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The Role of Religion and Secularism in Defining European Identity and Culture: challenges, scenarios and ways forward of the document

Vision Document
(cultural inclusion axis)

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Challenges

1: Is religion and in particular Christianity an integral part of European culture and European identity? Or is it rather a form of liberal democratic moderate secularism that characterises European societies and is distinctive of a shared European identity?

While in the late 20th century, religion was seen as losing its appeal and significance in European societies, today the situation is different: there is no linear progression towards absolute secularism among citizens or such a radical decline of the importance of religion in Europe.

First of all, claims that Europeans become increasingly secular have been qualified: Europe is becoming increasingly unchurched but not necessarily secular. People do not express their religiosity as they used to do in the past and socio-economic transformations of urban life also lead to a decline to church-going. However religious belief – predominantly along the main Christian denominations – continues to be strong and so is a commitment to moderate secularism, notably to the, at least, partial separation of church and state, to freedom of religion and to freedom of expression. At the same time the only European country that practices a form of absolute separation of church and state and of absolute secularism, delegating religion to the private life, is France. All other European countries, including major immigrant host countries such as Britain, Germany, but also Italy, Spain or Sweden and Belgium, practice moderate forms of secularism having a recognised state religion – based on the national history – and making different types of arrangements to accommodate religious and ethnic minorities in public life, notably in education, in cultural festivities, in the workplace. In addition, we have to take into account the revival of religion in the former Communist countries. Such processes include also a rise in the social and political influence of national churches as happens for instance in Poland or in Romania.

Other processes testifying to the above are the overall debate on the accession of Turkey to the European Union in the mid-2000s and the Convention for the preparation of a European Constitutional Charter. The question of whether Christian faith should be included in the preamble of the European Constitutional Charter or whether Turkey could become in the near future a member of the



European Union despite it being culturally and religiously 'different' from other EU member states were but two of the most vocal and debated expressions of the dilemma of whether Europe is a fundamentally Christian continent – historically and spiritually – and whether Christianity is an inextricable part of European identity and culture. Indeed the relevance of religious sites, religious monuments and religious festivities in dominant discourses and celebrations (through festivals, cultural programmes and tourism) of the European cultural heritage cannot be ignored.

Such debates about the role of religion and particularly of Christianity in European identity and culture however take place in a landscape of increasing religious diversity which is largely the result of several migration waves and the related formation of 'new' minorities alongside pre-existing native minorities in European territory.

2: Can religious minorities and particularly Muslims be integrated in European identity and culture? Or is their adherence to their religion too strong / qualitatively different than that of Christians for them to be accommodated in European liberal and moderately secular democratic societies?

Muslims are the largest immigrant (non-indigenous) group in Europe that is perceived to raise important challenges of cultural and religious diversity. European Muslims cannot of course be considered as a uniform group in any respect, as they come from different countries, live in different countries, speak different languages, adhere to different versions of Islam, are more or less moderate in their beliefs and claims (Triandafyllidou 2012). Despite this multi-level difference within the Muslim communities of Europe, they are often portrayed in the media and policy discourses as a single community, as a population that shares common traits and that can be dealt with by the same type of policies – or indeed that cannot be integrated or assimilated in several countries for the same type of reasons.

Interestingly, there is a tendency since the 1990s across Europe amongst some Muslims and others to highlight their religious identity and for societies to label ethnic minorities and immigrants in religious terms rather than in relation to their



ethno-cultural background or social roles in society. This tendency, whereby Muslims in particular are seldom categorised as Turks, Moroccans or Pakistanis (or as students or workers), exists in several European countries, where debates over integration and toleration of differences invariably centre on Muslims, and where religion is often associated with potential conflict.

Public discussions tend to take place in an 'us-them' framework: Islam is increasingly constructed in opposition to 'European' (British, Dutch, Swedish, Spanish, French, Italian and so on) values of democracy and equality. Issues of contention here can be divided into two large groups.

The first concerns ethical norms about individual behaviour: these include for instance specific codes of dress (e.g. women wearing a foulard or long gowns as mandated by their religion); the accommodation of gender roles and gender relations to specific cultural norms (e.g. separate swimming lessons for girls and boys that are adolescent or older). The question thus arises if such conceptions of gender and family relations are in tune and can be part of European cultural norms.

The second set of issues concerns more public life and particularly institutional arrangements and the urban space: for instance should specific prayer or dietary requirements be accommodated in the school life or in the workplace? Or are these considered too intrusive, too non-secular compared to the more relaxed requirements of a majority of Christians or atheists who are not so observant. Second, how to include mosques in the European landscape in ways that they mould into this landscape and become part thus of the European cultural heritage rather than standing out as 'foreign', 'eastern' or 'Asian'.

Current Context

The European culture has been gradually invested with an activation of the old narrative on tolerance and on religion as a private issue, to the extent that religiosity is thought as against 'European identity' or, even, 'anti-European'. Within this context, since the Arab spring in 2011 but particularly so during the last two years (2014-2015) Europe has been shaken by acts committed in the name of religious extremism.



The Arab spring appears to have imploded and together with it the promise for a new paradigm of religion in politics as professed by the youth protesting in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria in 2011-2012. The quest of Arab Muslims for more democracy, more economic development and more religion in the public sphere had raised hopes that there is an alternative model for the governance of religious diversity and the management of religion in the public sphere to be developed in the Arab world (Ramadan 2012), that would go beyond secularism as practiced in Europe and North America. However, these hopes if not abandoned, they are relegated to a distant future as the region has gone in flames and as jihadist terrorism and intra-Islamic fighting has taken the lead, over any sense of democratic and peaceful reform. In addition to these negative developments in the Middle East and North Africa, Europe has been shaken by the extremist violence of the Charlie Hebdo' killings in Paris in January 2015, the terrorist attacks in Paris again on 15 November 2015 and in Brussels on 22 March 2016, and by the recruitment of young European Muslims in the lines of the Islamic State (ISIS). Indeed this tiny albeit dramatically visible part of European Muslims (some of whom are second generation migrant youth of Muslim origin and others are young converts) who have joined the ISIS forces in Syria and Libya to fight a jihadist war (estimated at 3,500 by [recent reports](#)) are seen to testify to a failed socio economic integration of second generation youth. The extreme choices of these young people are seen by some to support earlier allegations that Muslims are not 'fit' for European liberal and secular democracies. On the other hand, they also seem to suggest a failure in governing religious diversity in Europe and also that national and ethnic identity has lost its power of providing a sense of belonging. The young Muslims recruited by ISIS do not feel attached to their parents' country of origin or even their parents' religious traditions and norms (Roy 2003; 2009). Similarly though majorities appear unable to understand what has gone wrong and why this marginalised youth turns to religious extremism and violence.

Within this context, three negative future scenarios emerge:

1. Institutionalizing Xenophobia

Xenophobia rising and the radical Right capitalising on it promoting an 'authentic' version of European identity that is predominantly Christian and that stigmatises



any minority norms that deviates from this identity and cultural prototype. Far right parties have experienced a strengthening of their electoral appeal in the past 15 years. This is true both at the national level (Marine Le Pen/Front National in France, True Finns in Finland, The People's Party and Geert Wilders in the NL, but also the XXX party in Poland, Jobik in Hungary, Lega Nord in Italy and Golden Dawn in Greece) and at the European level (New radical right group formed in 2015 named 'Europe of Nations and Freedoms'). Their electoral platforms and ideologies include strong populist elements coupled with chauvinism (presented as patriotism) and an attachment to ethnic and cultural purity that should not be 'contaminated' by native minorities or migrants.

This process has taken place against the background of an ongoing global financial crisis and Eurozone crisis and related rising rates of unemployment, which have fuelled citizens' feeling of insecurity translated both at the socio-economic and at the cultural level. Within this context, minorities (like the Roma for instance) and migrants (particularly Muslims lumped all together in one category) appear as responsible or contributing to complex problems of socio-economic adjustment in post-industrial capitalist economies.

2. Liberal cultural values high jacked by the far right

The tragic events in Paris and Brussels are likely to bring together the Far Right's concerns of cultural purity and Christian faith with those of the progressive movements in favour of liberal and left-wing values. Indeed we witness such a short-circuiting in several debates which focus on gender equality for instance (Triandafyllidou and Kouki 2013) elevating it to the quintessentially European cultural norm even if it is rather imperfectly implemented in real life. European identity offers perhaps a malleable context within which such short-circuiting can take place, even inadvertently by otherwise opposed political forces. The danger however is real of unholy alliances that tend to instrumentalize liberal or Christian values (such as freedom of speech and respect for human life) so as to stigmatise those being different as being 'unfit' and undesirable in Europe and certainly as not belonging to Europe.



3. Radicalisation and Alienation of Migrant Youth

There is a fear that second and third generation youth of migrant origin have not been able to integrate in the schools and labour markets of different European countries (and indeed social indicators suggest that youth of migrant origin experiences higher levels of school failure, higher unemployment and important discrimination in the workplaces as well as in social life more generally). Alienation, insecurity and lack of prospects and belief in any identity seem to be connected with radicalized preaching by Salafist Muslim groups that provide youth with a sense of belonging and redemption. Such radicalization turns young Muslims against any sense of belonging to Europe (even if they have been born and they have grown up in a European country with little sense of connection/belonging to the community of origin of their parents) and also construct a big cultural gap between the European dominant cultural and religious norms and those preached by these.

A third way between secularism and religion: Keys for Change

Can European identity and culture (re)acquire an inclusive driving force bringing in the cultural norms and religious customs of migrants and post-migration minorities and **creating a new synthesis of culture and identity that unites all Europeans, the 'old' and the 'new' ones?** How much **we should allow for 'majority precedence'** to the historically European religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism, Christian Orthodoxy and Judaism in Europe? And should such precedence be awarded because of historical (present in European territory for longer, but indeed how long is long enough?) or cultural (because this is what it means to be 'European') reasons. At the same time, against this background of a multifaceted unfolding crisis (socioeconomic and political crisis, refugee and migrants' integration crisis, political violence and terrorism), another question emerging is **whether there is any room for religiosity in European culture** and whether policies related with religion can tackle some of these emerging scenarios.

Which is the best way to deal with religious diversity, to equalise upwards (notably more religion in public life for both majorities and minorities) or to equalise downwards (moving towards a more radical secularism)? What are the obstacles to



a more egalitarian religious pluralism? Do they come from the minorities, powerful churches, secularist assumptions or public antipathy to certain groups? Old paradigms of republicanism or multiculturalism seem to be in crisis but a new “third way” between *laïcité* and state religion, which would combine national and religious identity into a plural mix (where several ethnic and religious minority identity registers can exist in multiple layers within the same state’s citizenship and system of institutions) is not yet visible, even if this would constitute a positive scenario for a future that appears bleak.

In order to explore potential solutions, **we should think creatively and outside the box in what concerns the dilemma between secularism as against religion, which equates the first with modernity and the second with tradition: Both these trends form undoubtedly part of the European experiences**, while religion is not a static idea or feeling, but (also) a relational process embedded in history and society. While we should resist tendencies for simplification (posing dilemmas between us/them), at the same time we should present the complexity embedded in real life as a way to liberate and enrich people’s lives. **The key for change is to develop a language and a regime which brings both religion and secularism into peaceful coexistence based on mutual respect:** towards this respect a direction could be, on the one hand and within the field of religion, to draw on the trend towards de-hierarchisation of clergy and church authority and, on the other, to problematize self-understandings in terms of ‘liberal’ when it comes to European culture. For instance, we should reflect upon the forms of moderate political secularism that allow for majority and minority religions to co-exist in reciprocal autonomy with the state, and with an active participation of religious institutions in the governance of welfare and in public life. At the same time, we question whether secularism should be seen as a complete (or less complete) form of separation of church and state or a form of twin toleration and twin autonomy. We seek to distinguish secularism from atheism and the loss of significance of believing and, thus, consider how European societies can forge a sense of multi religious legitimacy that allows for the smooth governance of religious diversity within liberal democracy. Within this regime, thus, instead of separating the realms of secularism and religion (thus replicating the mistake of conflating religiosity with anti-state politics), an open public debate should open between different religious and secular beliefs.



Key Questions for a Research and Policy Agenda

In what concerns research and policy agendas, focus should be laid on the **role of religions in identities' formation in the history of Europe and in the historical development of secularism in relation to its religious counterpart in different geographies and times**, from a comparative and transnational perspective. For instance, against a religious polarization prevalent nowadays, research and policy could instead put emphasis on **traditions of religious diversity and co-existence in Europe**: this has been the case during *la Convivencia*, 'the Coexistence', the period from the Muslim Umayyad conquest of Hispania in the early eighth century until the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. During that time, the Muslims, the Christians and the Jews lived under a regime of relative religious tolerance giving rise to a **European-Oriental immaterial cultural heritage**, which can contribute to a different understanding of European legacies. Within this context, national histories should be re-narrated/ re-written so as to highlight the underestimated multi ethnic and multi religious aspects of the European cultural heritage and thus give rise to alternative European identities.

Or, from a different perspective, attention should be also paid to the **abuses of religion that have been an inherent part of European history**, as well, dating from the Christian crusades and the Thirty Years War onwards. Religion's entanglement with politics has been a standard rather than exceptional case in the way European identity and culture has been formed throughout the centuries: religion has traditionally functioned as an instrument for political power and as a substitute for social frustration creating conflicts partially related with religious faiths. **Recognizing this long historical perspective of instrumentalisation of religion** can shed light to the fact that (also) to the socioeconomic and political implications of contemporary problems that are perceived as a 'clash' between different religions or/ and secularism.

Then, moving from the past to the present, we should also pay attention to **peoples' lived experiences** on the ground and the complex ways they are able to **perform their multiple and often contradictory identities** in contemporary settings around Europe. Do mainstream narratives about religion, Christianity and Islam correspond with how young people experience religiosity in urban European cities? In which cases religiosity is performed in people's communities around



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Europe as a form of co-existing and belonging? Can religious feelings and practices enable people to deal with contemporary fears and anxieties while enhancing values considered to be at the core of the European idea, such as diversity, equality, solidarity, and altruism?