

Secularization and the Church in Europe

Christian beliefs and church attendance are playing a much smaller role in Europeans' lives in general than in the past. Rick Wade gives a snapshot of the place and nature of Christianity in Europe.

At the end of a talk about the state of the evangelical mind in America, the subject turned to Europe, and a man said with great confidence, "The churches in Europe are all empty!" I've heard that said before. It makes for a good missions sermon; however, it doesn't quite do justice to the situation. Not *all* the churches in Europe are empty! The situation isn't like in Dallas, Texas, where churches dot the landscape, but there are thriving churches across the continent.



That said, however, there is more than just a grain of truth in the claim. Church attendance in Europe *is* down. Traditional Christian beliefs *are* less widely held.

It's important to know what the situation is in Europe for a few reasons.

First, we have a tendency to write Europe off in a way we don't other parts of the world. The church is struggling there, but it isn't a lost cause by any means! Maybe we can even *learn* from the thinking and life's experience of believers across the Atlantic.

Second, learning about the church around the world is good because it broadens our understanding of the interaction of Christianity and society. This should be of interest to us here in America.

Let's look at a few numbers in the area of church attendance.

To provide a contrast with the situation today, the best estimate for church attendance in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century was between forty and sixty percent of the adult population.[{1}](#) By contrast, in 2007, ten percent attended church at least weekly. About a quarter of those (about two million people) self-identify as evangelicals.[{2}](#) Although there has been large growth in so-called “new churches,” that growth hasn’t offset the loss across other denominations, especially the Church of England.

What about some other countries? In 2004, Gallup reported that “weekly attendance at religious services is below 10% in France and Germany, while in Belgium, the Netherlands, [and] Luxembourg . . . between 10% and 15% of citizens are regular churchgoers. . . . Only in Roman Catholic Ireland do a majority of residents (54%) still go to church weekly.”[{3}](#)

As we’ll see later, reduced numbers in church doesn’t mean all religious belief—even Christian—is lost.

The Golden Age of Faith

There is a story of the prominence and demise of religion in Europe that has become standard fare for understanding the history of Christianity in the modern world. The story goes that Europe was once a Christian civilization; that everyone was a Christian, and that the state churches ensured that society as a whole was Christian. This was the so-called “golden age of faith.” With the shift in thinking in the Enlightenment which put man at the center of knowledge, and which saw the rise of science, it became clear to some that religion was really just a form of superstition that gave pre-modern people an explanation of the world in which they lived and gave them hope.[{4}](#)

This story has come under a lot of fire in recent decades.[{5}](#) Although the churches had political and social power, there

was no uniform religious belief across Europe. In fact, it's been shown that there was a significant amount of paganism and folk magic mixed in with Christian beliefs.[{6}](#) Many priests had the barest notions of Christian theology; a lot of them couldn't even read.[{7}](#) Sociologist Philip Gorski says that it's more accurate to call it an Age of Magic or an Age of Ritual than an Age of Belief.[{8}](#)

On the other side of this debate are scholars such as Steve Bruce who say that, no matter the content or nature of religious belief in the Middle Ages, people were still *religious* even if not uniformly *Christian*; they believed in the supernatural and their religious beliefs colored their entire lives. "The English peasants may have often disappointed the guardians of Christian orthodoxy," Bruce writes, "but they were indubitably religious."[{9}](#)

So what changed? Was there a loss of Christianity or a loss of religion in general, or just some kind of shift? Historian Timothy Larson believes that what has been lost is Christendom.[{10}](#) The term *Christendom* is typically used to refer to the West when it was dominated by Christianity. The change wasn't really from religion to irreligion but from the dominance of Christianity to its demise as a dominant force.

Religion has come back with significant force in recent decades even in such deeply secular countries as France, primarily because of the influx of Muslims.[{11}](#) Although the state Christian churches are faltering, some founded by immigrants are doing well, such as those founded by Afro-Caribbean immigrants in England. It seems that critics sounded the death knell on religion too soon.

European Distinctives

Although Christian belief is on the demise in general in Europe, the institutional church—the state church

specifically—still has a valuable place in society.

In Europe's past, the church was a major part of people's lives. Everyone was baptized, married, and buried in the church. That tradition is still such a part of the social psyche that people fully expect that the church will be there for them even if they don't attend. Sociologist Grace Davie describes the church in this respect as a *public utility*. "A public utility," she writes, "is available to the population as a whole at the point of need and is funded through the tax system."[{12}](#) Fewer people are being married in churches now, and far fewer are being baptized. However, there's still a sense of need for the church at the time of death along with the expectation that it will be there for them.

Another term that characterizes religion in Europe is *vicarious religion*. Vicarious religion is "religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who . . . understand [and] approve of what the minority is doing." Church leaders are expected to believe certain things, perform religious rituals, and embody a high moral code. "English bishops," Davie writes, "are rebuked . . . if they doubt in public; it is, after all, their 'job' to believe." She reports an incident where a bishop was thought to have spoken derogatorily about the resurrection of Jesus. He was "widely pilloried" for that, she writes. Soon after his consecration as bishop, his church was struck by lightning. That was seen by some as a rebuke by God![{13}](#)

Another indicator of the importance of the church in European life is the fact that, in some countries, people still pay church tax, even countries that are very secular. Germany is one example. People can opt out, but a surprisingly high number don't, including some who are not religiously affiliated. Reasons include the possibility of needing the church sometime later in life, having a place to provide moral guidance for children, and the church's role in positively influencing the moral fabric of society in general.[{14}](#)

From Doctrine to Spirituality

I described above two concepts that characterize religious life in parts of Europe: *public utility* and *vicarious religion*. There's a third phrase sociologists use which points to the shift in emphasis from what one gets through the institutional church to personal spiritual experience. The phrase is "believing without belonging."

Sociologist Peter Berger believes that, as America is less religious than it seems, Europe is less secular than it seems. "A lot goes on under the radar," he writes.[{15}](#)

A phrase often heard *there* is heard more and more frequently in the States: "I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual." This could mean the person is into New Age thinking, or is interested in more conventional religion but doesn't feel at home in a church or in organized religion, or just prefers to choose what to believe him- or herself. A term some use to characterize this way of thinking is "patchwork religion."

One frequently finds a greater acceptance of religion in Europe when religion in *general* is the subject and not particular, creedal religions. Davie notes that "[generally speaking] if you ask European populations . . . do you believe in God, and you're not terribly specific about the God in question, you'll get about 70 percent saying yes, depending where you are. If you say, do you believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, you'll get a much lower number. In other words, if you turn your question into a creedal statement, the percentages go down." A "cerebral" kind of belief doesn't hold much appeal to the young. The essence of religious experience isn't so much what you learn as it is simply taking part. "It's the fact that you're lifted out of yourself that counts."[{16}](#)

The loss of authority in the state church hasn't resulted in the triumph of secular rationalism among young people, which

is rather surprising. They experiment with religious beliefs. "The rise occurred right across Europe," Davie notes, "but is most marked in those parts of Europe where the institutional churches are at their weakest." This isn't seen, however, "where the church is still strong and seen as a disciplinary force and is therefore rejected by young people."[\[17\]](#)

Some Closing Thoughts

Allow me to make some observations about the subject of secularization and the church in Europe.

Here are a few things to keep in mind as we face a Western culture that is increasingly hostile to the Gospel. First, we routinely hear the charge from people that religious people are living in the past, that they need to catch up to modern times. Such people simply assume as obviously true the long-held theory that secularization necessarily follows from modernization. This theory is sharply disputed today. Europe's history isn't the history of the rest of the world. Modernization appears in different forms around the world, including some that have room for religious belief and practice. America is a prime example. It isn't the backward exception to the rule, as haughty critics would have us believe. Some say it's *Europe* that is the exception with its strong secularity.[\[18\]](#) In fact, I think a case can be made that the modern propensity to separate our spiritual side from our material one is artificial; it violates our nature. But that's a subject for another time. What we can be sure of is that the condescending attitude of people who want Christians to catch up to modern times is without basis. There is no necessary connection between modernity and secularity.[\[19\]](#)

A second thing to keep in mind is that the church doesn't require a Christian society around it in order to grow. Christianity didn't have its beginnings in a Christian society, but it grew nonetheless. The wide-spread social

acceptance of Christian beliefs and morality is not the power of God unto salvation. It is the word of the cross.

Third, religion per se will not disappear because we are made in God's image and He has put eternity in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11). Christianity in particular will not die either, for the One who rose from the dead said even the gates of hell won't prevail against it (a much more serious adversary than the new atheists!).

What should we do? The same things Christians have always been called to do: continue in sound, biblical teaching, and learn and practice consistent Christian living. It is the way we live that, for many people, makes our beliefs plausible in the first place. And proclaim the gospel. Despite any constraints society may put on us, the Word of God is not bound.

Notes

1. Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 63-64.
2. Tearfund, "Churchgoing in the UK," available on the Web at www.tearfund.org/webdocs/Website/News/Final%20churchgoing%20report.pdf.
3. Robert Manchin, "Religion in Europe: Trust Not Filling the Pews," Sept. 21, 2004, www.gallup.com/poll/13117/religion-europe-trust-filling-pews.aspx.
4. Kevin M. Schulz, "Secularization: A Bibliographic Essay," *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 8, nos.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2006), 171. Online at www.virginia.edu/iasc/HHR_Archives/AfterSecularization/8.12RBibliography.pdf.
5. Sociologist Rodney Stark is one of the most prominent doubters of secularization theory. See his "Secularization, R.I.P. – rest in peace," *Sociology of Religion*, Fall, 1999, available online at findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0S0R/is_3_60/ai_57533381/.

6. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, England: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 41; quoted in Philip S. Gorski, "Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (Feb. 2000), 144.
7. Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P."
8. Gorski, "Historicizing the Secularization Debate": 146.
9. Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 47.
10. Timothy Larsen, "Dechristendomization As an Alternative to Secularization: Theology, History, and Sociology in Conversation," *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. XV, No. 3.
11. See Jean-Paul Willaime, "The Cultural Turn in the Sociology of Religion in France," *Sociology of Religion* 65, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 373-389.
12. Grace Davie, "Is Europe an Exceptional Case?" *The Hedgehog Review* 8, nos.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2006): 27. Online at www.virginia.edu/iasc/HHR_Archives/AfterSecularization/8.12DDavie.pdf.
13. Grace Davie, "Is Europe an Exceptional Case?": 24-26.
14. See Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 15.
15. Charles T. Mathewes, "An Interview with Peter Berger," *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 8, nos.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2006):155. Online at www.virginia.edu/iasc/HHR_Archives/AfterSecularization/8.12PBerger.pdf
16. "Believing Without Belonging: Just How Secular Is Europe?" A discussion with Grace Davie at the Pew Forum's biannual Faith Angle Conference on religion, politics and public life, December 2005. pewforum.org/events/?EventID=97.
17. Ibid.
18. Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?*.
19. Sociologist Christian Smith edited a volume titled *The*

Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life (UC Press, 2003) in which the case was argued that secularization became so powerful here because of a concerted effort by people who wanted it, not because of some natural, teleological progression.

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Western Europe: Religious Practice

In my [last post](#), we looked at how many people in the countries of Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, Spain, and Cyprus profess a God-focused worldview. Now let's consider some religious practices typically associated with an active faith. This worldwide survey did not ask many questions about religious practice, but the three questions asked highlight some interesting differences.

The three questions asked were:

1. Apart from weddings and funerals, about how often do you pray?
2. Do you have an active membership in a church or religious organization?
3. Apart from weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services these days?

Let's look at the responses based on the country of the respondent, their religious preference, and their age (less than 30 or over 60). The "Pray" columns are those who pray daily or more often. The "Active" columns refer to those who

say they have an active membership. The “Attend” columns are those who attend religious services once a month or more often.

Table 1 Those Actively Participating in Religious Practices

Country	Age	All (%)			Protestant {%}			Catholic (%)		
		Pray	Active	Attend	Pray	Active	Attend	Pray	Active	Attend
Germany	All	NA	14	20	NA	14	17	NA	27	35
	Under 30	NA	9	10	NA	13	7	NA	13	19
	Over 60	NA	18	25	NA	16	21	NA	31	48
Netherlands	All	19	11	17	65	46	64	31	18	30
	Under 30	9	6	11	42	42	77	20	5	21
	Over 60	26	16	24	70	48	67	38	22	39
Sweden	All	10	6	9	11	8	11	–	–	–
	Under 30	9	2	6	6	2	2	–	–	–
	Over 60	13	7	12	17	10	15	–	–	–
Spain	All	NA	7	20	–	–	–	NA	8	24
	Under 30	NA	3	6	–	–	–	NA	4	8
	Over 60	NA	14	41	–	–	–	NA	15	47
Cyprus	All	32	10	35	–	–	–	42	12	44
	Under 30	22	6	20	–	–	–	34	7	26
	Over 60	52	12	65	–	–	–	55	13	68

We see some widely varying results between countries and age groups, but none are very encouraging. How many say they pray daily or more often? In the Netherlands, almost 2 out of 3 Protestants and 1 out of 3 Catholics. The large number of Nones in the Netherlands drop the percentage for the country as a whole down to less than 1 out of 5. Sweden, on the other

hand, has only about 1 out of 10 saying they pray regularly whether they are Protestant or otherwise. We will see how dismal this level is when we compare it to the United States later in this post.

Also, you can see that those under 30 are less likely to pray daily than older adults. However, the small number of adults of all ages praying daily is the dominant factor.

Being an active member of a church is a definite minority in all categories shown. Roughly one out of ten adults claim to be an active church member across all countries and age groups. Once again, the relatively smaller number of young adults who claim to be active is overwhelmed by the small number across the board.

Those who attend church at least once a month reflect percentages almost equal with those who pray daily or more.

What does it look like when we consider those who combine all three of these characteristics as shown below?

Table 2 Those Who Pray at Least Daily, Are Members, and Attend Monthly or More

Country	Age	All (%)	Protestant (%)	Catholic (%)
Germany	All	9	7	19
	Under 30	3	1	7
	Over 60	13	10	25
Netherlands	All	8	39	10
	Under 30	4	35	5
	Over 60	12	43	12
Sweden	All	3	4	—
	Under 30	1	1	—
	Over 60	4	6	—

Spain	All	5	—	6
	Under 30	1	—	2
	Over 60	12	—	14
Cyprus	All	4	—	5
	Under 30	2	—	3
	Over 60	9	—	10

Note: For Germany and Spain this does not include “Pray at least daily”

Clearly none of these countries have a significant number of people who report a minimal amount of regular religious involvement. Only among Protestants in the Netherlands do we see more than 1 in 10. The percent of Protestants in the Netherlands is small enough that only 8% of all people in that country report a minimal religious involvement.

Just looking at these three very simple practices, we see that the vast majority of people in all these countries do not actively practice their faith. And, those under the age of 30 are much less likely than their seniors to practice these characteristics.

Now let’s compare the results for Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands with those from the United States as shown in table 3.

Table 3 United States Results Compared to Germany, Sweden and Netherlands (GSN)

Activity	Age	All (%)		Protestant (%)		Catholic (%)	
		U.S.	GSN	U.S.	GSN	U.S.	GSN
Pray daily	All	45	10	64	16	51	11
	Under 30	34	5	55	6	30	4
	Over 60	55	14	65	25	64	18

Active church member	All	35	11	54	17	40	23
	Under 30	26	6	40	10	34	11
	Over 60	42	15	58	22	48	27
Attend monthly or more	All	44	16	65	22	10	33
	Under 30	36	1	58	10	53	20
	Over 60	50	22	67	30	58	43
All three	All	26	4	45	9	27	4
	Under 30	15	1	32	3	14	1
	Over 60	35	6	48	13	41	6

As shown, the religious activities of Western Europeans lag significantly behind the level of activity practiced in the United States. When it comes to daily prayer, over 4 times as many Americans practice this activity across the general population, the Protestant population and the Catholic population. Looking at only those under thirty, we find that over 7 times as many Americans practice daily prayer as do Western Europeans. This increase is not due to an increase in prayer among under 30's in the United States, but rather due to a significant drop in daily prayer among young adult, Western Europeans.

The table shows similar levels of differences between people in the United States and those in Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. Consider the young adults who practice all three of these religious activities. The Americans practice these activities from 10 to 15 times as often as their Western European counterparts. Once again, these huge differences are not due to high levels of faithfulness among Americans. Americans claim only 15% of those under 30 practice all three activities. But rather by the lack of faithfulness among Western Europeans; where only 1% claim to practice all three.

This look at the data on three questions, which describe a very nominal degree of commitment to one's religious life, clearly shows that Western Europe has a very small remnant of

active Christ followers. Without looking at this data, you probably would have agreed with the statement above. But now, you know how significant the problem really is. If they represent the rest of Western Europe, we see that the places where Protestantism was born and initially flourished have become places where Christian religious practice is relegated to a few and ignored by the many.

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Western European Religious Makeup

This is the fifth of a series of posts reporting on our analysis of the survey data collected by the World Values Survey project. Surveys were conducted in 57 countries between 2010 and 2014. In all, over 85,000 people were interviewed for these surveys. The survey had fifteen questions directly concerning religious beliefs and practices. But it also had questions in a number of areas that related to how people applied their religious beliefs to cultural and political issues.

The first four blogs dealt with the North American countries, the United States and Mexico. With this post, I begin a series on the beliefs across the five European countries included in the survey process: Germany, Norway, Sweden, Spain and Cyprus.

As you probably know, Germany and Sweden were at the heart of the Protestant revolution, with the Netherlands following in their footsteps. Spain and Cyprus retained a much stronger connection to Roman Catholicism. Let's see how their self-declared religious affiliations line up today.

Table 1 Religious Denomination					
Country	Age	Catholic (%)	Protestant (%)	None (%)	Other (%)
Germany	All	29	33	31	6
	Under 30	29	34	30	7
	60 plus	33	38	28	1
Sweden	All	2	61	34	3
	Under 30	1	49	43	7
	60 plus	2	69	29	0
Netherlands	All	18	16	64	3
	Under 30	11	10	75	4
	60 plus	25	21	54	1
Spain	All	73	2	24	1
	Under 30	63	2	33	2
	60 plus	86	1	13	0
Cyprus	All	68	1	7	25
	Under 30	53	1	9	36
	60 plus	90	0	4	5

As shown the countries vary widely in their self-professed religious makeup. All of them, except Cyprus, have a significant percentage of Nones ranging from 24% in Spain to 64% in the Netherlands. Sweden, Netherlands and Spain have a significant increase in Nones among those under the age of 30 as we also observed in the United States and Mexico.

Apart from the Nones, each nation is somewhat unique in its distribution. Germany is almost equally split between Catholics, Protestants and Nones. Sweden has Protestants as a strong majority at the level of Protestants plus Catholics in

Germany. The Netherlands has a strong majority of Nones with the remainder evenly split between Catholics and Protestants. Spain, of course, has a strong majority of Catholics and almost no Protestants. Cyprus also shows a strong majority of Catholics with a strong minority of Muslims among the younger generations.

As we will see in the following blogs, many of those who selected Protestant or Catholic denominations are not involved with the church in any significant way.

Pluralism

In the [first blog](#) of this series on the religious preferences of the United States and Mexico, we looked at how many agreed with this statement, “The only acceptable religion is my religion.” Let’s look at how this question was answered in Western Europe.

Table 2 Agree or Strongly Agree: The Only Acceptable Religion is My Religion			
Country	Age	Catholic (%)	Protestant (%)
Germany	All	33	30
	Under 30	22	23
	60 plus	49	30
Sweden	All	16	8
	Under 30	0	4
	60 plus	30	12
Netherlands	All	10	25
	Under 30	19	36
	Under 60 plus	12	23
Spain	All	28	32
	Under 30	26	39
	60 plus	35	25

Cyprus	All	54	71
	Under 30	40	67
	60 plus	69	100

Note: Shaded areas did not have enough respondents to make the data useful

As shown, in Germany only about one in three Catholics and Protestants would say their religion is right and others are wrong. Those under thirty are much less likely to make that assertion. In any case, the vast majority of Germans take a pluralistic view.

Swedes are much less likely than Germans to agree with this statement, with fewer than one in ten taking a non-pluralistic position. Protestants in the Netherlands are similar to Germans, but Catholics are significantly more pluralistic. Catholics in Spain are also similar to those in Germany.

Except for Cyprus, all the countries had the vast majority of those affiliated with a Christian church taking a pluralistic view.

It is interesting to note that on this question Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands combined were generally consistent with the United States. Mexico and Spain were also fairly consistent, with 49% of Mexicans and 32% of Spaniards taking a non-pluralistic view.

Clearly for Western Europeans, whether they claim to be Catholic or Protestant, most reject the teachings of the Bible in favor of a pluralistic doctrine. They change John 14:4 from "I am **the** way, the truth and the life" to "I am **a** way, **a** truth and **a** life."