

*Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller and Gert Pickel (eds.)*

## **The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe: Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization.**

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As the title suggests, this book examines the role of religion in European society since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, paying particular attention to such concepts as secularization, individualization and pluralization. All three editors are well known for their quantitative work on European religion but, although there are plenty of significant statistics in this volume, there is much more besides. Nine countries are selected for a detailed descriptive analysis by specialists in the field: Finland (Kimmo Kääriäinen and Kati Niemelä); Ireland (Karen Andersen); Portugal (Helena Vilaça; Germany (the editors); Poland (Dorota Hall); Russia (Marat Shterin); Estonia (Eva-Liisa Jaanus); Hungary (Gergely Rosta); and Croatia (Krunoslav Nikodem and Siniša Zrinščak). All give a brief historical account of their country's religious history before going on to discuss the present situation with respect to the religious scene, providing information about such matters as church-state relations as well as detailed statistics relevant to the issues raised in the book. The editors also provide both a useful conceptual and theoretical introduction and a concluding chapter that provides a comparative overview.

The main source for the statistical data is a study, *Church and Religion in an Enlarged Europe* (C&R), conducted in 2006 with roughly a thousand interviews in each of the nine countries, but the contributors draw on several other sources, such as the European Values Surveys and national censuses.

The principle questions that are asked of the data are: In what ways one can observe processes of societal, organizational and individual secularization, and how might such processes be related to each other and to other aspects of society? The empirical results are then used to assess the relative plausibility of three theories that have been proposed to explain changes in the contemporary religious scene. These theories are: societal secularization (that religion loses its social significance through functional differentiation); individualization (that individuals are moving away from traditional religion to alternative forms of spirituality); and the market economy theory (that religious vitality increases as religious pluralism increases, although this process will be tempered where there is strong state regulation of religion).

The main conclusion reached by the editors is that the secularization theory wins out: Societal secularisation, as indicated by a general acceptance that religion should be separated from politics, science and other areas of social life (though less so in the case of education) has occurred pretty well throughout the region, although the process of differentiation has varied at different levels and operated at different times and at different speeds in different countries, with socialization (by not only the family but also the general culture) proving to be crucially important in determining whether religiosity is transmitted from one generation to the next. This on-going process of secularization is, the editors suggest, most helpfully investigated not as an inevitable lineal process, but as a result of the tensions that arise between modernity and religion.

The individualization thesis is received with a certain respect, but considerable caution. The analysis indicates that those who espouse alternative or personalized expressions of spirituality are likely to be among the more traditionally religious – in other words, traditional

religion and alternative spiritualities tend to go hand in hand, presenting a case of 'both/and' rather than 'either/or'. The undoubted, although relatively small, attraction of unconventional beliefs and practices might, however, be seen as reflections of certain changes in the dominant religions which are themselves associated with changes in the dominant culture (such as rising levels of education, higher standards of living and post-modern attitudes) – and as such, could be interpreted as part of the secularization process rather than as an alternative to it. Interestingly, it is suggested in the chapter on Estonia that the Earth-religion, espoused by believers who want to restore the local pre-Christian religions, is essentially person-centred and might be seen as an individualization of religion, standing for 'personal freedom, self-reliance, private-personal development and growth' (p. 176).

The economic-market model is dismissed as not merely incapable of holding up to empirical scrutiny, but as actually being demonstrably wrong in most of its major claims. The data show that whether a country is traditionally Catholic or Protestant is a far more significant variable than religious pluralism for indicating the fate of religious vitality. Indeed, that there would appear to be an inverse correlation between religious vitality and religious pluralism, and no consistent correlation with state regulation, is evident in the data.

The importance of a country's historical religious culture is revealed through the finding that in Catholic majority countries (Portugal, Ireland, Poland, Croatia) religion is deemed an important part of their lives for roughly three quarters of the population; in mixed Catholic and Protestant countries (Hungary and West Germany) this applies to about half the population; the proportion falls again in a mainly a Protestant country (Finland); then, when Protestantism has been combined with socialism, those respondents claiming religion is important drop to less than a quarter (24 per cent in East Germany where 53 per cent report that they are non-religious, and 18 per cent in Estonia where 34 per cent report being non-religious).

The volume convincingly demonstrates the crucial importance of comparative empirical research in testing theories that may well appear eminently plausible when one is familiar with the situation in one or two countries, but whose plausibility can be devastatingly weakened by evidence to be found elsewhere. However, whilst the contribution of the analyses that are revealed through the statistical results of C&R and other surveys cannot be overstated, it is the nuances and particularities that make this book well worth reading from cover to cover.

One fact that is unambiguously stands out is that religiosity is certainly not a predictably uniform phenomenon and that to talk of an individual as religious can mean many different things. To take a fairly obvious example, while it may seem eminently understandable that people who rarely attend a place of worship are unlikely to say they believe in a personal God (as is typically the case in Germany and Estonia), there are others, equally unlikely to attend public rituals, yet who (as in Finland), nonetheless confess to believing in God. And, of course, there is considerable diversity in the understandings of 'God', ranging from a personal, anthropomorphic Being, to an absent creator or life force to some sort of spiritual energy. A common finding would seem to be not so much 'believing not belonging' (though that certainly happens) as 'belonging not participating' (as in Russia).

The reasons for belonging can certainly vary. One mentioned in several chapters is that religion can be tied in with nationalist sentiments. In Russia, the coincidence with nationalism is strong: to be a 'real' Russian, one has to be a member of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the wake of the Homeland War (1991-95), Croatian nationalism became closely associated with Catholicism, especially in the south and east where the country is flanked by Islam and Orthodoxy. Conflating religious and national identity is particularly evident among older people, the young being somewhat more likely to draw a distinction between religion and

national identity, considering religion to be one's individual choice.

Then there are the vastly different ways in which the state and other aspects of society interact with religion. Sometimes liberalisation of the law can encourage further developments in the religious field. Finland is possibly the most open society described in the book, with a population that believes that everyone should be free to choose their own religion, but that religion should not interfere with political decisions. Nonetheless, the Lutheran Church, overwhelmingly the largest is treated with respect, but to not an inconsiderable extent this is because of its welfare activities rather than its religious pronouncements. In other countries (Ireland has provided an example) it has been assumed that the (Catholic) Church should have an important say in the educational, welfare, health and sexual behaviour of the population, even if there has not been an official liaison between the Church and state. In recent years, however, scandals involving the sexual abuse of children have diminished the respect in which the church was once held.

Needless to say, there are still many questions to be raised; more data need to be collected – it could be helpful to conduct supplementary quantitative research – and further analyses await to be pursued. It would also be interesting to have further comparisons with the other European countries, and, perhaps, the situation in North America and even other continents. But then an instructive and stimulating book always leaves one wanting more – and this, indubitably, is an instructive and stimulating book.

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