

IS EUROPE AN EXCEPTIONAL CASE?

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A NUMBER OF FACTORS MUST BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IF WE ARE TO UNDERSTAND THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY EUROPE. These include the legacies of the past, more particularly the role of the historic churches in shaping European culture; an awareness that these churches still have a place at particular moments in the lives of modern Europeans, even though they are no longer able to discipline the beliefs and behaviour of the great majority of the population; an observable change in the churchgoing constituencies of the continent, which operate increasingly on a model of choice, rather than a model of obligation or duty; and the arrival in Europe of groups of people from many different parts of the world, notably the global South, with very different religious aspirations from those seen in the host societies.

Each of these factors will be taken in turn in order to answer the question set out in the title.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Two points are important in relation to the role of the historic churches in shaping European culture; the Christian tradition is indeed a crucial element in the evolution of Europe, but it is by no means the only one. O'Connell identifies three formative factors or themes in the creation and re-creation of the unity that we call Europe: Judeo-Christian monotheism, Greek rationalism, and Roman organisation.¹ These factors shift and evolve over time, but their combinations can be seen in forming and reforming a way of life that we have come to recognise as European. The religious strand within such combinations is self-evident.

One example will suffice: the Christian tradition has had an irreversible effect on the shaping of time and space in this part of the world. Both week and year, for instance, follow the Christian cycle, even if the major festivals are beginning to lose their resonance for large sections of the population. Or to put the same point in a different way, we have had heated debates in parts of Europe about whether or not to shop on Sundays. We do not, for the most part, consider Friday an issue in this respect – though this may change. The same is true of space. Wherever you look in Europe, there is a predominance of Christian churches, some of which retain huge symbolic value. This is not to deny that in some parts of Europe (notably the larger cities) the skyline is becoming an indicator of growing religious diversity. Europe is changing, but the legacies of the past remain deeply embedded in both the physical and cultural environment.

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►VICARIOUS RELIGION

Physical and cultural presence is one thing; a 'hands-on' role in the everyday lives of European people quite another. Commentators of all kinds agree that the latter is no longer a realistic aspiration for the historic churches of Europe. That does not mean, however, that the churches have entirely lost their significance as markers of religious identity. In my own work, I have explored this ambiguity through the concept of 'vicarious religion'.²

By vicarious, I mean the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing. The first half of the definition is relatively straightforward and reflects the everyday meaning of the term – that is, to do something on behalf of someone else (hence the word 'vicar'). The second half is more controversial and is best explored by means of examples. Religion, it seems, can operate vicariously in a wide variety of ways.

For instance, churches and church leaders conduct ritual on behalf of a wide variety of individuals and communities at critical points in their lives. The most obvious illustrations can be found in the continuing requests, even in a moderately secular society, for some sort of religious ritual at the time of a birth, a marriage, and, most of all, a death. It is at this latter point, if no other, that most Europeans come into direct contact with their churches and would be deeply offended if their requests for a funeral were met with a rejection.³ A refusal to offer either a funeral liturgy or appropriate pastoral care would violate deeply held assumptions.

But churches and church leaders do more than conduct ritual: they also believe on behalf of others. And the more senior or visible the role of the church leader, the more important it becomes that this is done properly. English bishops, to give but one example, are rebuked (not least by the tabloid press) if they doubt in public; it is, after all, their 'job' to believe. When they doubt, something quite clearly has gone amiss.

Similar pressures emerge with respect to behavioural codes: religious professionals (both local and national) are expected to uphold certain standards of behaviour – not least, more rather than less traditional representations of family life – and incur criticism when they fail, from outside churches as well as within. It is almost as if people who are not themselves participants in church life want the Church's representatives to

embody a certain social and moral order, thereby maintaining a way of living that has long since ceased to be the norm in the population as a whole. Failure leads to accusations of hypocrisy but also to expressions of disappointment.

A final possibility with respect to vicariousness develops this point further, and more provocatively. Could it be that churches offer space for debate regarding particular, and often controversial, topics that are difficult to address elsewhere in society? The current debate about homosexuality in the Church of England offers a possible example, an interpretation encouraged by the intense media attention directed at this issue – and not only in Britain. Is this simply an internal debate about senior clergy appointments in which different lobbies within the Church are exerting pressure? Or is this one way in which society as a whole comes to terms with profound shifts in the moral climate? If the latter is *not* true, it is hard to understand why so much attention is being paid to the churches in this respect. If it *is* true, sociological thinking must take this factor into account.

Either way, large sections of the European media are, it seems, wanting to have their cake and eat it, pointing the spotlight at controversies within the Church whilst maintaining that religious institutions must, by their very nature, be marginal to modern society.

Social scientific observers cannot afford a similar mistake. The public attention displayed in the examples set out above demands that we understand how religious institutions matter even to those who are not 'participants' in them (in the conventional sense of the term). That, moreover, is the norm in European societies – a situation rather different from that found in the USA.

Herein, moreover, lies an important explanation for the 'exceptional' nature of Europe's religion. It derives from a particular history of state-church relationships, out of which grows the notion of a state church (or its successor) as a public utility rather than a private organisation. A public utility is available to the population as a whole at the point of need and is funded through the tax system. Precisely that combination remains in place in the Lutheran countries of Europe. Elsewhere both constitutional and financial arrangements have been modified (sometimes radically), but the associated mentalities are, it seems, more difficult to shift.

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FROM OBLIGATION TO CONSUMPTION

At the same time, there is an observable change taking place in the nature of churchgoing, which is best described as a movement from a culture of obligation or duty to a culture of consumption or choice. What until recently was simply imposed (with all the negative connotations of this word), or inherited (a rather more positive spin), becomes instead a matter of personal choice: 'I go to church (or to another religious organisation) because I want to, to fulfil a particular need in my life. But I have no *obligation* either to attend in the first place or to continue if I don't want to.'

This pattern is entirely compatible with vicariousness: 'the churches need to be there in order that I may attend them if I so choose.' The 'chemistry', however, gradually changes, a shift that is discernible in both practice and belief, not to mention the connections between them. Take, for example, the change in the patterns of confirmation in the Church of England. In England, though not yet in the Nordic countries, confirmation is no longer a teenage rite of passage, but a relatively rare, and therefore significant, event undertaken as a matter of personal choice by people of all ages.

It becomes in fact an opportunity to make public what has often been an entirely private activity. It is increasingly common, moreover, to baptise an adult candidate immediately before the confirmation, a gesture which is evidence in itself of the fall in infant baptism some 20 to 30 years earlier. Taken together, these events indicate a marked change in the nature of membership in the historic churches, which become, in some senses, much more like their non-established counterparts. Voluntarism (a market) is beginning to establish itself *de facto*, regardless of the constitutional position of the churches. Or to continue the 'chemical' analogy a little further, a whole set of new reactions are set off that in the *longer* term (the stress is important) may have a profound effect on the understanding of vicariousness.

Rather different and less frequently recognised in the writing about religion in modern Britain (as indeed in Europe) is the evident popularity of cathedrals and city-centre churches. Cathedrals and their equivalents deal with diverse constituencies. Working from the inside out, they are frequented by regular and irregular worshippers, pilgrims, visitors, and tourists, though the lines between these groups frequently blur. The numbers, moreover, are considerable – the more so on

special occasions, both civic and religious. Hence, concerns about upkeep and facilities lead to difficult debates about finance. Looked at from the point of view of consumption, however, cathedrals are places that offer a distinctive product: traditional liturgy, top-class music, and excellence in preaching, all of which take place in a historic and often very beautiful building. A visit to a cathedral is an aesthetic experience, sought after by a wide variety of people, including those for whom membership or commitment presents difficulties. They are places where there is no obligation to opt in or to participate in communal activities beyond the service itself.⁴

The point, however, is that we *feel* something; we *experience* the sacred, the set apart. The purely cerebral is less appealing. Durkheim was entirely correct in this respect: it is the taking part that matters for late modern populations and the feelings so engendered.⁵ If we feel nothing, we are much less likely either to take part in the first place or to continue thereafter.

NEW ARRIVALS

The final factor in this complicated mosaic is somewhat different: the growing number of incomers in almost all European societies. There have been two stages in this process. The first was closely linked to the need for labour in the expanding economies of post-war Europe – notably in Britain, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Wherever possible, each of these countries looked to its former empire to expand its workforce. The second wave of immigration occurred in the 1990s and included, in addition to the places listed above, both the Nordic countries and the countries of Mediterranean Europe – bearing in mind that the latter, until very recently, have been countries of emigration rather than immigration. Here, the turnaround has been truly remarkable.

Different host societies and different countries of provenance have led to a complex picture – generalisation is dangerous. Some points are, however, common to most, if not all, cases. Above all, it is important to remember that those who are arriving in Europe are coming primarily for *economic* reasons – they are coming to work.

What, though, are the implications for the religious life of Europe? The short answer is that they vary from place to place depending on both host society and new arrivals. Britain and France offer an interesting comparison. In Britain immigration has been much more varied than in France, both in terms of provenance

NOTES

1. James O'Connell, *The Making of Modern Europe: Strengths, Constraints and Resolutions* (University of Bradford Peace Research Report no. 26; Bradford: University of Bradford, 1991).
2. Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
3. Interestingly, *relatively few* people opt for a secular ceremony. Much more common is what might be termed a 'mixed economy' funeral, i.e. a liturgy in which the religious professional is present and the Christian structure maintained but filled with a variety of extraneous elements, including secular music or readings and, with increasing frequency, a eulogy rather than a homily.
4. The attraction of cathedrals and city-center churches is closely related to the growth in pilgrimage across Europe; see Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe*, pp. 156–62.
5. See in particular Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912; London: Harper Collins, 1976).

'The growing presence of other faith communities in general, and of the Muslim population in particular, is challenging some deeply held European assumptions'

► and in terms of faith communities. Britain, moreover, is a country where ethnicity and religion criss-cross each other in a bewildering variety of ways (only Sikhs and Jews claim ethno-religious identities). The situation in France is very different: here immigration has been largely from the Maghreb, as a result of which France has by far the largest Muslim community in Europe (between 5 and 6 million). Almost all Muslims in France are Arabs.

Britain and France can be compared in other ways as well – an exercise that provokes some interesting questions, among them the tensions between democracy and tolerance. France is markedly more democratic than Britain on almost all institutional or constitutional measures. There is correspondingly strong stress on the equality of all citizens whatever their ethnic or religious identity. Individuals who arrive in France are welcome to maintain their religious belief and practices, provided these are relegated to the private sphere. Any loyalty (religious or otherwise) that comes between the citizen and the state in France, however, is regarded in negative terms. The result, whether intended or not, is a relative lack of freedom to promote collective as opposed to individual expressions of religious identity – i.e. those that impact the public sphere.

Britain is very different. On strict measures of democracy it fares less well. More positively, Britain has a more developed tradition of accommodating group identities (including religious identities) within the framework of British society, a feature that owes a good deal to the relatively greater degree of religious pluralism that has existed in Britain for centuries rather than decades. Hence a markedly different policy towards newcomers: the goal becomes the accommodation of difference rather than its eradication.

One further point is significant and reflects a shift that is taking place right across Europe. The growing presence of other faith communities in general, and of the Muslim population in particular, is challenging some deeply held European assumptions. The notion that faith is a private matter and should, therefore, be proscribed from public life – notably from the state and from the education system – is widespread in Europe. Conversely, many of those who are currently arriving in this part of the world have markedly different convictions, and offer, simply by their presence, a challenge to the European way of doing things. Reactions to this challenge vary from place to place, but

at the very least, European societies have been obliged to re-open debates about the place of religion in public as well as private.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Several things are happening simultaneously in the religious life of Europe. This is partly a coincidence – each, however, encourages the other. The historic churches are losing their capacity to discipline the religious thinking of large sections of the population (especially the young). Simultaneously, the range of religious choice is widening all the time both inside and outside the historic churches. New forms of religion are coming into Europe from outside, largely as the result of the movement of people. Finally, at least some of the people arriving from outside are offering a significant challenge to the widely held assumptions about the place of religion in European societies.

It is equally clear that at least some aspects of exceptionality can be pursued by framing these statements in the form of questions, and by looking carefully at their implications for the religious life of Europe. For example: is Europe likely to produce a religious market like that found in the USA? The turn from obligation to consumption could be seen in this light. Conversely: is the residue of the state church sufficiently strong to resist this – maintaining thereby the notion of religion as a public utility rather than a freely chosen voluntary activity? And where in these complex equations do we place the newly arrived populations, whether Christian or not?

The answers must be tentative, but I will offer three; the last takes the form of a cautious prediction about the future of religion in Europe.

There are effectively two religious economies in Europe, which run alongside each other. The first is an incipient market, which is emerging among the churchgoing minorities of most, if not all, European societies, and in which voluntary membership is becoming the norm, *de facto* if not *de jure*. The second economy resists this tendency and continues to work on the idea of a public utility, in which membership remains ascribed rather than chosen. In this economy opting out, rather than opting in, remains the norm and is most visible at the time of a death. Interestingly, the two economies are in partial tension, but also depend upon each other – each fills the gaps exposed by the other. Exploring these tensions offers a constructive route into the complexities of European religion in the twenty-first century.

Religion will increasingly penetrate the public sphere, a tendency driven largely by the presence of Islam in different parts of Europe. Paradoxically, in many ways this is easier for the active, increasingly voluntarist, Christian minorities to understand than those who remain passively attached to their (public) historic churches. For the former, seriously held belief leads to public implications; for the latter, seriously held belief is seen as a threat rather than an opportunity.

The religious situation in Europe is and will remain distinctive (if not exceptional), given the legacies of the past. It is not, however, static. Clearly things are changing, and in some places very fast. Exactly how they will evolve is not easy to say, but I will conclude by making a cautious and three-fold prediction – the first part is tentative, the second more certain, and the third increasingly evident. First, I *think* that vicarious religion will endure at least until the mid-century, but maybe not for much longer. It follows that the actively religious in Europe will increasingly work on a market model, but the fact that their choices will include the historic churches complicates the issue (the alternatives are not as mutually exclusive as they first appear). Second, I *know* that the presence of Islam is a crucial factor that we ignore at our peril. Not only does it offer an additional choice, but it has become a catalyst of a much more profound change in the religious landscape of Europe. Finally, the *combination* of all these factors will increase rather than decrease the salience of religion in public, as well as private, debate – a tendency encouraged by the ever more obvious presence of religion in the modern world order. In this respect, the world is more likely to influence the religious life of Europe than the other way round. ■