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Religion and Society in Europe: Continuities, Transformations, and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between religion and society in Europe, tracing historical trajectories, contemporary challenges, and future directions. While Christianity—particularly Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy—has historically shaped European institutions, values, and identities, the continent has also witnessed processes of secularization, pluralization, and post-secular transformation. The analysis covers medieval Christendom, the Reformation, and Enlightenment critiques before turning to contemporary dynamics of secularization, religious pluralism, and the interplay between religion and politics. Case studies of France, Poland, Germany, and the United Kingdom highlight the diversity of religious–societal relations across Europe. The paper argues that religion remains a vital yet contested force, not as a hegemonic authority but as a dynamic element in shaping identities, politics, and social debates. The study contributes to understanding the persistence of religion in a secular age and the complexities of negotiating religious diversity in European societies.

1. Introduction

Religion has played a central role in shaping European societies for over a millennium. From the dominance of the Catholic Church in medieval Christendom to the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and modern secularization, religion has been deeply interwoven with Europe's cultural, political, and social transformations (Davie, 2018; McLeod, 2020). Although contemporary Europe is often characterized as one of the most secular regions in the world, religion remains a powerful force that informs identity, politics, and public debate. The presence of both declining institutional religiosity and growing religious diversity, particularly through migration, highlights the complexity of Europe's religious landscape (Norris & Inglehart, 2011; Casanova, 2006).

The aim of this article is to examine the relationship between religion and society in Europe by situating it in both historical and contemporary contexts. It argues that while secularization has profoundly reshaped European societies, religion continues to play a critical—albeit changing—role in shaping collective identities, public policies, and cultural values. Europe's story

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is not one of simple decline of faith but of negotiation between long-standing traditions and new religious realities.

2. Materials and Method

Historical significance of religion in Europe

The historical trajectory of Europe cannot be understood without considering the central role of religion. Christianity, in particular, was not only a spiritual system but also the foundation for legal institutions, education, art, and political authority across the continent (Hastings, 1996). Religious conflicts, such as the Reformation and the subsequent wars of religion, redefined territorial states and cultural identities, laying the groundwork for modern Europe. The Enlightenment challenged religious authority but did not erase its influence; instead, it reshaped it, contributing to the secular foundations of European modernity (Taylor, 2007).

Religion and society in the 21st century

In the present era, religion interacts with European societies in more fragmented and contested ways. Several key dynamics define this interaction:

1. Secularization and decline of church attendance: Traditional forms of religious practice, such as regular attendance at Catholic or Protestant churches, have declined sharply in many Western European countries (Voas & Chaves, 2016).
2. Religious pluralization: Immigration from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East has introduced new religious traditions, especially Islam, contributing to the diversification of European societies (Koenig, 2007).
3. Post-secular debates: Scholars such as Habermas (2008) argue that Europe is witnessing a "post-secular" condition, in which secular institutions must learn to coexist with religious voices in public life.
4. Identity and politics: Religion remains central to debates about national identity, integration, and social cohesion, often serving as both a unifying and divisive force (Roy, 2007).

Research questions and scope

This article seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How has religion historically shaped the social and political foundations of Europe? (2) How does religion influence contemporary European societies in the context of secularization and pluralism? (3) What are the implications of religion's ongoing presence in European politics, culture, and identity?

To address these questions, the article is structured as follows. First, it presents a historical background on religion's role in European societies. It then examines three thematic dimensions: religion and identity, religion and politics, and secularization and post-secular society. Case studies from Poland, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom illustrate how these dynamics manifest in diverse national contexts. The discussion synthesizes these findings to consider the challenges and opportunities religion poses for European societies in the 21st century.

3. Data presentation and Discussion

Historical Background

Religion's role in Europe cannot be separated from its historical development. The continent's institutions, cultural norms, and political structures were profoundly shaped by Christianity and its various branches, while later centuries introduced processes of secularization

and pluralization that redefined religion's place in society. This section provides a chronological overview of religion in Europe, focusing on four key periods: medieval Christendom, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the modern era of secularization.

Medieval Christendom

The Middle Ages established Christianity as the dominant religious and cultural force in Europe. By the early medieval period, the Catholic Church had consolidated its authority, with the papacy serving as a transnational institution wielding both spiritual and political power (Southern, 1995). The Church was not only the guardian of faith but also the central institution in education, law, and governance. Universities, monasteries, and cathedrals became hubs of intellectual and artistic life, embedding Christianity deeply in European cultural identity (Le Goff, 1988).

Religion permeated every aspect of social life, from birth to death, sacralizing the rhythms of time through liturgical calendars and festivals (Huizinga, 1996). Political legitimacy was often derived from religious authority; monarchs sought papal approval, and rulers styled themselves as defenders of the faith. The fusion of religion and politics also extended to military campaigns such as the Crusades, which, despite their violent nature, further entrenched the identity of Europe as a Christian continent (Tyerman, 2006).

The Reformation and Religious Conflicts

The unity of Christendom fractured in the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation. Sparked by Martin Luther's critique of Catholic practices in 1517, the Reformation reshaped Europe's religious and political landscape (MacCulloch, 2003). Protestant movements spread across Northern and Western Europe, challenging the authority of Rome and leading to the creation of distinct confessional states.

The religious upheavals of the Reformation had profound social consequences. In Protestant regions, religious life became closely tied to emerging forms of literacy and education, as the reading of scripture in the vernacular was emphasized (Cameron, 2012). At the same time, violent conflicts, including the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), devastated much of Central Europe and highlighted the destructive potential of religious division. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 institutionalized the principle of cuius regio, eius religio ("whose realm, his religion"), laying the foundation for the modern state system and reinforcing the link between religion and national identity (Philpott, 2000).

The Enlightenment and the Challenge to Religion

The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries introduced new challenges to religious authority. Intellectuals such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Kant emphasized reason, individual autonomy, and secular morality, often critiquing the power of organized religion (Israel, 2001). The Enlightenment was not uniformly anti-religious; many thinkers retained belief in God but advocated for a rationalized, de-institutionalized form of faith known as Deism.

The French Revolution (1789) represented the most radical break with religious tradition. Revolutionary leaders sought to curtail the Church's power, promote secular education, and establish religion as a private rather than public matter (McManners, 1990). These changes

reverberated across Europe, even if they were not universally adopted. The Enlightenment's emphasis on rationalism laid the intellectual groundwork for secularization in the 19th and 20th centuries, as religion gradually lost its monopoly on knowledge and public authority (Taylor, 2007).

Modern Secularization and the Pluralization of Religion

The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed accelerating processes of secularization across Europe, though at uneven rates. Secularization theory, advanced by scholars such as Weber (1905/2002) and later Berger (1967), argued that modernization, scientific progress, and industrialization would inevitably lead to the decline of religion in social life. Indicators such as church attendance, clerical influence, and adherence to traditional beliefs declined significantly in many Western European societies (Bruce, 2011).

However, the story was not uniform. In parts of Eastern and Southern Europe, religion remained more resilient. Catholicism in Poland, for instance, became a key force in sustaining national identity under foreign domination and communist rule (Ramet, 1998). Similarly, Orthodoxy retained strong cultural significance in Greece, Romania, and Russia.

The 20th century also brought new dynamics of pluralization. Immigration from former colonies introduced Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and other faiths into European societies, particularly in countries like France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands (Koenig, 2007). These developments complicated Europe's religious map, turning once predominantly Christian societies into multi religious ones. The arrival of Islam, in particular, has fueled debates on integration, secularism, and national identity, sometimes exacerbating social tensions (Cesari, 2004).

Post-Secular Europe?

By the early 21st century, scholars began questioning the assumption of a straightforward decline of religion. While traditional church attendance continues to decline in many places, religion persists in new forms. Alternative spiritualities, "believing without belonging," and the mobilization of religious identity in politics suggest that Europe is entering a "post-secular" condition (Davie, 2018; Habermas, 2008). In this context, secular states and societies are compelled to engage with religion not as a relic of the past but as a continuing, albeit transformed, social reality.

Europe's religious history is thus a story of continuity and transformation. From the unity of medieval Christendom to the fragmentation of the Reformation, from Enlightenment critiques to modern secularization, religion has been deeply entangled with Europe's cultural and political life. The current pluralistic and post-secular era cannot be understood without recognizing these long trajectories. Religion remains a vital force in European societies, though no longer in the form of hegemonic Christendom but as part of a diverse and contested social landscape.

Religion and Identity in Modern Europe

Religion remains a key dimension of identity in contemporary Europe, even as patterns of belief and practice have changed significantly. While traditional forms of institutional religiosity have declined, religion continues to influence how individuals and communities define themselves and how nations negotiate questions of belonging, integration, and social cohesion. This discussion examines the role of religion in shaping identity in modern Europe, focusing on national identity, European identity, multiculturalism and migration, individual religiosity, and the intersections of religion with politics and secularization.

Religion and National Identity

Religion has historically served as a cornerstone of national identity across Europe. In some cases, the association between faith and nationhood remains particularly strong. Catholicism has long been integral to Polish identity, where the Church symbolized resistance to foreign domination, especially under communist rule (Byrnes, 2001). Similarly, in Greece, the Orthodox Church continues to safeguard national culture and historical continuity (Roudometof, 2014).

Even in secularized societies, religion retains symbolic power. In England, the Church of England continues to be tied to national identity through its establishment status, royal ceremonies, and association with Britishness (Bruce, 2011). In Scandinavia, despite low church attendance, Lutheran state churches still function as markers of cultural heritage (Ahlin, 2021). Religion therefore serves as a symbolic resource for national self-understanding, especially in times of crisis or debates over immigration, where appeals to Europe's "Christian heritage" function as cultural markers rather than theological commitments (Katzenstein, 2006).

Religion and European Identity

The question of whether Europe itself possesses a shared religious identity is contested. Christianity has historically been described as the cultural foundation of Europe (Hastings, 1996). Yet, the European Union (EU) deliberately avoids explicit references to religion in its constitutional framework, as illustrated by the failed attempt to include Christianity in the EU Constitutional Treaty (Foret & Itçaina, 2012).

For some, Christian identity serves as a cultural boundary marker against Islam, especially in the rhetoric of right-wing populist parties (Roy, 2007). Others argue that European identity is defined by pluralism, tolerance, and human rights rather than a single religious heritage (Casanova, 2006). This tension between religious legacy and pluralist ideals continues to shape debates about what it means to be European in the 21st century.

Religion, Multiculturalism, and Migration

Migration has been the primary driver of Europe's religious transformation in recent decades. Post-war labor migration, postcolonial movements, and refugee flows have introduced Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and other groups into European societies (Koenig, 2007). Islam, now a significant minority in countries such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, has become the most visible of these religions (Cesari, 2004).

Muslim communities enrich Europe's cultural and religious diversity but have also triggered political debates on integration, secularism, and security. Disputes over Islamic dress, mosque construction, and religious education highlight religion's role as a flashpoint for broader identity struggles (Modood, 2013).

Approaches to multiculturalism vary. France's strict *laïcité* restricts public religious expression, generating recurrent disputes over headscarves and religious symbols (Fernando, 2014). By contrast, the United Kingdom follows a more pluralist model, granting recognition to religious diversity in education and public life, though not without tensions (Modood, 2013).

Migration has also reshaped host societies. In some contexts, anxieties about diversity have revived appeals to Europe's Christian heritage (Koenig, 2007), while in others, societies are challenged to redefine national identity in more inclusive terms.

Individual Identity and "Believing Without Belonging"

At the individual level, religion in Europe reflects both decline and transformation. Grace Davie's (2018) notion of "believing without belonging" captures a trend where individuals identify with religious symbols or beliefs without active participation in institutions.

Alternative spiritualities such as yoga, meditation, and New Age practices have also expanded (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Religion thus functions less as doctrinal commitment and more as a flexible cultural identity, expressed in family traditions, holidays, and rites of passage.

Religion and Politics in Europe

Religion continues to influence European politics through institutional arrangements, policy debates, and political mobilization.

Church–State Relations

European states display diverse models. The United Kingdom, Denmark, and Norway retain established churches, symbolizing enduring—if mostly ceremonial—ties between religion and state (Bruce, 2011; Ahlin, 2021). By contrast, France's laïcité enforces strict separation, tested by controversies over Islamic dress and education (Fernando, 2014). Germany exemplifies a cooperative model, with its church tax system and recognition of religion as a partner in public welfare (Madeley, 2003).

Religion in Public Policy Debates

Religion also shapes debates on education, bioethics, immigration, and gender. In education, legacies such as the Netherlands' "pillarization" allow religious communities to maintain institutions (Lijphart, 1968/2012), while France restricts religion in public schools. Catholicism has influenced bioethical debates in Ireland, Poland, and Italy, though its political authority has weakened in some contexts (Ramet, 2014; Inglis, 2014; Graff, 2010). Immigration and integration issues, including disputes over Islamic practices, highlight tensions between secularism and religious accommodation (Koenig, 2007). Gender debates further reveal religion's contested political role, with conservative and progressive actors mobilizing on opposing sides (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

Political Mobilization of Religion

Christian Democratic parties, rooted in Catholic social teaching, were central in Europe's postwar reconstruction and still wield influence (Kalyvas & van Kersbergen, 2010). Right-wing populist movements increasingly invoke Christianity as a cultural identity marker, positioning it against migration and globalization (Roy, 2007). Religious organizations, meanwhile, remain key actors in civil society, providing humanitarian services and influencing policy from the ground up (Casanova, 2006).

The Post-Secular Condition

Scholars such as Habermas (2008) argue that Europe now faces a "post-secular" condition in which religion, though no longer dominant, must be engaged as a legitimate voice in public discourse. This requires translating religious arguments into secular language while ensuring pluralism and inclusivity.

Secularization and Post-Secular Society

Theories of Secularization

Classical theories argued that modernization would lead to the decline of religion (Berger, 1967; Wilson, 1966). Weber (1905/2002) described this as the "disenchantment of the world." Europe was long seen as confirming these theories, with sharp declines in church attendance and institutional influence (Bruce, 2011).

Empirical Patterns

Data confirm widespread decline: fewer than 10% attend church regularly in Sweden, Denmark, and the Czech Republic (Voas & Chaves, 2016). Younger generations increasingly identify as "nones" (Bullivant, 2019). However, religiosity remains strong in Poland, Croatia, and Romania, often tied to national identity (Ramet, 1998), and Orthodox Christianity continues to shape identity in Greece and Russia (Knox, 2019).

Post-Secular Perspectives

Despite secularization, religion resurfaces in politics, culture, and individual spirituality. Davie's (2018) "believing without belonging" and the rise of alternative spiritualities (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) exemplify new religious expressions. Casanova (2006) highlights religion's persistence in pluralized, diffuse forms.

Case Studies

To illustrate the diverse interactions of religion and society in Europe, this section examines four case studies: France, Poland, Germany, and the United Kingdom. These examples highlight the variety of church–state arrangements, levels of religiosity, and political debates across the continent.

France: Laïcité and the Challenge of Pluralism

France epitomizes the secular model of laïcité, enshrined in the 1905 law separating church and state. Religion is understood as a private matter, with public institutions, especially schools, expected to remain neutral (Baubérot, 2012). This model has generated ongoing controversies over the visibility of Islam, particularly regarding headscarves, niqabs, and burkinis.

Critics argue that laïcité disproportionately targets Muslims and undermines religious freedom (Fernando, 2014). Supporters contend that it preserves republican values of equality and neutrality. France illustrates how secularism itself becomes a contested identity, shaping how the nation negotiates diversity.

Poland: Catholicism and National Identity

Poland presents a stark contrast. The Catholic Church has long been a pillar of Polish national identity, particularly during foreign partitions and communist rule (Byrnes, 2001). The election of Pope John Paul II in 1978 reinforced Catholicism as a symbol of Polish pride and resistance.

In contemporary politics, the Catholic Church maintains significant influence, especially through its alliance with the Law and Justice Party (PiS). Issues such as abortion, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ rights are heavily shaped by Catholic teaching (Graff, 2010). While urban youth exhibit growing secularization, Poland remains one of the most religious societies in Europe, demonstrating the resilience of religion where it is tied to national history.

Germany: Cooperative Secularism and Religious Pluralism

Germany represents a "cooperative" model of church–state relations. Religious communities recognized by the state can collect taxes through the Kirchensteuer system, enabling churches to remain financially significant even amid declining membership (Madeley, 2003).

Germany's religious landscape has been transformed by immigration, particularly from Turkey, making Islam the second-largest religion. Debates over mosque construction, Islamic instruction in schools, and integration policies highlight tensions between pluralism and secularism (Koenig, 2007). Nonetheless, Germany's federal system allows for experimentation, with some regions adopting inclusive policies to integrate religious minorities.

United Kingdom: Established Religion and Multiculturalism

The United Kingdom maintains an established church, yet religious pluralism is central to its social reality. The Church of England retains ceremonial importance, but regular attendance has declined sharply (Bruce, 2011). At the same time, migration has made the UK one of the most religiously diverse societies in Europe, with significant Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Jewish communities (Modood, 2013).

The UK adopts a multicultural model that recognizes religious diversity in public life. Faith schools receive state support, and religious communities play roles in local governance and social services. However, the country also grapples with tensions over radicalization, integration, and the limits of multiculturalism (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010).

Summary of Case Study

These case studies illustrate Europe's diversity. France emphasizes secular neutrality, Poland highlights religious resilience, Germany demonstrates cooperative pluralism, and the UK embodies multicultural accommodation. Together, they show that religion in Europe cannot be understood through a single model but only in terms of multiple, context-specific trajectories.

Prior Discussion

The preceding analysis highlights several key insights. First, religion in Europe is characterized by both decline and persistence. Secularization has reduced institutional religiosity, but religion endures in cultural, political, and individualized forms. Second, religious diversity has transformed European societies, challenging traditional models of national identity and integration. The presence of Islam, in particular, has forced European states to reconsider the relationship between secular norms and religious accommodation.

Third, religion's role in politics reflects both historical legacies and contemporary challenges. While Christian Democratic parties and established churches maintain influence, new dynamics

such as right-wing populism and post-secular engagement reveal how religion adapts to changing circumstances. Finally, the diversity of European contexts demonstrates that there is no single trajectory. Instead, religion's role is shaped by national histories, institutional arrangements, and social dynamics.

Final Statement

Religion remains a vital force in European society, despite widespread secularization. It continues to shape national and European identities, influence politics and policy debates, and provide resources for both conflict and cohesion. Europe's religious future will not be defined by a return to medieval Christendom nor by the disappearance of faith. Instead, it will be shaped by ongoing negotiations between secular institutions, religious traditions, and new forms of pluralism.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for scholars, policymakers, and citizens alike. Religion in Europe is not a relic of the past but an evolving factor that continues to shape the continent's social and political landscape.

4. Conclusion

Religion and identity in modern Europe remain deeply intertwined. National identities are still linked to religious traditions, even in secular societies. At the European level, debates over Christian heritage versus pluralist ideals continue to shape continental identity. Migration and multiculturalism complicate these dynamics, while individualized spirituality demonstrates religion's transformation at the personal level. Politically, religion influences church–state relations, policy debates, and party mobilization, underscoring Europe's "post-secular" reality where secular institutions must engage religious voices within democratic pluralism.

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— Martin E. Marty

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