in turn, the way in which Europe resolves both questions will determine not only Europe's civilizational identity but the role of Europe in the emerging global order.

What makes 'the immigrant question' particularly thorny in Europe, and inextricably entwined with 'the Turkish question', is the fact that in Europe immigration and Islam are almost synonymous. This entails a superimposition of different dimensions of 'otherness' that exacerbates issues of boundaries, accommodation and incorporation. The immigrant, the religious, the racial, and the socio-economic unprivileged 'other' all tend to coincide. Moreover, all those dimensions of 'otherness' now become superimposed upon Islam, so that Islam becomes the utterly 'other'. Anti-immigrant xenophobic nativism, the conservative defence of Christian culture and civilization, secularist anti-religious prejudices,

¹ A controversy has erupted in Germany because Oscar Lafontaine, the left Socialist leader, dislikes the euphemism *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) and prefers to call immigrant workers *Fremdarbeiter* (foreign workers), the term used during the Nazi period.

liberal-feminist critiques of Muslim patriarchal fundamentalism, and the fear of Islamist terrorist networks, are being fused indiscriminately throughout Europe into a uniform anti-Muslim discourse which practically precludes the kind of mutual accommodation between immigrant groups and host societies that is necessary for successful immigrant incorporation.

Finally, the debates over the new European constitution also revealed that religion has become a public contested issue across Europe. From a purely legal positivist point of view, modern constitutions do not need transcendent references. But insofar as the main rationale and purpose of drafting a new European constitution appeared to be an extra-constitutional political one, namely to contribute to European social integration, to enhance a common European identity, and to remedy the deficit in democratic legitimacy, the confronting of issues of common European values and common European identities was inevitable.

Who are we? Where do we come from? What constitutes our spiritual and moral heritage and the boundaries of our collective identities? How flexible internally and how open externally should those boundaries be? Addressing such complex questions through an open and public democratic European-wide debate would under any circumstance be an enormously complex task that would entail addressing and coming to terms with the many problematic and contradictory aspects of the European heritage in its intra-national, inter-European and global-colonial dimensions. But such a complex task is made the more difficult by secularist prejudices that preclude not only a critical yet honest and reflexive assessment of the Judaeo-Christian heritage, but even any public official reference to such a heritage, on the grounds that any reference to religion could be divisive and counterproductive, or exclusionist, or simply violates secular postulates.

I am not trying to imply that the European constitution ought to make some reference either to some transcendent reality or to the Christian heritage. But one should certainly recognize that any genealogical reconstruction of the idea or social imaginary of Europe that makes reference to Graeco-Roman antiquity and the Enlightenment while erasing any memory of the role of medieval Christendom in the very constitution of Europe as a civilization evinces either historical ignorance or repressive amnesia.

The inability to openly recognize Christianity as one of the constitutive components of European cultural and political identity could also mean that Europeans are missing the historical opportunity to add a third important reconciliation to the already achieved reconciliations between Protestants and Catholics and between warring European nation-states, by putting an end to the old battles over Enlightenment, religion and secularism. The perceived threat to secular identities and the biased over-reaction of excluding any public reference to Christianity belie the self-serving secularist claims that only secular neutrality can

guarantee individual freedoms and cultural pluralism. What the imposed silence signifies is not only the attempt to erase Christianity or any other religion from the public collective memory, but also the exclusion from the public sphere of a central component of the personal identity of many Europeans. To guarantee equal access to the European public sphere and undistorted communication, the European Union would need to become not only post-Christian but also post-secular.

Finally, the privileging of European secular identities and secularist self-understandings in the genealogical affirmation of the common European values of human dignity, equality, freedom and solidarity may not only impede the possibility of gaining a full understanding of the genesis of those values and their complex process of societal institutionalization and individual internalization, but also preclude a critical and reflexive self-understanding of our own European secular identities. David Martin and Danièle Hervieu-Léger have poignantly shown that the religious and the secular are inextricably linked throughout modern European history, that the different versions of the European Enlightenment are inextricably linked with different versions of Christianity, and that cultural matrices rooted in particular religious traditions and related institutional arrangements still serve to shape and encode, mostly unconsciously, diverse European secular practices.

The purpose of this argument, as noted above, is not to imply that the new European constitution ought to make reference either to some transcendent reality or to the Christian heritage, but is simply to point out that the quarrels provoked by the possible incorporation of religious reference into the constitutional text would seem to indicate that secularist assumptions turn religion into a problem, and thus preclude the possibility of dealing with religious issues in a pragmatic and sensible manner.