

# Normativity in Europe

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A dossier by EARS on normativity across 14 European countries



The European Academy on Religion and Society (EARS) is a European network of Departments and Faculties of Theology and Religious Studies. The need to understand the complexity of religious developments is increasingly important. This is why EARS, the participating universities, and their theologians cooperate at different levels, aiming to make knowledge available and applicable to society at large. Within the debate on religion, EARS strives to seek the nuance rather than further polarize the debate. EARS contributes, from its own narrative, to the debate on values, societal cohesion, and the challenges and impact of religion. It acts both as a think tank and as a hub for society. Our insights on topics such as leadership, social dilemmas, politics, technology, and education aim to inspire and to motivate.

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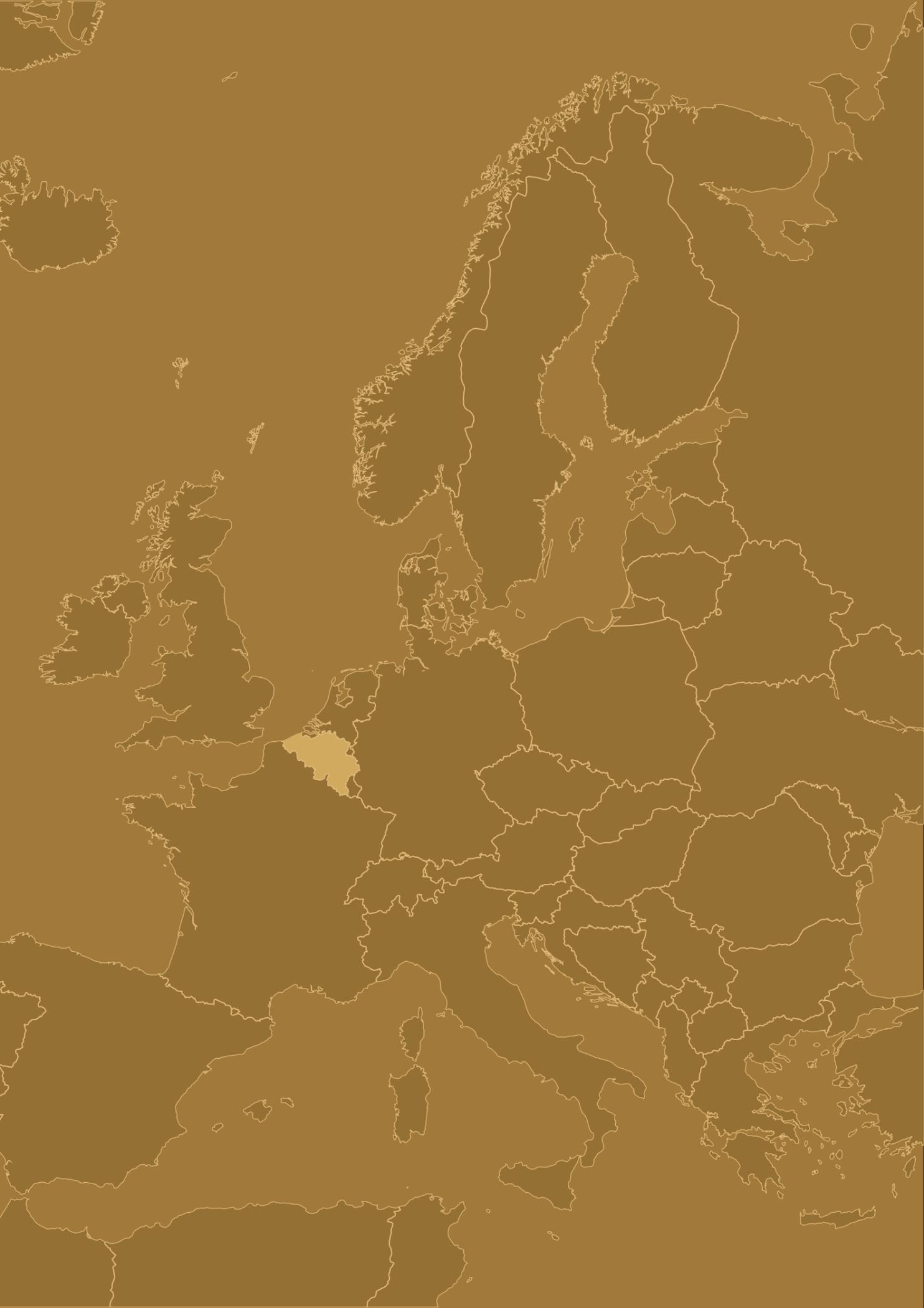
## Introduction

The role of religion within society is a complex phenomenon. In European countries, different historical, political, and cultural factors have shaped the influence religions have on citizens' public and private lives. For some countries, normativity has existed in regards to religion, often with a specific religious tradition having dominance over matters of religiosity and morality within the country. This dossier understands normativity as the use of moral and/or ideological assumptions, often religious ones, within a certain social context.

As will be seen in this dossier, the extent to which religions or one religion influence the moral and ethical makeup of a country remains a live issue in the present day for many European countries. While this religious normativity still shapes some countries, others have moved away from a strong presence of religion. Moreover, in some countries, religious normativity can lead to the formation of 'bubbles': groups of individuals who are united in a common outlook, in this case, a religious one. The existence of such bubbles can be a catalyst for both cohesion and conflict. Debates on topics such as freedom of expression, religious education, and political correctness reflect the tensions that have occurred over the role of normativity and religion in Europe and will be considered in this dossier.

The 14 countries covered in this dossier were analysed by a total of 15 analysts from across Europe. Importantly, each chapter in this dossier is written by authors either native to or very familiar with that country, ensuring that the reader is provided with a more intimate knowledge of debates surrounding normativity and religion in each specific country.

We will start by examining religion and normativity in these 14 countries. Then, we will move on to identify three common trends in the relationship between religion and normativity among different countries in Europe. Finally, we will conclude by analysing the challenges and opportunities that the relationship between religion and normativity faces across Europe.



## Belgium: The blurred lines between identity, religion, and education

### *Bubbles of religious belonging in Belgium*

Belgium once had a very Catholic identity, enforced by the clergy through education. Since the Enlightenment, however, the approach to education became increasingly secular and the population of Catholics began to dwindle.<sup>1</sup> For example, expressing religious identity in Belgian municipal schools became a subject of debate when the question of wearing hijabs was raised in 2020. In September 2021, the ban on religious symbols, including the hijab, in the Belgian Francophone region of Wallonia was lifted after petitions by activists.<sup>2</sup> In a way, secularisation efforts in municipal schools and universities attempted to cross Islamic boundaries or ‘bubbles’ by banning head coverings for Muslim women.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from the secular and Islamic bubbles, the Catholic bubble still remains a cultural force, particularly in educational institutions run by the Catholic Church and other affiliated communities and organisations. Such examples of these affiliated groups involved in Belgian society are Caritas,<sup>4</sup> the Jesuit Refugee Service,<sup>5</sup> and the International Catholic Migration Commission.<sup>6</sup> These bubbles of belonging are points of contention when it comes to discourse regarding religious identity and Belgian society.

### *The place of Catholicism in Belgian academia*

It has been argued by some religious groups that the decline in catechetical or religious instruction resulted in a downturn in the knowledge of doctrine among young people who belong to their religious denominations. Bishop Bonny of Antwerp, however, questions the kind of fundamentals that need to be taught in Belgian religious education. For Bishop Bonny, the fundamentals of Catholic doctrine that need to be taught in schools are more than jargon, figures, or which Bible verse says what, but rather the ethical foundations upon which Catholicism is hinged upon.<sup>7</sup> The bishop added that while it is good that a young person knows the details of the story of the Good Samaritan, it is much more important that a young person knows how to treat other people with compassion and care.<sup>8</sup> Belgian Catholic education should keep a balance between teaching fundamental doctrines as well as the relational, moral concepts contained within it.

Commenting on the 2019 reform on the religious education curriculum, Lieven Boeve from the Catholic University of Leuven added that a philosophy of dialogue and openness to pluralism is needed in order for the religious sphere to permeate the secular bubble.<sup>9</sup> Bonny stressed, however, that there is a need for literacy regarding the fundamentals of Roman Catholicism, even while learning about other belief systems. The tension between maintaining literacy on the basic tenets of Catholicism and openness to other life philosophies still remains.<sup>10</sup>

Such was the case back in 2010 when Mieke Van Hecke, then-director general of the Flemish Secretariat of Catholic Education, discussed the issue of having just one subject on religion in Flemish municipal schools instead of having separate subjects on each religion, including Catholicism and Islam.<sup>11</sup> She disputed that one can only enter into dialogue with another religion when one is literate with one's own religion. She insisted that one's own religious identity should be established before engaging with other belief systems.<sup>12</sup> In maintaining that there should be separate subjects for each religion, Van Hecke seems to see each religion as some sort of 'bubble', communities or concepts with a clear set of boundaries and criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

### *The Catholic University of Leuven*

It was also around this time that there were talks of dropping the 'Catholic' title of the University of Leuven. The Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the university issued a statement regarding these discussions back in December 2011. It insisted that regardless of the final name, the university will remain Catholic. The KU Leuven will also remain a canonical faculty. This is due to the separate agreements with the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education and the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels.<sup>13</sup> In the end, the university decided to keep the 'Catholic' in its name, albeit abbreviated to become the KU Leuven.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting to see the definition of Catholic identity adopted by the KU Leuven's Faculty of Theology. For them, Catholic identity fundamentally means openness to dialogue and inclusion.<sup>15</sup> The faculty took a maximalist perspective on Catholic identity in order to engage the secularist side in the university during the debates. This eventually worked.<sup>16</sup> The university managed to maintain its 'Catholic' title without compromising its ideals of openness to other views in Belgian society and academic freedom. Despite becoming autonomous from the Catholic hierarchy because of its funding by the state, the mission of the KU Leuven remains aligned with Christian ideals.<sup>17</sup> It describes a normativity of secularism with the Catholic Church remaining as a cultural and humanitarian influence. The Church's influence could still be felt in the educational bubble, albeit in a more dialogical capacity with secular society.

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**[O]ne can only enter into dialogue with another religion when one is literate with one's own religion.**

The secular and religious bubbles have become very pronounced in the KU Leuven during this time of tension. These bubbles, however, are not mutually exclusive in the production of knowledge in Belgian society. The attempt to rename the prominent university has become an indicator of the efforts to assess, redefine, and rearticulate Catholic identity. The orientation to engage with the increasingly changing societal context in Belgium has become the thrust of Catholic institutions.

### *Plurality versus identity*

Perhaps an orientation towards open dialogue and pluralism can be a point of intersection for these bubbles. Of course, resistance to dialogue would need to be addressed, and there will always be a tension between keeping one's identity and facing a diverse reality. This diverse, pluralistic reality with various bubbles that Belgian society faces is a point of conflict, but conflicts can be resolved through openness and inclusive dialogue. These bubbles of education, Catholic identity, religious expression, and secularisation in Belgium seem to point to a normativity of critical discourse, the gradual acceptance of pluralism, and the need for dialogue.

— *Joshua Amiel Marasigan*



## Croatia: The rule of nationalism and Roman Catholicism

### *Behind the Iron Curtain, communism is the only bubble*

Croatia spent the entire period from the Second World War until the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1991<sup>18</sup> under the communist regime in Yugoslavia. “Religion is the opium of the people” was the slogan of communist ideology in favour of propaganda for an atheist state without religion.<sup>19</sup> Before the communist regime, Croatia was a predominantly Roman Catholic country, but when it found itself behind the Iron Curtain, the Roman Catholic Church was thrown to its knees.<sup>20</sup> The Communist Party of Yugoslavia expelled the Roman Catholic Faculty of Theology from the University of Zagreb in 1952.<sup>21</sup> The only judge of morally appropriate behaviour was communist ideology. For example, abortion was socially acceptable and allowed by law,<sup>22</sup> homosexuality was a crime (according to the Criminal Law 1959),<sup>23</sup> and church marriage was not recognised by law.<sup>24</sup>

The Communist Party was the only party that reigned in Yugoslavia as well as in Croatia.<sup>25</sup> The communist ideology was imposed by the state as the only correct and ethically acceptable perspective and the Roman Catholic Church was marginalised and oppressed.<sup>26</sup> This made it impossible for different norms of socially acceptable behaviour to exist. Although the Communist Party attempted to create a classless society in Croatia, it did not fully succeed in doing so. There was some opposition, but it was small and very weak in relation to strong state propaganda. On the margins of society were those who were opponents of the Communist Party’s ideology and moral norms.<sup>27</sup> These opponents were primarily members of the old royal family and the religious community. The king was deprived of his civil rights and was forbidden to return to Yugoslavia.<sup>28</sup>

### *The church bells of the Roman Catholic Church are not heard behind the Iron Curtain*

The Roman Catholic Church in Croatia in communist Yugoslavia was under the jurisdiction of the Holy See. Believers of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia expected that the pope and the Roman Curia would protect them from communist terror.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, even diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Yugoslavia were severed in 1952.<sup>30</sup> Believers did not feel any improvement due to these events, because apart from mutual visits of Vatican and Yugoslav diplomats, no changes took place in the life of an ordinary believer.<sup>31</sup> The Roman Catholic Church was removed from the public and media sphere. It was forbidden to give sermons outside of church walls, and church holidays were replaced by working-class and Communist Party holidays. The only moral norms that existed were those prescribed and propagated by communist ideology. Since the communists did not tolerate resistance or opposition, Christian teachings were not welcome under the communist regime. Therefore, the Holy See could not do much for the Roman Catholics from behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>32</sup>

### *Croatia is free — a Roman Catholic religious purge follows*

Croatia fought for its independence through a bloody civil war that lasted several years during the 1990s.<sup>33</sup> After the fall of communism, nationalism triumphed in Croatia. The Holy See was the first state to recognise Croatia's independence on January 13, 1992.<sup>34</sup> The law on compensation for property confiscated and nationalised during the Yugoslav communist rule was adopted in 1997 and property was returned to the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>35</sup> Finally, a concordat with the Roman Catholic Church was signed in 2002.<sup>36</sup>

### Croatia's independence



The Church has once more become financially powerful and very present in the public sphere. With the return of the Church to the public stage, the propagation of Christian morality also resumed. The Roman Catholic Faculty of Theology was returned to Zagreb University in 1990. Religious education was restored to the education system in 1991.<sup>37</sup>

### *Nationalism and the Roman Catholic Church as the undisputed rulers of social norms*

The strength of Croatian nationalist policy and propaganda can be seen in those who are marginalised by it: the Serbs.<sup>38</sup> Although according to Croatian law, Serbs as a minority in Croatia have the right to their national alphabet (the Cyrillic alphabet), the board with the Cyrillic inscription on the city of Vukovar was broken by Croatian nationalists and a new one was never placed.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, incidents such as the looting of Serbian Orthodox churches and the writing of graffiti on their walls, as well as other acts of oppression, became an almost daily occurrence.<sup>40</sup>

Nationalism was banned during communism, but it is now glorified as the greatest moral value of Croatian society. During national holidays, people celebrate Croatian nationalism by visiting the battlefields from the civil war in Yugoslavia (1991-1995), and graveyards where Croatian nationalists are buried.<sup>41</sup> War veterans or 'Domobrani' are now almost unofficially in charge of defending and glorifying nationalism in Croatia.<sup>42</sup> Communism has been abandoned and nationalism is now an omnipresent norm in Croatian society.<sup>43</sup>

Based on all of this, it can be concluded that nationalism in Croatia is a strict norm, in addition to the norms imposed by the Roman Catholic Church. The political elite cooperates very closely with the Roman Catholic Church. This could be seen when the President of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, awarded the highest state decoration to Cardinal Kuharić (2020).<sup>44</sup> The Roman Catholic Church is very influential in the sphere of proposing and adopting moral norms. For example, it has called for a ban on abortion. In addition, it continues to cover up sexual abuse scandals<sup>45</sup> and appears to be complicit in attacks on the LGBTQ+ population.<sup>46</sup>

Although the Roman Catholic Church, together with nationalist movements, are unofficially in charge of moral norms, they also sometimes violate them. This was best seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. While all public gatherings were forbidden because of the pandemic, Mass in the Roman Catholic Church throughout Croatia was held without interruption and without a single punishment from the state or society.<sup>47</sup> This provides a good example of the close relationship between Croatian nationalism and the Church.

Croatian society has two normative codes: one prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church and one prescribed by the nationalist movement. This morality offers a substitute for communist norms. Although the communist ideology is a thing of the past, Croatian society is again seeking to be morally solid and firm with the norms prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church and nationalist movement.

— Marko Pavlović



## France: Insulting religions and freedom of expression

The 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris<sup>48</sup> showed that the consensus in favour of freedom of expression cannot be taken for granted. A typical example was given by the Al Jazeera editor who argued that “[d]efending freedom of expression in the face of oppression is one thing; insisting on the right to be obnoxious and offensive just because you can is infantile.”<sup>49</sup>

There is admittedly a huge tension, if not a paradox, within the French government’s policy on religions. Since the 19th century, the Republic has prohibited hatred on the grounds of religion while implementing freedom of expression and freedom of religion. However, what kind of balance have public policies enforced?

### *The return of ‘blasphemy’*

In February 2020, young Instagrammer Mila live-streamed a video where she declared: “The Koran is a religion of hatred, there is only hatred in it. Islam is s\*\*t, your religion is s\*\*t.” She later explained she was blaspheming to defend her right to freedom of expression.<sup>50</sup>

Considering that the crime of blasphemy was banned following the French Revolution, the argument immediately hit home. A #JesuisMila hashtag was created and supported by a majority of French citizens.<sup>51</sup> Adopting the principle of freedom of expression in 1789 and banishing blasphemy from its penal code in 1791, France quite clearly dissociated law and religion. By definition, blasphemy can offend religions as well as identities and political systems. All sorts of sacredness were originally targeted. Caricatures and insults affected any place of power — including Republican institutions.<sup>52</sup>

Since the Republic does not control and censor blasphemy, “it is not the public authority that declares what blasphemy is. It is the person who feels ‘blasphemed’, who feels the values they build their existence and belief around are affected,” says historian Alain Cabantous.<sup>53</sup> Today, the notion of blasphemy has taken on different meanings for different people. More importantly, blasphemous and anti-blasphemous discourses are becoming prominent.

## “ France quite clearly dissociated law and religion.

### *‘Blasphemy’, a pretext for hate speech?*

Mila’s defence has not stood the test of time. While her trial against her harassers still receives public support,<sup>54</sup> her political stance for blasphemy is now rather overlooked by major political parties and institutions. Only far-right politicians and media keep presenting her as a defender of freedom of expression.<sup>55</sup> Despite continuous death threats, a member of the government only recently promised to find a way to let her have a normal life again.<sup>56</sup>

In contrast, Samuel Paty was transformed into a national figure and protector of freedom of expression. In October 2020, Paty, a history teacher, was murdered for showing his students two caricatures of Muhammad during a civic education class.<sup>57</sup> On the occasion of a national homage, President Macron said that Paty was “the face of the Republic.”<sup>58</sup>

One of the reasons the two narratives largely differ is that there was nothing divisive in Paty’s action. On the contrary, Mila blurs the limit between blasphemy and hatred on the grounds of religion. After a public prosecutor had asked the court if Mila should be sued for hate speech, her ‘rejection of all religions’<sup>59</sup> was acknowledged as a personal opinion.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, according to the jury, Mila is innocent. Still, 42% of French citizens felt her words provoked racial and religious hatred.<sup>61</sup> If her statements do not provoke hatred, they provoke disunion.

### *National unity over freedoms of all kind*

Though they both question the balance between freedom of religion and freedom of expression, these two events were not treated the same by public authorities. In Mila’s case, the government decided not to take sides, while it deliberately sided with Paty. It did so not only for itself as a political group, but in the name of the whole nation.

After a period of clumsy public communication, the government almost completely withdrew from Mila’s situation.<sup>62</sup> It was then framed as an individual problem that demanded ‘solidarity’.<sup>63</sup> On the contrary, the circumstances of

Paty’s blasphemy were highly politicised and his personal values were generalised as being ‘the French values’.

One can only assume that national cohesion was prioritised. Whatever could strengthen it would be favoured. Whatever would put it at risk would be marginalised. With a legal and juridical system re-asserting that blasphemy is not a crime, and that caricaturists and detractors of all kinds are innocent, the compatibility (or rather absence of incompatibility) between freedom of religion and freedom of expression is solidified. But in the meantime, this disinterest of the Republic for insults and outrage makes living together harder. Daily adjustments in public communication on specific events help to keep the balance in check. Aside from the ongoing trial, this national disunion makes Mila’s blasphemy an enduring hot topic.

### *Juggling bubbles*

The controversy over blasphemy fragments religious and political groups from within. It does not oppose religions to the State, as one might think. On the contrary, freedom of religion and freedom of expression both release these institutions from any concern of blasphemy. Balance has been found, therefore, in prioritising national unity and juggling freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

Cases like that of Mila do not impair this moving balance. They put it into perspective, forcing religious and political authorities to restate their non-involvement in such situations.

— Clémence Sauty

## Germany: Addressing normativity in Religious Education

In Germany, denominational Religious Education (RE) as a school subject is the default option in 12 out of 16 federal states, except in Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, and Hamburg.<sup>64</sup> Despite its legal status in the German Basic Law, this organisational form of RE finds itself increasingly under pressure in public discourse.<sup>65</sup>

### Exceptions to mandatory RE in German federal states



### *The normative character of RE*

According to religious educators, RE should not only impart religious knowledge and insights, but also stimulate students to engage with religious approaches critically. Accordingly, students and teaching staff should be aware

of and be able to deal with the normative implications of religion and religious education. They should also bring them into critical dialogue with faith and theological practices in the here and now.<sup>66</sup>

In other words, the goal of RE includes two kinds of competencies: the ability to communicate religiously (to participate in a religion), and the ability to communicate about religion (to observe religion). Religious educators like Prof. Bernhard Dressler from the University of Marburg and Prof. Godwin Lämmermann from the University of Augsburg also emphasise the normative aspect of RE by providing knowledge and orientation about religion. It questions the validity of religious practice.<sup>67</sup>

### *Normativity as an argument against RE today*

However, in an increasingly secular society, denominational RE, the most common kind of RE in Germany, is losing social support. In Germany, many people see religion as a private matter that should not be taught publicly, especially in state schools. The number of members of religious institutions is also declining.<sup>68</sup> In addition, state-funded RE at schools is perceived as a sign of state-church cooperation that is no longer in accordance with the image of a modern democratic society.<sup>69</sup> The changing demography in Germany is also shaping the development of RE. While the Protestant and Catholic churches are losing members at a significant rate, the number of Muslims and people without religious affiliations is on the rise.<sup>70</sup> This religious heterogeneity makes RE harder at an organisational level.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, how to deal with religious plurality and diversity, fairly and without prejudices, is becoming one of the greatest challenges in today's Germany. Some argue that RE, particularly confessional RE, prescribes a certain worldview or confessionally-oriented ideology to students and does not comply with Germany's pedagogical standards and social requirements.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>73</sup> For example, the alleged creationist position in biology classes at Hessen's schools has caused heated public discourse and given rise to serious doubts about the educational value of RE.<sup>74</sup> However, according to Prof. Bernhard Dressler, the fact that the majority of those involved have protested against this approach shows the necessity of religious competence.<sup>75</sup>

### *Religious educators call for RE*

The ideological critique of RE is nevertheless directed against the normative perspective of RE itself. In Germany, RE has integrated theories and concepts from neighbouring related fields of study varying from theology, pedagogy, and sociology. It ensures an innovative and critical approach to the existing discourse on RE. In doing so, RE is asked to reflect on itself and its own theory formation.<sup>76</sup>

Whilst these actions against denominational RE are largely to be seen as part of a secularising and democratic process, they fail to prove themselves as free from normative implications. For example, Prof. Andrea Lehner-Hartmann from the University of Vienna has rejected the polemical distinction between the 'ideology-suspicious' RE and the 'value-neutral' Moral Education. According to religious educators, the very task of education is to make pupils aware of different worldviews and facilitate dialogues between them. Only this enables democratic coexistence. Both Moral Education and RE must contribute to this competence, neither in a neutral or value-free way nor in an ideological way.<sup>77</sup>

Research also shows that the so-called 'neutral' Moral Education does not have much support among German headteachers, who often prefer integrative RE over the cooperative 'religion for all'. On the other hand, some pedagogues suggest that confessional RE helps to form a religious identity, arguing that students or parents always have the right to withdraw from RE and can attend Moral Education or other substitute classes.<sup>79</sup> What is more, RE makes it possible to provide access to religion and deal with religion as a cultural phenomenon in which an individual faith can be communicated in the social sphere.<sup>80</sup>

### *Bridging bubbles: normativity as a tool to promote religious plurality*

For some, the normative implications of RE are no longer compatible with the concept of the modern secular state and cultural diversity. With RE being the only subject in Germany's school system which is not fully regulated by the state, it is clear that this normative character of RE is approved by the state, if not supported.<sup>81</sup> The attempt to 'promote' religious and cultural diversity by pushing religion and religious discussions out of the public sphere, is thus expected to become a contradiction in itself.

Religious educators argue that this exact character is what makes RE educationally valuable. Rolf Schieder, Professor of Protestant Theology, speaks of the theological and social values of religious education: "State-organised religious education makes an essential contribution to the civilisation of religious life. It prevents religion from fundamentalism. At the same time, it can also strengthen a society's awareness of its own religious-cultural roots."<sup>82</sup>

To conclude, RE seeks to create religious competence: the competence to participate in a religion as an individual and to communicate about religion as a part of society. By enabling pupils to reflect on its own normative implications, RE's normative character could be a meaningful tool to promote understanding among religions and social integration in a pluralistic society.<sup>83 84</sup>

— Han Chang



## Ireland: Normativity and Catholicism in a changing landscape

The Catholic Church's power in Ireland has shaped the country's national identity. Columnist T.P. O'Mahony perfectly encapsulates this influence, stating that since the Republic's creation, Catholicism has "run through the social fabric [of Ireland] like grain through wood."<sup>85</sup> While Ireland is made of different religions and Christian denominations, the norm in Ireland has been defined by a predominantly Catholic identity, dictating the morals and ethics of the country.<sup>86</sup>

However, Ireland has not been immune to political and social changes that have occurred across Europe since the mid-20th century. Public debates over several issues have resulted in loosening the Catholic Church's grip over the nation's morality. Discussion of how Catholicism became the norm and shaped Irish society will now take place. Moreover, focus will be given to debates about abortion. This issue highlights the shifting understandings of morality and ethics and how these have caused deep rifts within the country that are yet to be resolved.

### *Catholicism and Irish identity*

Under British colonial rule, the Catholic Church (henceforth referred to as the Church) was seen as a 'protector' of Irishness.<sup>87</sup> As the modern Republic was established in 1922, so was a symbolic dichotomy between Irishness-Catholicism and Britishness-Protestantism. The monolithic view was that Catholic values should be 'the definers of Irish identity' despite some citizens who identified as Protestant.<sup>88</sup>

In the Republic's early years, the Church held the moral authority, allowing it to shape the political agenda and veto any policies that it believed to be 'morally objectionable'.<sup>89</sup> While other European countries became more interconnected in the early part of the 20th century, 'insular self-sufficiency', this being a tendency to look inwards and limit trade with other countries, was the dominant objective in Ireland.<sup>90</sup> Foreign newspapers were taxed, and books and films were censored.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, until the mid-20th century, a traditional, inward-looking and morally-driven Catholic framework shaped Ireland.

## “ [I]nternal and external factors led to a shift in Catholic normativity from the mid-20th century onwards.

### *Shifting normativity*

While for many Irish citizens, Catholicism “has been the social cement that provided cohesion and stability,” internal and external factors led to a shift in Catholic normativity from the mid-20th century onwards.<sup>92</sup> Firstly, in the 1960s, the Church’s hold over Irish politics ‘fractured’ and the State reformed some domains previously under church control.<sup>93</sup>

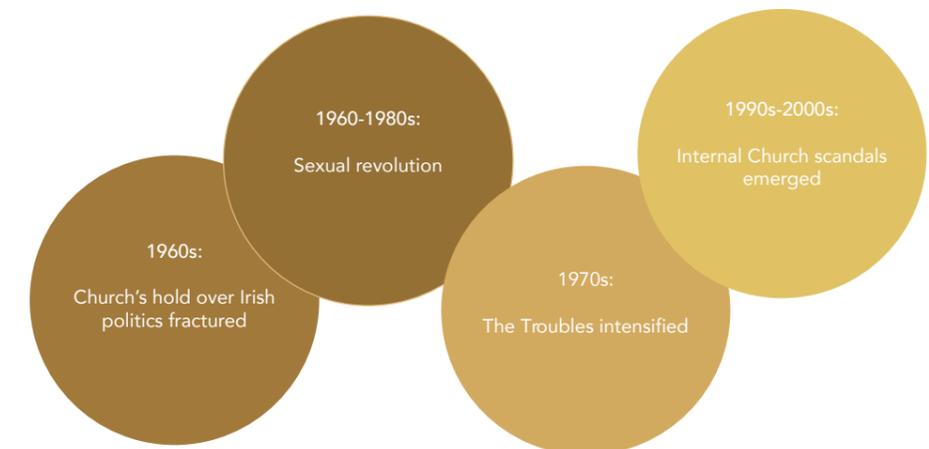
Secondly, The Troubles, which refers to a sectarian conflict between Unionists and Irish nationalists, began to intensify in the early 1970s.<sup>94</sup> While the conflict mostly took place in Northern Ireland, at times violence occurred in the Republic. The Troubles were not a religious conflict but they did have an impact on religiosity and Catholic morality in Ireland. Journalist Cahir O’Doherty speaks of how “the interminable conflict ... impacted the spirit and spiritual life of the Irish over four decades.”<sup>95</sup> People witnessed not only the horrors of the conflict but also how “religion had fostered and hardened the attitudes” that led to the conflict.<sup>96</sup> By the time the Good Friday Peace Agreement was signed in 1998, Catholic affiliation had slightly declined,<sup>97</sup> suggesting that the experience of The Troubles may well have impacted on both the religiosity of Irish citizens and their trust in the Church to bring peace.

Thirdly, internal scandals within the Church that emerged throughout the 1990s and 2000s ‘compounded the growing fragmentation of Irish-Catholic identity’.<sup>98</sup> Cases of sexual abuse by priests and illegal adoption organised by the Church led many Irish citizens to ‘ignore the Church’s guidance on social issues’.<sup>99</sup>

Alongside these internal factors, the sexual revolution that swept across Europe made a mark in Ireland and impacted the Church’s influence. Until this point, the Church had a monopoly on sexuality and women’s bodies. Yet, ac-

cess to better information about sex and reproductive rights led many women to slowly turn away from the Church’s moral values and embrace more liberal teachings.<sup>100 101</sup> With time, this trend grew and was reflected in major legal changes, including the 1979 law that allowed the importation and sale of contraceptives<sup>102</sup> and the 1996 law that removed the constitutional prohibition on divorce.<sup>103</sup>

### Shifting normativity in Ireland



### *The Church, politics, and women’s autonomy*

No event better exemplifies the tensions between Irish society and the Church than the issue of abortion. As the sexual revolution heralded a new, liberal approach to women’s autonomy, the ‘reliance on religious doctrine to guide legislation’ was coming under pressure.<sup>104</sup> Therefore, the Church and political right turned to the issue of abortion and pushed for recognition of the equal right to life of the pregnant woman and the unborn to be written into law. They succeeded and the Eighth Constitutional Amendment was introduced in 1983.<sup>105</sup>

The Eighth Amendment referendum was highly divisive and faced opposition from some on the political left.<sup>106</sup> However, it highlighted that through

much of the 1970s and 1980s, “the Church still exercised cultural influence among Irish citizens through ... its ability to frame political debates on moral policy issues.”<sup>107</sup> Moreover, it reconfirmed the moral panic over the future of Ireland.<sup>108</sup>

Yet, over the next 38 years, the Church’s moral influence over political debates began to face even more criticism. When it came to abortion, many Irish citizens felt that their country remained inward-looking and out of touch with much of Europe.<sup>109</sup> Meanwhile, several high-profile cases of women who died because they were denied abortions appalled Irish citizens.<sup>110</sup> These reasons, among many others, led to the 2018 referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment. The Constitution of Ireland had previously prohibited abortion unless there was serious risk to the life of the mother<sup>111</sup> but this new amendment, which was voted in by 66.4% of Irish citizens, permitted parliament to legislate for abortion.<sup>112</sup>

### *Fundamental change?*

The extended and intensely fierce debates on abortion reflect an Ireland struggling to come to terms with its changing landscape. The Thirty-Sixth Amendment highlighted how normativity in Ireland, which had once been defined by the influence of Catholic morality, has shifted. As the 2016 census revealed, religious affiliation has been declining overall, while those who identify as religious are increasingly not Catholic.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, the Church’s centuries-old influence in Irish society has inevitably weakened.

However, the tensions between the Church and some of Irish society over issues such as abortion, religious education, and LGBTQ+ rights are by no means resolved. The symbiotic relationship between the Church and politics is still in existence and support for the Church from many Irish citizens remains stable. Due to this, Catholic normativity may have shifted but it has not disappeared.

— *Martha Scott-Cracknell*



## Italy: The issue of political correctness

One of the hottest and most controversial discussions in Italian society and politics is around the issue of political correctness. One criticism that many politicians, especially from the political right, make is that political correctness imposes a specific normative code on the Italian people and society and, in a certain way, undermines freedom of expression.<sup>114 115</sup>

On the other hand, the same critics of political correctness are starting to become politically correct themselves in order to protect their own values. For instance, they have developed the term 'Christianophobia',<sup>116</sup> which is supposed to be parallel to the problem of homophobia of which they are often accused. Therefore, the norm of political correctness is becoming an instrument to justify less popular views and create divisions, instead of bridges, within Italian society.

### *Christianophobia*

In February 2021, the Northern League, an Italian right-wing party, proposed to use public funds to establish an 'Observatory of Christianophobia'. The Northern League adviser Max Bastoni stated that "Italian and European culture" is "under attack" due to the emergence of Christianophobia in Italy and is in need of this observatory.<sup>117 118</sup> The Observatory of Christianophobia's website states:

Since 2000, 160,000 Christians have been victims of persecution every year. Every five minutes a Christian was killed because of his faith. All this cannot be accepted, because it constitutes an offence against God and human dignity. Moreover, it is a threat to security and peace and prevents the achievement of authentic integral human development.<sup>119</sup>

### *Christians are persecuted because they are not 'politically correct'*

According to Bastoni, it is often the norm of the politically correct to be responsible for the development and increase of Christianophobia in Italy. He argued that in Italy, "a simple Mass in favour of the natural family or a rosary against gay marriages ends up entering the statistics of the courts."<sup>120</sup> More-

over, Bastoni also argues that this is “not an exclusively confessional theme. Italian and European culture is under attack.”<sup>121</sup> Finally, this anti-Christian sentiment is, according to him, because of “demographic decrease” and “mass immigration” in Italy.<sup>122</sup>

The position of the Northern League in the Lombardia region is not an isolated case. In September 2020, the Lazio region made a similar proposal. It was advocated by the Lazio regional councillor Laura Corrott. Corrott stressed the need to establish a ‘Regional Observatory on Christianophobia’ due to the damages done to some places of worship in Italy. She argued that attacks on places of worship represent acts of persecution against Catholics.<sup>123</sup> Yet, those on the other side of the political spectrum argue that these attacks to places of worship were isolated cases and were done by individuals with diagnosed mental disorders.<sup>124</sup>

### *A law proposal against Christianophobia*

The battle against Christianophobia is pursued by the Northern League at a national level as well. In December 2021, Lorenzo Fontana of the Northern League advanced a law proposal against Christianophobia. It is interesting to note that in the same period, the Italian parliament was also discussing a law against homophobia. Therefore, the proposal is a direct response to a law that enhances politically correct values. Thus, again, it appears that the phenomenon of Christianophobia is directly connected to the Italian development of political correctness and the protection of minority groups.<sup>125 126 127</sup>

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**[T]he phenomenon of Christianophobia is directly connected to the Italian development of political correctness and the protection of minority groups.**

### *Is it a political strategy?*

The question arises whether the Northern League is advancing this law and changes in order to obtain votes from religious circles in Italy. Catholics in Italy have strong political power and represent a large number of voters. Therefore, discussing Christianophobia could be a good political strategy for the League.<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, this does not negate the fact that Catholics in Italy identify with this idea of Christianophobia because it may well be a real problem.

### *Bridging bubbles*

In conclusion, Christians who express values that go against the ‘politically correct’ often feel discriminated against in Italy. As a consequence, politicians in Italy are proposing laws and reforms to counteract this phenomenon. These reforms are based on the same ‘politically correct’ strategies and principles used by discriminated groups. So while there is a law against homophobia, right-wing politicians are trying to develop a parallel law against Christianophobia. However, this situation risks creating bubbles and divisions in Italian society rather than bridging gaps. We will need to see in which way Italy will respond to this challenge and bridge these gaps among different Italian social groups.

— Ghila Amati



## The Netherlands: (In)tolerance as the norm

The Netherlands is a secularised, liberal society that highly values freedom. Religious freedom, freedom of speech, or freedom of sexuality: the Dutch claim to have it all. Yet, even though the country is secular, its Christian roots can still be found all around. For example, each year on Maundy Thursday, the suffering and death of Jesus Christ are reenacted through a big musical play.<sup>129</sup> While the Christian roots are not always as visible, Christianity is still the norm. However, over the past years, the Dutch identity of tolerance toward religious minorities has shifted towards an identity of being openly discriminatory.<sup>130</sup> How did this happen?

### *“How do you feel about ISIS?”*

The ‘othering’ of religious or ethnic minorities became clearly visible during Dutch colonial rule. Othering means creating binary differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and seeing the minority group as the Other. The Other is not just seen as being inherently different from the dominant group, but also as inferior.<sup>131</sup> Thus, a power imbalance is created.

In the Netherlands, the danger lies within the normalisation of this process and can be clearly seen in the treatment of Dutch Muslims. The discrimination of Dutch Muslims is subtle, interwoven within daily activities.<sup>132</sup> It can be found on the work floor, for example, where Dutch Muslims have to defend themselves from colleagues asking intrusive questions. From “How do you feel about ISIS?” to “Are you against gay marriage?”, Muslims are tested to see whether they share Dutch secular values.<sup>133</sup> Such discriminating practices have become normal. Negative framing by the media and politicians openly attacking Islam only add fuel to the fire.<sup>134</sup>

An example can be found in the electoral program of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV). The leader of the PVV, Geert Wilders, declares, “Islam is in the first place not a religion, but the most violent political ideology that exists.”<sup>135</sup> When such statements become normal, discrimination against Muslims becomes the norm with no one there to fight it. How does this change the understanding of so-called Dutch tolerance?

### *To each their own (pillar)*

The Dutch attitude towards tolerance could be seen as passive. Tolerance, in this case, does not mean socialising with the other but being indifferent toward them.<sup>136</sup> The indifferent attitude of the Dutch can be traced back to its history as a pillarised society. The construction of pillars within Dutch society has been the dominant discourse for many years.<sup>137</sup> Each religious or political group formed its own pillar with its own schools, churches, and rules. The main purpose of this pillarised system was to prevent conflicts between the different religious and political groups.<sup>138</sup>

When more and more Muslim migrants came to the Netherlands as guest workers in the late 1950s and 1980s, they started their own pillar.<sup>139</sup> At the same time, Dutch society tried to de-pillarise and shifted their focus to a more individual, autonomous society. The creation of the new pillar by Muslims created a sense of uneasiness amongst the wider Dutch community.<sup>140</sup> The Dutch felt like the Muslim migrants represented a threat and that the Muslim minority was incapable of assimilating into the Dutch culture. At the same time, the Dutch were not very welcoming to the Muslim migrants, since they believed they were here for a temporary stay.<sup>141</sup> These negative feelings created even more distance between the different religious groups. What are the consequences of this religious segregation within Dutch society? Segregated spaces can result in misunderstanding people outside of one's own group due to a lack of language sensitivity. It can also lead to mistrust and conflicts.<sup>142</sup>

### *Bridging the gap*

The most important question remains: how can the Dutch bridge these differences and move toward an inclusive and actively tolerant society? A helpful method to bring people of different religious backgrounds into contact with each other is interreligious dialogue. The first official interreligious encounters in the Netherlands took place during the first half of the 1970s.<sup>143</sup> Most of the interreligious groups were started by Christians, who still formed the majority of the Dutch population at the time. One of the first attempts at an interreligious group was the Joden-Christenen-Moslims (Jews-Christians-Muslims / JCM). It was founded by Dirk Cornelis Mulder, who was a professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He wanted Christians to act as a bridge between Jews and Muslims. However, the group was not successful at the time because the Christians outnumbered the Muslims and the Jews. Moreover, the Muslim community did not have representatives to send to those meetings.<sup>144</sup>

Even though there were a number of these failed first attempts, they eventually led to the creation of multiple interreligious institutions. The

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## **What are the consequences of this religious segregation within Dutch society?**

Dutch Council of Churches started a section for interreligious encounters, and one for a plural society that helped migrants without looking at their religious background.<sup>145</sup>

Considering the diverse and secular nature of society in the Netherlands, interreligious dialogue should not only stay within houses of worship, but should also gain a place within education.<sup>146</sup> Universities have a role in challenging structures of exclusion, increasing inclusivity, and connecting these structures to historical and societal frameworks. One way of doing this might be to integrate interreligious dialogue within a school's curriculum, and create safe spaces for reflection.<sup>147</sup> As Ghorashi puts it: “Is there any place left in our universities for vulnerability, solidarity, and humanity when we reproduce structures that praise individual perfection, over-assertiveness, and over-achievement as sources of success and almost single sources of promotion?”<sup>148</sup> Interreligious dialogue requires solidarity, a strong communal feeling, and spaces where one feels safe enough to be vulnerable.

### *Working toward an active tolerance*

To conclude, the discrimination of the Muslim ‘Other’ has become more normal in the Netherlands over the past years. Even though the Netherlands values freedom of religion as well as freedom of speech, the attitude towards Muslims has become more negative over the past years within Dutch society. The negative representation of Muslims in the media plays a part in this and so do anti-Islamic statements by politicians.<sup>149</sup> Tolerance in the Netherlands nowadays is not about interacting with each other, but about accepting the existence of the other.<sup>150</sup> To build bridges between the different religious and social groups, there should be more space for dialogue.<sup>151</sup> Interreligious dialogue might help in challenging the dominant narrative and working toward a new norm: one of active engagement.

— Laura Waardenburg



## Portugal: Building bridges between different bubbles on euthanasia

The legalisation of euthanasia in Portugal took place in 2020, and was confirmed in 2021. This process was not without opposition. The legalisation of euthanasia has always been a long-term aspiration of various left-wing actors. However, this move consistently faced opposition from the Catholic Church, which has been joined by other faiths in an unprecedented inter-religious alliance. Therefore, the issue of euthanasia in Portugal highlights the tension between two different bubbles: the political and the religious.

### *30 years of parliamentary discussion*

The recent approval of the Portuguese law to decriminalise euthanasia (also referred to as medically-assisted death) emerges almost a year after its approval. This was the result of a long and not always peaceful discussion between various parts of society, including the different religious denominations.

The discussion began in 1995 with an opinion by the National Ethics Council for Life Sciences (CNECV), which considered that “the acceptance of euthanasia by civil society and the law would lead to a loss of confidence that the patient has in the doctor and in health teams.”<sup>152</sup>

### *From the parliamentary discussion to the approval of the law*

After more than twenty years of debates, discussions, and drafts to regulate medically-assisted death, a proposal for its liberalisation finally emerged in the Portuguese parliament. It experienced both support and strong opposition.<sup>153</sup> On May 29, 2018, different proposals presented by various parties were voted down by a short margin.<sup>154</sup> Future proposals would not be heard in the parliament during the tenure of the same legislature (2015 to 2019).<sup>155</sup>

On February 20, 2020, new proposals were brought to a vote in the parliament from the same parties that had already done so in 2018, alongside the Liberal Initiative. Unlike the previous vote, the decriminalisation of medically-assisted death was approved in general terms.<sup>156</sup> Portugal became the fourth country in Europe to approve euthanasia, after the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg.<sup>157</sup>

### Presidential veto

Soon after the law was approved, the President of the Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, sent it to the Constitutional Court to assess whether it complied with Portuguese constitutional requirements.<sup>158</sup> On March 15, 2021, the same court issued advice considering that the law included concepts that were not properly determined, such as ‘intolerable suffering’ and ‘permanent injury’. However, the court considered that decriminalisation of medically-assisted death itself was legitimate and constitutional.<sup>159</sup> Following the court’s decision, the President vetoed the law on the grounds of unconstitutionality. The law was sent back to the parliament for reconsideration.<sup>160</sup>

### The position of religious denominations

Various religions in Portugal, starting with the Catholic Church - the most representative religious denomination in terms of number of believers in the country - have always opposed euthanasia (and assisted suicide). On the eve of the 2018 vote, nine religious denominations - Catholic, Orthodox and Adventist Churches, Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and Bahá’í communities, and the Evangelical Alliance - spoke out for the “inviolability of human life until natural death” and expressed “opposition to the legalisation” of “assisted suicide and euthanasia.”<sup>161</sup> In 2020, the same representatives again expressed their opposition to the bill to legalise medically-assisted death.<sup>162</sup> One of the key arguments these religious communities made was that Portugal did not offer sufficient medical care for serious illness to justify the use of euthanasia.<sup>163</sup>

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Portugal became the fourth country  
in Europe to approve euthanasia

## Religious denominations opposing euthanasia



Catholic Church



Orthodox Church



Adventist Church



Baha'is



Evangelical Alliance



Muslims



Jews



Buddhists



Hinduists

## “ The recent approval of the law decriminalising euthanasia in Portugal did not make the debate in Portuguese society disappear.

### *The referendum issue*

However, during the 2020 Portuguese Episcopal Conference, the Catholic Church announced its support for a possible referendum, contrary to what it had advocated for until then. The Church explained that although “life-related issues were not referendable,” it would be more legitimate to listen to the popular will than to leave the issue to two hundred representatives.<sup>164</sup> The support for a referendum, however, was not shared by all the representatives of the other religious communities. For this reason, the Interfaith Working Group (composed of the religious denominations mentioned above) did not take any position in that direction.<sup>165</sup>

### *The position of civic movements*

The Portuguese Federation for Life (Federação Portuguesa pela Vida), a group of associations that defend life until natural death, began collecting signatures in favour of the referendum. Meanwhile, the civic movement Direito a Morrer com Dignidade (Right to Die with Dignity), which promotes the legalisation of medically-assisted death, was against this solution.<sup>166</sup> In the case of the first movement, there is a prevalence of associations which, although secular, are inspired by the Catholic Church. In the case of the second movement, its composition includes mainly individual personalities associated with parties more on the political left and the arts.<sup>167</sup> Among the left-wing parties, the Portuguese Communist Party’s opposition to both legalisation and the referendum stands out.<sup>168</sup> This is particularly important since the Commu-

nist Party is the only party supporting the governing majority that has taken a position contrary to that of the government regarding euthanasia.<sup>169</sup>

Among the bubble of physicians, there seems to be an intricate division of opinions. The Medical Association Board has taken an active position against legalisation,<sup>170</sup> while other doctors explicitly defend it.<sup>171</sup> Apart from the positions of the movements, the CNEVC has once again pronounced itself against the legalisation of medically-assisted death.<sup>172</sup>

### *A law that is burning bridges*

The recent approval of the law decriminalising euthanasia in Portugal did not make the debate in Portuguese society disappear. On the contrary, the lack of a referendum to hear the opinion of the whole population, irrespective of political ideology or religious denomination of each citizen, has contributed to this situation. Although approved by law, euthanasia continues to be a hot topic of discussion for religious, social, and political reasons, which instead of building bridges between different groups has isolated them even more. The groups seem to remain unyielding in their opinion as individuals and as citizens.

— *Maria Inês Nemésio*



## Russia: Back into the bubble of religion — an Orthodox revival

“He who is not Orthodox cannot be Russian.”<sup>173</sup> This famous line from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Demons* (1871) seems to be on its way to once again become a normative principle in present-day Russia. Following decades of Soviet State Atheism, in which religious worship was suppressed and atheism was promoted, over the last 25 years Russian Orthodoxy has seen a revival in both the Russian Federation and in neighbouring states.<sup>174</sup>

A major survey carried out in 2017 showed that religion plays an important part in shaping individual and national identities throughout Eastern European countries.<sup>175</sup> The study makes apparent that religion and national identity are closely intertwined: to be Orthodox is to be ‘truly Russian’.<sup>176</sup> A previous study in 2014 showed that 72% of Russia’s population identifies as Russian Orthodox, but the 2017 survey demonstrates that Orthodox affiliation in nine of Russia’s neighbouring states varies from 73% in Belarus to 92% in Moldova.<sup>177 178</sup> In contrast, after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, roughly two-thirds of Russians claimed no affiliation with any religion.<sup>179</sup>

### *Orthodoxy as a national identity*

The religious sentiments in contemporary Russia and neighbouring states have become fairly similar to what they were during the times of the Russian empire, before the atheistic Soviet rule.<sup>180</sup> In 1832, Count Sergey Uvarov, minister of education under the imperial government of Czar Nicholas I, introduced the slogan ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality’ – the three tenets on which the tsarist rule rested.<sup>181</sup> As one reporter notes, the Russian Orthodox Church has “regained some of its historical authority as one of the “three pillars” of tsarism under Putin’s rule.”<sup>182</sup> Although only 10% of Orthodox Christians across the region go to church on a weekly basis, for many, religion has become an element of national belonging, thus, again linking Orthodoxy to nationalism.<sup>183</sup>

This trend is not only discernible in Eastern Europe. Russian diasporic communities have also been (re)turning to Russian Orthodoxy for a sense of belonging outside of the Soviet context for decades, while Russian President Vladimir Putin recently stressed the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in strengthening ties with compatriots abroad.<sup>184 185</sup>

### *Sociological vacuum – the quest for a new bubble*

The current search for national cohesion and the return to religion in Russia evokes a theory coined by the Polish sociologist Stefan Nowak in the late 1970s: the sociological vacuum.<sup>186</sup> In the wake of great socio-political changes, a society faces an ideological void, lacking a sense of communal identity, or a set of normative values that creates a sense of belonging. A 2015 volume on the upsurge of nationalism in the Russian Federation shows how during the communist regimes, the population of the expansive Soviet Union was joined in a political nationalism, an overarching Soviet culture, which upon the fall of the USSR created an ideological vacuum.<sup>187</sup> In 1988, the leader of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, recognised the looming prospect of such a social divide, or what he called “apathy and indifference,” and hailed the Orthodox Church back into public life.<sup>188</sup> An illustrative image that has been used in this respect, presenting the Church as a welcoming institution, is that of ‘Pokrov Bogoroditsa’ (The Mantle of the Mother of God), which refers to the protection given the faithful through the intercession of the Virgin.<sup>189</sup>

### *What about the division of Church and State?<sup>190</sup>*

The long-standing association of Russian Orthodoxy with national identity has been invoked on multiple occasions to justify Russian expansion and political actions.<sup>191</sup> A telling example is Russia’s annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in 2014. In a speech published on the official website of the Kremlin, Vladimir Putin justified the annexation by pointing the residents of Crimea at the religious and, consequently, the cultural history that they share with the Russian Federation:

Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization, and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.<sup>192</sup>

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, also assimilates Church and State. At the 10th anniversary of his enthronement in 2019, he declared that the relationship between Church and State, “in all the history of Russia,” has never been established on such equal grounds as today. However, the patriarch also stressed that “by no means” the Russian Orthodox Church will ever support any political forces.<sup>193 194</sup>

### *St Putin*

In 2016, just outside the Kremlin in central Moscow, a 17.5-metre high monument was erected depicting Saint Vladimir, who is credited with the foundation of Orthodox Christianity in the 10th century.<sup>195</sup> Critics were quick to recognise ‘the other Vladimir’ in the statue, seeing it as a ‘metaphoric monument to Putin’.<sup>196</sup>

It is not the first instance in which Putin has been referred to as a saintly figure. The religious sect of The Chapel of Russia’s Resurrection in Nizhny Novgorod has hailed Putin as its patron saint and sees him as the reincarnation of Paul the Apostle.<sup>197</sup> Following Putin’s reelection in 2012, the ties between Church and State were tightened in a nationalist campaign in which the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church, as one reporter notes, presented President Putin as “the protective saint of Russia,” while to some Russians he resembles a father figure.<sup>198 199</sup>

“He who is not Orthodox cannot be Russian.” Dostoyevski’s statement was not merely an archaic assessment. Under the watchful eye of Putin as a resolute but saintly father and the Russian Orthodox Church as a mother who invitingly opens her cloak in a warm embrace, Russia’s national religious tradition, Russian Orthodox Christianity, has once again become normative.

— *Warja Tolstoj*

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**Russia’s national religious tradition,  
Russian Orthodox Christianity, has  
once again become normative.**



## Serbia: Christian values are on the throne again

### *Communism rules - the church is in the doghouse*

From the end of the Second World War until the beginning of the 1990s, the Communist Party ruled in the whole of Yugoslavia, including Serbia. The Communist Party was the only authority over all social issues and was able to set socially acceptable forms of behaviour. Under communist authority, all religious communities were marginalised and deemed socially unacceptable.<sup>200</sup> As the church was removed from the social sphere, communism became a substitute for faith, and Communist Party officials a substitute for clergy.<sup>201</sup>

### *Communism is dead - the church has been resurrected*

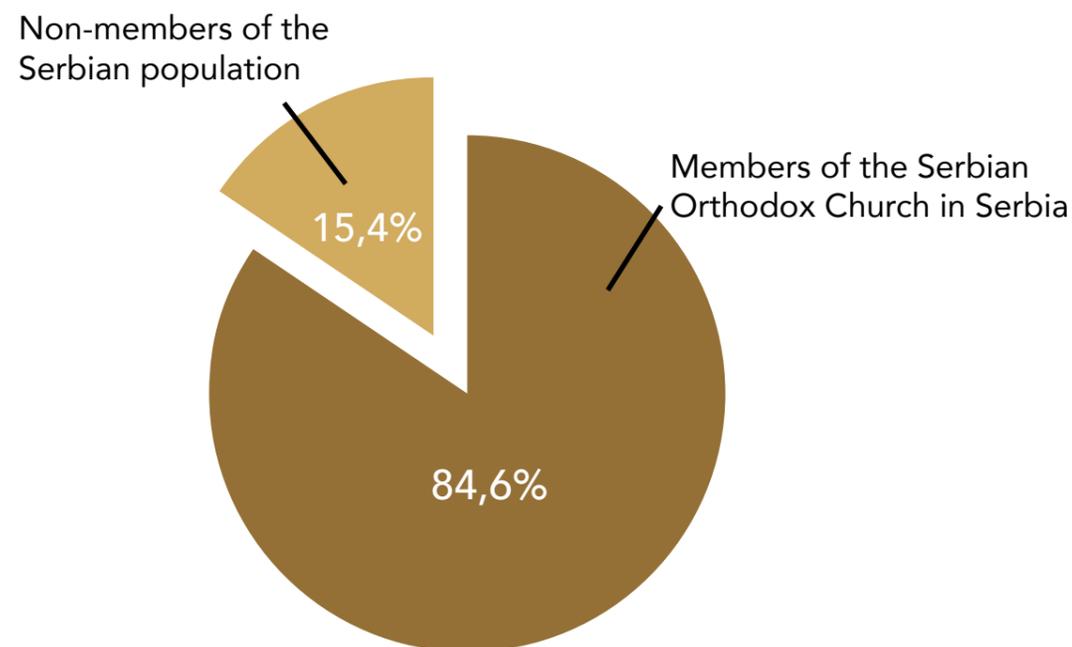
The 1990s were marked by the civil war for the peoples of Yugoslavia.<sup>202</sup> The communist regime disintegrated and the need for a new ideology appeared in Serbia. During communism, the idea of communism and unity was propagated, and nationalism had always been manipulated by communism.<sup>203</sup> After communist rule, rigid communist 'religion' was replaced with nationalism.<sup>204</sup> The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) was the only pan-Serbian institution that nurtured love for the Serbian nation.<sup>205</sup>

Nationalism substituted communism, and thanks to new nationalist propaganda, the SOC became free again.<sup>206</sup> The new political elite in Serbia recognised the Serbian Church as an integral part of Serbian identity and cultural heritage.<sup>207</sup> The nationalists wanted to use the SOC for their political idea of creating an independent Serbian state. Therefore, the SOC was restored to the public so that it could be the majority church in that new state.<sup>208</sup> The first Serbian president of the state, Slobodan Milošević, also visited the Serbian medieval monastery in Greece.<sup>209</sup> This visit showed that even the president now wanted to support and ally with the SOC.<sup>210</sup> The SOC unquestionably brought with it the resurrection of Christian norms that replaced the abandoned communist ideology.<sup>211</sup>

### *Communist heritage and Christian morality*

Since social changes do not happen easily, this shift from an outgoing communist morality to an incoming Christian tradition was not simple. The 2006 law on restitution saw the state return the property that was previously nationalised by the communists to the church.<sup>212</sup> As a result, the church has now become a very rich institution that has substantial financial means at its disposal to spread its teachings. In 2011, 84.6% of the Serbian population were members of the SOC.<sup>213</sup>

## Serbian Orthodox Church members (2011)



The influx of new church members also led to an increasing number of people interested in becoming monks. This ultimately caused the renovation of the monasteries. Monasteries play a very important role in the mission of the church and in spreading its moral teachings. In 2001, the state returned religious education to schools again and the Orthodox Theological Faculty of the Serbian Orthodox Church was returned to Belgrade University in 2004.<sup>214</sup>

However, during the decision to return religious education to the education system, it was clear that the impact of communist ideology on society had not fully disappeared. Communist ideology advocated an atheist way of education, so the part of the nation that still respected communist principles and norms was disturbed by the return of religious education.<sup>215</sup> Some citizens did not want their children to attend religious education classes. This resulted in the creation of the subject of Civic Education, based on non-religious moral norms.<sup>216</sup> This shows that Christian teachings are not privileged by the whole of Serbian society.

Nevertheless, the legacy that communism left in Serbia can be seen in the fact that church marriage is still not recognised as legal today.<sup>217</sup> Similarly, even though the SOC considers abortion a sin, the Communist Party's decision to make abortion legal still exists in Serbia.<sup>218 219</sup>

### *Nationalism and LGBTQ+ - friends or opponents of the SOC*

During the 1990s, nationalism replaced communist ideology on the political scene.<sup>220</sup> Nationalism has brought with it the norm that a true Serb is only one who is a member of the SOC and a nationalist.<sup>221</sup>

Not only has nationalism become a challenge to church morality, but also the LGBTQ+ community has become part of the political elite, including the current Prime Minister.<sup>222</sup> However, the Christian values preached by the SOC do not support the LGBTQ+ population. Therefore, they face the challenge of condemning the LGBTQ+ population and losing the support of the political elite. On the other hand, accepting cooperation would lead to the loss of the support of a large part of its believers. The nationalist ideology that brought the SOC to the social throne has now brought the LGBTQ+ community into the political elite. By admitting the LGBTQ+ population to its members, nationalism has shown its adaptability and power to evolve. Will Christian morality remain inviolable in Serbian society, or will it be replaced by other moral values?

— Marko Pavlović



## Spain: From 'National Catholicism' to a pluralistic society

Since the days of the counter-reformation, Spain has often been perceived as a nation in which the Catholic Church holds significant sway in dictating the norms of society. Whilst this notion was consistently reinforced during the 20th century, particularly by the ubiquitous role of the Church under the Francoist dictatorship, Spain has moved away from such a commitment to religion in more recent decades. In 2021, it has a government that openly promotes the idea of the country being a 'pluralistic' nation in terms of faith.

It is, therefore, important to ask what this transformation to a more pluralistic religious community means, both for the Catholic Church and for the wider Spanish society itself.

### *Catholicism as a basis for the state*

Following the defeat of the Second Republic by the fascist forces of Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the Catholic Church was given great power to dictate the moral and social norms of the nation. With this power, the authoritarian state and the Church developed a 'symbiotic relationship' by which the two institutions worked hand in hand to create the official state ideology of 'National Catholicism'.<sup>223</sup>

During the 36 years of dictatorship that followed, Catholicism was given a central role in the design of the education system, leading decisions about curriculum and rituals. The faith also served as the normative basis of many laws, ranging from the prohibition of contraception, abortion, and divorce, to censorship, which banned ideas that were considered to challenge 'ideological and cultural uniformity'.<sup>224</sup>

### *The secularisation of public life*

However, with the death of Franco in 1975 and Spain's transition to democracy with the 1978 Constitution,<sup>225</sup> the last four decades have seen the Church's grip on social and moral norms steadily loosen.

In no small part, this transformation has been underpinned by rapid secularisation. The number of practising believers (in any faith) fell from 50% in 2000 to just 26.6% in 2018.<sup>226</sup> The consequence of this demographic change

is particularly stark when we consider that just one in 10 Spaniards between the ages of 15 and 29 describe themselves to be ‘practising Catholics’.<sup>227</sup>

This rapid pace of secularisation has been matched by a consistent process in which elected progressive governments have sought to implement reforms that often explicitly challenge the normative role of the Church. Perhaps the most notable instance of this was Spain becoming just the fourth country in the world to legalise gay marriage in 2005 despite widespread opposition from Catholic clergy.<sup>228</sup>

This trend has continued until the present day. The current progressive coalition government has recently taken steps to permit euthanasia, clearly defying the beliefs of the Catholic faith. It also further reduced the role of Catholic teaching in the public education system.<sup>229 230</sup>

### *A pluralistic Spain*

However, whilst this dual process of secularisation and changes to law has demonstrated the reduced power of the Catholic Church as a political force, it is important to note that this does not equate to the complete removal of religion as a basis for norms and morals in Spain’s wider society.

The key change is that whilst the Catholic Church may have felt in the past that it held a monopoly over such questions, it is now one voice among many others. The current government has made a clear attempt to promote the idea of Spain as a religiously plural nation.

Evidence of this change was clear at the memorial for deaths from the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike in previous memorials of national tragedies, this memorial was not held at a cathedral but instead in a strictly non-confessional setting. Furthermore, rather than the memorial being led by

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**The current government has made a clear attempt to promote the idea of Spain as a religiously plural nation.**

members of the Catholic clergy, bishops were invited to sit alongside other faith leaders as equals.<sup>231</sup>

The significance of this type of change is reflected in the leadership of Vice-President Carmen Calvo, who over the past two years has conducted meetings with the leaders of minority faiths in Spain, including Protestants, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists. During an online webinar with leaders of NGOs focusing on religious pluralism in May 2021, Calvo commented that adapting Spain’s public institutions to a pluri-religious society “helps us to maintain democracy, to widen it and to pass it on to future generations.”<sup>232</sup>

This message of religious pluralism is not purely a political or ideological belief, but in fact what Calvo has referred to as the ‘new reality’ of Spanish society. Notably, whilst the number of practising Catholics is falling, the number of Muslims in Spain passed 2 million in 2019.<sup>233</sup> Similarly, there has been a rise in the number of Evangelical Christians as well as Orthodox Christians, many of whom are migrants from Romania.<sup>234 235</sup>

To conclude, over the last four decades Spain has witnessed a profound transformation in the relationship between religion and the norms and morals which form the basis of public life. As the nation moves forwards to an increasingly pluralistic reality, the challenge of creating consensus around social and moral questions, without having the normative basis of the Catholic faith, offers both opportunities but also dangers.

— *Freddie Scott*



## Sweden: Normativity, religion, and ethnicity in the school system

There are different normativity bubbles connected to the realm of education in Sweden. For example, they exist in relation to the curriculum for upper secondary school, the debate connected to the existence of confessional education, and the attempts to prohibit the use of religious symbols in schools.

### *Normativity and religion in upper secondary school*

The curriculum for upper secondary school shows that religion is both at the core of what defines normativity, and at the same time, a marker of otherness. According to the curriculum, Swedish education follows the ethical principles found in the Christian tradition and in Western humanism. However, the curriculum stresses that Swedish education is non-confessional.<sup>236</sup> Moreover, the curriculum states that students should gain knowledge of the main strands of the cultural heritage found in Sweden, the Nordic Countries, and in the Western world. On the other hand, when it comes to their understanding of national minorities, students are expected to learn more about the culture, language, history, and religion of said minorities.<sup>237</sup>

The curriculum for upper secondary school creates a remarkable situation. On the one hand, Christian tradition is one of the main ethical pillars in Swedish education, even though the latter is expressively non-confessional. On the other, it is in connection to minorities that students are expected to learn more about religion. Religion becomes, in other words, both a marker of normativity (with Christian ethics being central to the education system) and a marker of otherness (when attached to the study of minorities).

### *Normativity and confessionalism: banning confessional schools*

The entangled relationship between normativity, otherness, and religion becomes all the clearer in the debate about the existence and work of confessional schools. A governmental report from 2020 proposes new regulations for this type of education.<sup>238</sup> Among these, the idea that no confessional schools should be established after 2023 is the one that has led to much debate. On the one hand, such a ban might be against the European convention, which stresses the right to choose an education in line with the person's religious beliefs.<sup>239</sup> On the other, there seems to be a need to recognise the different characteristics of confessional schools instead of generalising their work based on their connection to faith and religion.<sup>240</sup>

Yet another aspect of the debate seems to revolve around the limited number of confessional schools in Sweden. The number of students involved in this type of

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## **[R]eligion does not seem to have any connection to mainstream Sweden.**

education amounts to about 1% of the total number of students in Sweden. This is something that differentiates Sweden from other European countries, where this percentage is usually much higher.<sup>241</sup> Researchers, however, argue that a Protestant worldview is what characterises Swedish public schools, even though a majority of people do not notice it.<sup>242 243</sup> The failure to recognise such religious elements that are part of (public) education in Sweden might strengthen the idea that (confessional) religiosity is connected to a minor group of people choosing faith schools. As a consequence, religion does not seem to have any connection to mainstream Sweden.

### *Normativity and faith expression: the role of religious clothing*

Religious clothing becomes, in some cases, yet another marker of otherness. In 2019, two municipalities introduced a ban against the use of religious veiling in schools, with legal courts suspending the prohibition in 2020 and 2021.<sup>244 245</sup> In 2021, the proposal to ban the use of female veiling in schools and in municipal administrations seems to be based on the idea that they might contribute to the oppression of women.<sup>246</sup> In March 2021, the minister of education received a written question about the ban on female Muslim religious clothing in schools based on this principle.<sup>247</sup> According to the minister, however, the use of religious clothing could be seen as a way of expressing personal faith, with the European convention and the Children’s convention protecting the individual’s right to do so.<sup>248</sup> Once more, religion, and more specifically, religious clothing as an expression of personal faith, is connected to a select group of individuals.

### *Either Swedish or religious?*

In conclusion, the Swedish school system presents two different approaches to religion. On the one hand, Christian ethics play an important role in defining the education system. On the other, public education seems to connect confessionalism and faith expression to ethnic and religious minorities in the country. In the long run, a failure to recognise the role religion plays in the Swedish school system, and

broadly speaking in Swedish society, might lead to a polarised understanding of normativity and religion. In other words, while mainstream Sweden may appear free from confessional elements, faith expressions become a marker of otherness. This may strengthen the opposition between being Swedish and being religious.

— Annamaria Laviola-Svensäter



## Switzerland: Awareness of normativity as a tool for dialogue

### *Switzerland built on different identities*

In 1291, three rural communities signed a protection agreement with each other. Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwald are the first three cantons forming Switzerland. In 1815, Switzerland became the Confederation of 22 cantons as we know it today. The first cantons of Switzerland were German speaking, and when Bern became part of the Confederation, French- and Italian-speaking communities allied with these cantons.<sup>249</sup>

Each canton came into the alliance with their own confessional, social, and ethical norms. The confessional norms in the canton of St-Gallen were Catholic while they were Protestant in the cantons of Zurich and Geneva. In Geneva, for example, Calvin instituted moral rules such as the sense of modesty in clothing.<sup>250</sup> These norms, present in the Confederation, show that normativity was a building block for Switzerland's founding community. Yet, how do Swiss people consider their norms today? Is the Swiss norm often taken into account in political and ethical debates?

### *Normativity as a source of ethical debates*

One recent event portrays the importance of norms in Swiss society and the discussions that surround them. In September 2020, there was a controversy in a middle school in Geneva. The middle school asked that two boys and ten girls wear a white XXL t-shirt provided by the school because their outfit was inappropriate. One girl was wearing high-waisted jeans with a white pullover which revealed her stomach slightly. The mother of this girl filed a complaint because, according to her, her daughter was wearing an appropriate outfit. The t-shirt provided by the school featured the symbol of a Facebook 'like' on it, in addition to the text 'an appropriate outfit'.<sup>251</sup>

Following this event, it was revealed that other similar situations had occurred in other middle schools in French-speaking cantons. Many discussions followed this event, with a major focus of discussions being about the continued sexualisation of women's bodies. Debates about women's clothing are recurrent in Switzerland and mostly in Geneva, as it became a social norm. When Calvin reformed Geneva, he established many rules and morals to make better Christians out of the citizens of Geneva.<sup>252</sup> These rules are not used anymore, but still shape social norms today. The main one is the norm of modesty in social contexts through clothing and ways of being. However, the example of the t-shirt in the middle school reveals how this norm of modesty disagrees with the freedom of expression of young girls today. Because of a religious norm, individuals are limited in their freedom of expression.

Therefore, how can the awareness of our religious norms become relevant for freedom of expression?

### *Academia in Switzerland offers tools for awareness of normativity*

In Switzerland, the faculties of theology are Catholic or Protestant according to their locations. For example, The Chur School of Theology teaches about Catholic confession as Chur is the oldest city in Switzerland and became Catholic in the 4th century.<sup>253</sup> Therefore, the faculties assume part of their historical identity by teaching about the confession that historically formed the canton. However, the tendency to affirm a confessional identity in a faculty is largely discussed. The majority of these faculties propose a program in the first year that is focused on learning the theology of the specific confession. Then the program invites students to learn about other religions by going into History of Religions classes.<sup>254</sup> These bachelor programs depict the debate of normativity in Swiss academia. In the field of religion, students are made aware of their religious and cultural norms, and are taught how to use these norms for a dialogue with other confessions or religions. So can this identity policy, in the field of religion, truly help in the matter of freedom of expression?

### *How norms influence freedom of religion in Switzerland*

In Swiss law, freedom of religion is clearly stated. But in reality, this freedom is not present in all situations. Two past votes revealed the gap between rural and urban communities in Switzerland. In 2010, all Swiss citizens had to vote on the possibility of building minarets in Switzerland. The law on banning the construction of new minarets passed with a small majority of people from German-speaking rural communities.<sup>255</sup> The same event happened in 2020 with the vote on banning the wearing of burqas in public space.<sup>256</sup> In September 2021, the Swiss population will vote on the matter of 'marriage for all'.<sup>257</sup> But will a religious norm, which later became a Swiss cultural norm, once again not permit freedom of religion?

### Votes revealing the gap between Swiss rural and urban communities



Banning the construction of new minarets



Banning burqas in public space



Marriage for all

### *Awareness of normativity for freedom of expression*

These examples show how a few cultural norms that originate from the 16th-century theological discourse in Switzerland are still impacting Swiss society in the present day. An attachment to some Christian moral values and the practice of modesty influence daily decisions in Switzerland and seem to contradict with freedom of expression.

However, if used differently, these norms have the potential to harmonise freedom of religion with freedom of expression. These events happened due to a lack of awareness of the different religious norms that were included in the debate. In the case of the vote on minarets and the burqa, rural communities are not often in dialogue with people of other religions. Thus, they are not aware of Swiss Muslims' cultural norms. Moreover, the t-shirt incident shows that the representatives of education in Geneva are often not aware that their cultural norm comes from Calvin's time. In Switzerland, theological faculties have grasped this issue of misuse of normativity.<sup>258</sup> Thus, they try to teach about these norms in order to produce a fruitful dialogue with other religions.<sup>259</sup>

These religious norms, which later became social norms, are significant for dialogue as they portray the identity of the people in dialogue. Freedom of religion starts with becoming aware of norms present in different religions. Freedom of expression would also be more respected through this awareness, as freedom of religion and freedom of expression are interconnected due to this historical shift from religious norms to social norms. In conclusion, our awareness of our normativity can be used as a tool for dialogue to harmonise freedom of religion with freedom of expression in Switzerland.

— Emma Van Dorp

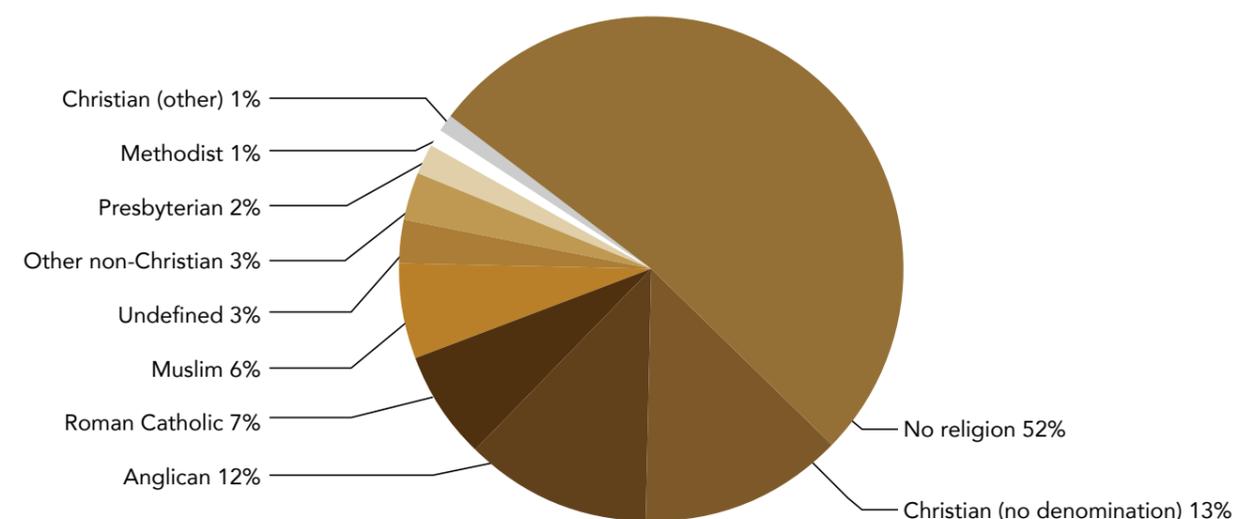


## United Kingdom: Navigating religious freedoms within a secularising society

### *Religious identity within the United Kingdom*

The United Kingdom (UK) differs from many of its European peers as it is one of the few nations to have a state religion, Anglicanism.<sup>260</sup> Despite the established status of the Church of England, the vast majority of the British populace do not consider themselves members. In fact, studies suggest around as little as 12% of the British population identify as Anglican.<sup>261</sup> Overall, 38-59% of Brits identify as some denomination of Christianity, whereas 25-52% profess no religion at all.<sup>262 263</sup>

Religious identity in the UK (2018)



Additionally, some argue that ‘identifying’ as one religion differs from actual religious participation. If statistics on regular church attendance are examined, the numbers drop further, with reports of about 5% of the British population attending church in 2015.<sup>264 265</sup> For comparison’s sake, the third-largest religious identification, besides Christian and ‘no religion’, is Muslim, with around 5% of the population identifying thusly in 2011.<sup>266</sup>

### *Scottish hate crime bill controversy*

Given the growing lack of religious affiliation in the UK, normativity has become increasingly more secular and political. This has led, in some situations, to clashes between the government and religious institutions.

One such struggle recently arose in the form of Scotland’s Hate Crime and Public Order Bill. The bill, designed to modernise Scotland’s hate crime laws, would scrap unnecessary laws, such as antiquated rules that criminalised blasphemy.<sup>267</sup> Other components, however, created new measures for handling hate speech, which swiftly generated controversy over freedom of speech and religion. One section of the bill would have penalised the possession of “threatening, abusive, or insulting material with a view to communicating the material to another person.”<sup>268</sup> Another would have criminalised “stirring up hatred,” regardless of authorial or speaker intent, thereby placing restrictions on inflammatory material.<sup>269</sup>

A widespread coalition from groups like the National Secular Society and the Network of Sikh Organisations criticised the law.<sup>270</sup> The Catholic Church warned that those who opposed gay marriage or increased transgender rights on religious grounds could be prosecuted.<sup>271 272</sup> The Bishops’ Conference of Scotland feared that the restrictions on inflammatory writings could be interpreted to cover religious texts, like the Bible.<sup>273</sup>

Not all groups united in opposition, though. Muslim Engagement and Development and the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) agreed with the Scottish government asserting that, despite imperfections, the bill ought to be passed. Acknowledging some of the aforementioned concerns, SCoJeC called for increased protections for religious beliefs, noting that some religious communities, like Jews and Sikhs, would be covered under ethnic protections, but that such protections should extend to members of all religions.<sup>274 275 276</sup>

Ultimately, several of the controversial elements were removed from the bill by the time it passed into law in March 2021.<sup>277</sup> That said, concerns, particularly around freedom of expression, still exist. The debate over the bill illustrates the delicate balance in the UK amongst freedom of expression, religious beliefs, and ethnic and religious minorities, an area likely to see continued debate in the years to come.

### *Gay conversation therapy controversy*

A good illustration of the tension surrounding normativity in the UK has been the practice of so-called ‘gay conversion therapy’. Such ‘therapy’ is aimed at people who exhibit sexual attraction towards members of their own sex, and seeks to change

them to a heterosexual orientation.<sup>278</sup> ‘Treatment’ often involves a combination of psychological, spiritual, and physical interventions.<sup>279</sup>

A 2018 survey of LGBTQ+ people in Britain found that conversion therapy is most commonly offered by some faith communities, and is usually based upon theological reasoning.<sup>280</sup> Gay conversion therapy is often justified by asserting that homosexual tendencies arise because of sinful desires or due to the influence of Satan. Homosexuality is therefore seen as an illusion, a (temporary) distortion of one’s true human nature.<sup>281</sup> Conservative brands of many religions have historically understood sex to be legitimate only as a means for procreation, and therefore consider gay sex to be illegitimate.<sup>282</sup>

The LGBTQ+ community, medical practitioners, and human rights advocates all condemn the practice. According to them, it is a breach of the individual’s right to self-determination and leads to a host of negative health impacts.<sup>283</sup> It also relies upon the premise that it is normative to engage in sexual activity only with those of the opposite sex.

However, some say that the right to religious freedom is being compromised by a left-wing neo-liberal ideology that wishes to impose its own normative secular values upon everyone.<sup>284</sup> A ban on conversion therapy would be discriminatory to faith communities and may lead to the practice being forced underground.<sup>285</sup>

So far, Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government has been slow to deliver the promised ban on conversion therapy.<sup>286</sup> Part of the bind he finds himself in is due to competing (and so far irreconcilable) normativities.

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[C]onversion therapy is most commonly offered by some faith communities.

### *A dangerous bargain? State-funded and -regulated faith schools*

Normativity in education is an inescapable phenomenon as much as normativity in funding and legal requirements is. The UK has ‘faith schools’ that receive funding from the state. These schools sit at the intersection of several forms of normativity.

While ‘faith schools’ are often lumped together, they represent many different communities. In 2014, in England, among the 6,210 state-funded faith primary schools, 70.77% were affiliated with the Church of England, 26.45% Roman Catholic, 0.58% Jewish, 0.14% Muslim, and 0.08% Sikh.<sup>287</sup> Among the 628 state-funded faith secondary schools, 33.54% are Church of England, 50.78% Roman Catholic, 1.88% Jewish, 1.41% Muslim, and 0.47% Sikh. The imbalance may constitute a kind of normativity: Christian predominance. However, a withdrawal of support for faith schools would affect not only Christian schools, but disproportionately religious minority schools.

Education is a form of cultural normativity, determining what is taught, how it is taught, and to whom it is taught. All state-funded - including non-faith - schools legally must offer religious education of some kind, though students’ participation is non-obligatory.<sup>288</sup> State-funded faith schools have more control over curriculum, but funds can influence what can be taught and how.

The level of legal normativity enforced on faith schools varies with their types, from significant control in ‘voluntary controlled schools’ (most control is ceded to the local council) to very little in ‘academies’ (they charge no fees but operate virtually independently).<sup>289 290 291 292</sup>

The most controversy surrounds social capital’s normativity, i.e. who can go to faith schools. Faith schools can choose students on the basis of their family’s religious affiliation and participation, though not all do.<sup>293 294</sup> Yet social normativity is also involved with questions of who gets to run the school, with regulations requiring faith schools to surrender some autonomy in governance to get funds.<sup>295 296</sup>

Faith schools demonstrate rival normativities. Yet, the diversity of school types and local situations affect which normativity takes precedence. Both religion and the state could be said to have made a dangerous bargain: religion for letting the government meddle in their education, or the government for letting religion do the same.

### *Learning from these case studies in UK normativity*

The religious and political landscape of the UK is diverse. Complex religious and non-religious normativities present within UK society are compounded by the UK’s several devolved legislatures.

All societies must implement normativities, but normativities at the intersection of religious and political life have the potential to be weaponised in either direction. Perhaps in the above cases, these rival normativities will not be reconcilable. However, they show that the first step forward is for communities holding rival normativities to seek to remove causes for fear of one another and increase causes for trust.



## Conclusion

### *Part 1: Differing normativities*

Once we have read this dossier, we can draw up the following conclusion. It is possible to identify three common trends in the relationship between religion and normativity among different countries in Europe. The first trend to be analysed is the *strong presence of religious normativity*. Second, the *modern creation of religious normativity* will be analysed. Finally, we will discuss the *decline of religious normativity* occurring in some European countries.

#### *The strong presence of religious normativity*

The first trend that is visible across Europe is the historical and persistently strong presence of religious normativity in several European countries.

This strong presence can manifest itself as the dominance of one religious tradition. Such is the case when looking at the role of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Even though Ireland is made up of many different religions, when it comes to religion, the norm has been defined by a predominantly Catholic identity.<sup>297</sup> After the creation of the modern Irish Republic in 1922, Catholicism became synonymous with Irishness and the Catholic Church established significant influence over morality in the nation.<sup>298</sup> Even though the country has undergone many landmark changes on religious and social issues from the mid-20th century onwards, and religiosity has declined somewhat, a symbiotic relationship between the Church and politics remains and many Irish citizens still support the Church. Therefore, in the case of Ireland, religious, or more specifically Catholic, normativity may have shifted but it has not disappeared.

In the Netherlands, while not so apparent, the historic normativity of one religious tradition has had a detrimental impact on other minority religious communities in the present. Even though the Netherlands is a secular country, Christianity still remains the religious norm. In the past, conversion to Christianity was part and parcel of Dutch colonial rule.<sup>299</sup> Due to this, the 'othering' of non-Christian religious minorities occurred, creating binary differences between 'us' and 'them'.<sup>300</sup> In the modern day, this 'othering' is seen in the discrimination of Dutch Muslims.<sup>301</sup> Therefore, in the Netherlands, the legacy of Christian normativity is still being felt and influences the treatment of other religious minorities.

### *Modern creation of religious normativity*

The next trend that can be seen in several countries is how normativity has gone from being dominated by political ideology for decades to reverting back to being shaped by religious authority.

Croatia, Russia, and Serbia all share similar histories when it comes to the relationship between religion and normativity. From the end of the Second World War to the early 1990s, Croatia and Serbia (and Russia too from 1917-1991) were under communist rule. The Communist Party held authority over all social and moral issues in each country. Religious communities were marginalised and shunned. For example, in Croatia, the Roman Catholic Faculty of Theology was expelled from the University of Zagreb in 1952.<sup>302</sup>

However, after the end of communist rule, all three countries saw a revival of religiosity — Russian Orthodoxy in Russia, the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbia. The respective churches of each country have gained significant influence over aspects of society such as education, politics, and moral issues. For example, in Croatia, the Roman Catholic Church has previously called for a ban on abortion. Therefore, in Croatia, Russia, and Serbia, communist normativity has been replaced by religious normativity.

### *Decline of religious normativity*

The final trend we have identified is the decline of religious normativity which, to varying degrees, can be seen in a few European countries.

Compared to the histories of the former communist countries discussed in this dossier, the opposite trajectory occurred in Spain. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the Catholic Church was given significant power to dictate the moral and social norms of the nation. Under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, the official state ideology of ‘National Catholicism’ was created and gave a name to the relationship between the authoritarian state and the Church.<sup>303</sup> However, after the end of Franco’s dictatorship in 1975, the Church’s influence over societal norms in Spain began to decline. Due to various factors, including rapid secularisation,<sup>304</sup> the Catholic Church no longer holds a monopoly over questions of morality but instead is one voice alongside other religious traditions.<sup>305</sup>

In the UK, a decline in religious normativity has also occurred. In comparison to other European countries, the UK is one of the few nations to have a state religion, Anglicanism. Historically, the Church of England has played an important role in defining the morals of British society. However, in recent studies it has been revealed that 25 to 52% of the British population now profess no religion at all.<sup>306 307</sup> Alongside a move to a more secular identity of the nation, certain events, such as the debates over gay conversion therapy<sup>308</sup> or faith schools,<sup>309</sup> have led to tensions around normativity and religion in the UK. One result of such debates has been an overall weakening of the influence of religious normativity.

Therefore, it has emerged from this dossier that the role of religious normativity in different European countries is informed by constantly shifting political and social

climates. Whether it be the collapse of a political regime or the influence of ideological movements, religious normativity in Europe is not static but subject to change.

## *Part 2: Challenges and opportunities*

### *The creation of ‘bubbles’*

The consequences of these three major trends go beyond changes in the position of religion within a modern, post-war Europe. Whether by reinstating, reinforcing, or relegating religion, European countries have reshaped their normativity to reshape their identities, institutions, and social development.

As a result, two consequences stand out in particular. Firstly, will shifts in normativity make it easier for people to form and remain inside the ‘bubbles’ of their particular community? Secondly, will remaining in these bubbles make it more difficult to understand each other and easier to engage in conflict with one another?

The key concern then is the future of pluralism in Europe. It remains to be seen whether the appearance of bubbles will lead to deep religious or political strife, exclusive identities, and the breakdown of a wider society.

Other questions are raised, such as whether the dominance of the Catholic Church in Ireland or Christianity in the Netherlands represents an innocent bubble or one that is much more strident. Would it lead to the exclusion of certain communities that are not part of the dominant religion, such as LGBTQ+ in Ireland or Muslims in the Netherlands? As American sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer warns, the use of a dominant religion to exclude others has been a significant global phenomenon over the past 30 years. Europe, it can be concluded, is not an exception to this phenomenon.

### *Nationalism and bubbles*

The exclusivity that bubbles may carry with them is also visible in cases where religious pluralism or identity have declined in the face of a standardising nationalism.<sup>311</sup> In France, for example, the emphasis on everyone identifying with the Republic has meant the demonisation of certain people within French society. The public debate around whether the Instagrammer Mila was freely expressing her views on Islam or hating Muslims led to an equally public contest between norms of freedom of religion on the one hand and the norms of freedom of expression on the other. In order to maintain its standardising nationalism, the French government transformed the slain history teacher Samuel Paty into a protector of freedom of expression while withdrawing any public support for Mila. But whether France’s coveted national cohesion with its sizable Muslim minority – the largest in Europe – survived intact remains ambiguous, just as the French government’s public position on the entire debate.

### *Bridges between bubbles*

Developments around religious education (RE) in countries like Germany also highlight how public institutions are attempting to support pluralism by contesting existing bubbles. Public discourse is increasingly challenging the choice of Protestant or Catholic denominational RE in German schools. It is instead advocating teaching religious competence so that the diversity of religious communities can live together in the country more easily. If the competence to participate in a religion as an individual and to communicate about religion as a part of society is created by RE, then the meaningful integration of communities within a pluralistic society may well be a future possibility.

In addition to RE, another key way to build bridges between bubbles appears to be faith awareness and interfaith dialogue. The case of Switzerland highlights this. While it does not follow the categorical markers of traditional religiosity, its influence on national identity reveals a “liminal religiosity” where religion has a “fuzzy” existence in everyday life.<sup>312</sup> Becoming aware of the influence of this liminal religiosity, with its specifically Christian nature, helps explain why Swiss citizens supported bans on Muslim practices in the public, such as on the construction of new minarets in 2010 or on the wearing of the burqa in public spaces in 2020.

The majority of faculties of theology in Switzerland are responding to this influence by proposing programs that invite students to learn about other religions. Can this faith awareness be scaled up beyond the academy to society itself, to make citizens aware of their religious norms and use this awareness to engage with other confessions or religions? Moreover, can this engagement successfully deploy dialogue between different faiths, in this case between Christianity and Islam in Switzerland? Many Christians, Bethel University professors Marion Larson and Sara Shady note, worry that “engaging in interfaith dialogue will require watering down their faith and accepting other religions as equally true.”<sup>313</sup>

Using religious competence or faith awareness and interfaith dialogue are proposals to turn our faith bubbles into bridges of inclusion and pluralism. But Jürgensmeyer’s warning still persists. Countries across Europe have increasingly used and elevated faith bubbles to take aggressive measures of nationalism. Countries like Russia have connected religion and nationality and used this connection as a “focal point of the populist upsurge” being witnessed across central and eastern Europe. As a result, in Russia, the rise in religious nationalism – driven by both the Orthodox Church and Putin’s Kremlin – has meant a similar rise in the “rates of particularism, xenophobia, and social intolerance”<sup>314</sup> in the country.

## *Part 3: What the future holds for Europe*

With these trends and their consequences, it is clear that religion will continue to play a significant role in shaping normativity across Europe. This role may be ambivalent and diverse, shaping morality and ethics or catalysing cohesion and conflict in different ways in different countries. But this does not mean that religion is in jeopardy. It is not. What is at stake is pluralism.

As the dossier showed, the future of pluralism becomes most uncertain in contexts where minorities or social issues are involved. The bans on Muslim public life in France and the Netherlands came out as key examples in the dossier. So did the debates around abortion in Croatia and LGBTQ+ in Ireland. All of these examples showed that religion is alive and well, and influential whether directly or indirectly.

This is not to say that religion will solely determine the future of pluralism in Europe. Across the dossier, nationalism emerged as a key determinant. Yet again, not on its own but rather in deep engagement with religion. Across all the countries considered in the dossier, the interaction of nationalism and religion was undeniable. This will play out across Europe in the future, either as a tension or as an opportunity, including in France, Germany, Ireland, Switzerland, and Russia.

One key development in relation to religion that may support the future of pluralism is the increasingly diverse religious character of Europe. While in some countries, such as France, this has led to opposition with religious minorities, in other countries, such as Germany, it has led to attempts at more plural interactions with religious minorities.

Religion, therefore, will be both a source of future tension and opportunity for pluralism in Europe.

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