

RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATIONS IN WESTERN EUROPE IN THE GLOBALIZATION CONTEXT

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Abstract: Worldwide there is a transformation of religion, professional studies supporting the existence of religious vitality in most countries of the modern world. In this global trend of increased religiosity, religious life of Western Europe becomes an exception, registering a decline of religious beliefs and practices, but also a gradual decrease of the influence of faith institutions both individually and socially. Therefore, this paper aims to understand the current religious landscape of Western Europe, both by identifying the beliefs, values and religious behaviors as well as by establishing the role of the globalization process.

Keywords: religion, globalization, Western Europe, religious decline, religiosity

Globalization is a unitary process where experience of daily life becomes standardized in the whole world. Because it is a phenomenon that has many connotations it hasn't been identified a definition of globalization in a universally accepted and definitive form. The reason is rooted in the fact that globalization includes a multitude of complex processes with a dynamic variable, covering different areas of a society (Niță 2013, 38). Thus, in general, the process may be defined as the increase of global connectivity and interdependence in the cultural, economic, social, political, technological and ecological areas.

At European level, globalization has a strong impact on all aspects of life and society, including religion. Thus, on the one hand, the process create new feeds of religious changes that talk about a culture of religious pluralism supporting religious vitality, building virtual communities of believers that allow the dissemination of religious ideas, spreading traditions, practices and religious values. In fact, the process itself contributes fundamentally to the religious revitalization by spreading religious teachings and strengthening the connections between believers and church.

On the other hand, researchers note that with the blurring of geographical boundaries, that deterritorialization as well as the desire to standardize religious systems, religions are becoming more and more competitive and seek to change their organization structures according with market requirements. Considering themselves both incompatible with the values promoted by globalization (rationalism, consumerism, liberalization) as well as those supported by other religions they are in contact with, they have taken steps to protect themselves from the bad influence of the globalization process. Moreover, with the development of technology and its mass media as well as the free flow of information, terrorist groups have used religion as a tool to fulfill their political objectives.

In fact, understanding the current state of religion in Europe depends on the focus on “the legacies of the past, in particular the role of historical churches in shaping European culture, the awareness that these churches still have a place at certain times in the life of modern Europeans, even if they are no longer able to discipline beliefs and the behavior of the vast majority of the population”(Davie 2006, 23).

In the study “Social values, Science and Technology” made by the European Commission it is outlined the spiritual composition and diverse nature of Europe, mentioning some key trends: countries with strong secular tradition that departs from religion in its traditional form, countries with traditional religious beliefs where the Church or religious institutions have always been strong and countries where the tendency is to develop a new type of religion characterized by the belief that “there is a sort of spirit or life force”. Therefore, the research results indicate a continent divided between secular Europe, where religion no longer has a decisive role in the construction and legitimation of individual and social identity, and a Europe dominated by a revival of religion.

In this context, how can we describe the religious life of Western Europe under the influence of the globalization process?

Western Europe is divided by language, cultural, religious, political barriers, which make this part of the continent in a non-homogenous unit. It is considered a general model of the completely modernized and therefore globalized society, with a number of features that are acquired during the development of these processes:

- ✓ creation of a free labor market, division of labor by specialization of functions;
- ✓ increase of productivity and market development due to industrialization;
- ✓ technology development of production and distribution of goods;
- ✓ organization of modern institutions by rules and regulations where their legitimacy derives from scientific discoveries;
- ✓ increase of the training level and development of mass media communication;
- ✓ populations become more urban and socially and geographically mobile;
- ✓ value reorientation by replacing traditional values with modern one (at religious level, values and religious beliefs have been marginalized).

Therefore, in order to highlight the transformations of religious life in Western Europe under the influence of the globalization process, it was used the empirical information obtained from field research carried out at European level, by the European Values Study (a transnational and longitudinal program to investigate the fundamental values of man and an important information basis to investigate the ideas, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values and opinions of citizens in European countries). By processing the data gathered for all research waves during 1981-2010, obtained as a SPSS model (*EVS Longitudinal data file* that comprises 49 countries/regions and is built from the data updated for the four research waves), the following aspects could be analyzed: religious affiliation, church and religious services attendance, assessing the role of religion and divinity in people’s lives, private religious behavior of individuals (prayer), degree of religious involvement, analysis of traditional religious values and beliefs (such as faith in God, Hell, Heaven, sin, life after death, angels, devils, etc.).

The countries included in the analysis were taken by dividing the member states of the United Nations in five regional geopolitical groups. Thus, in the regional group „Western Europe and other states” were enclosed 19 countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Great Britain, Norway, Holland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. The nations excluded from the analysis were Andorra, Australia, Canada, Israel, Lichtenstein, Monaco, New Zealand, San Marino, the United States of America. It is also necessary to mention that in the studies

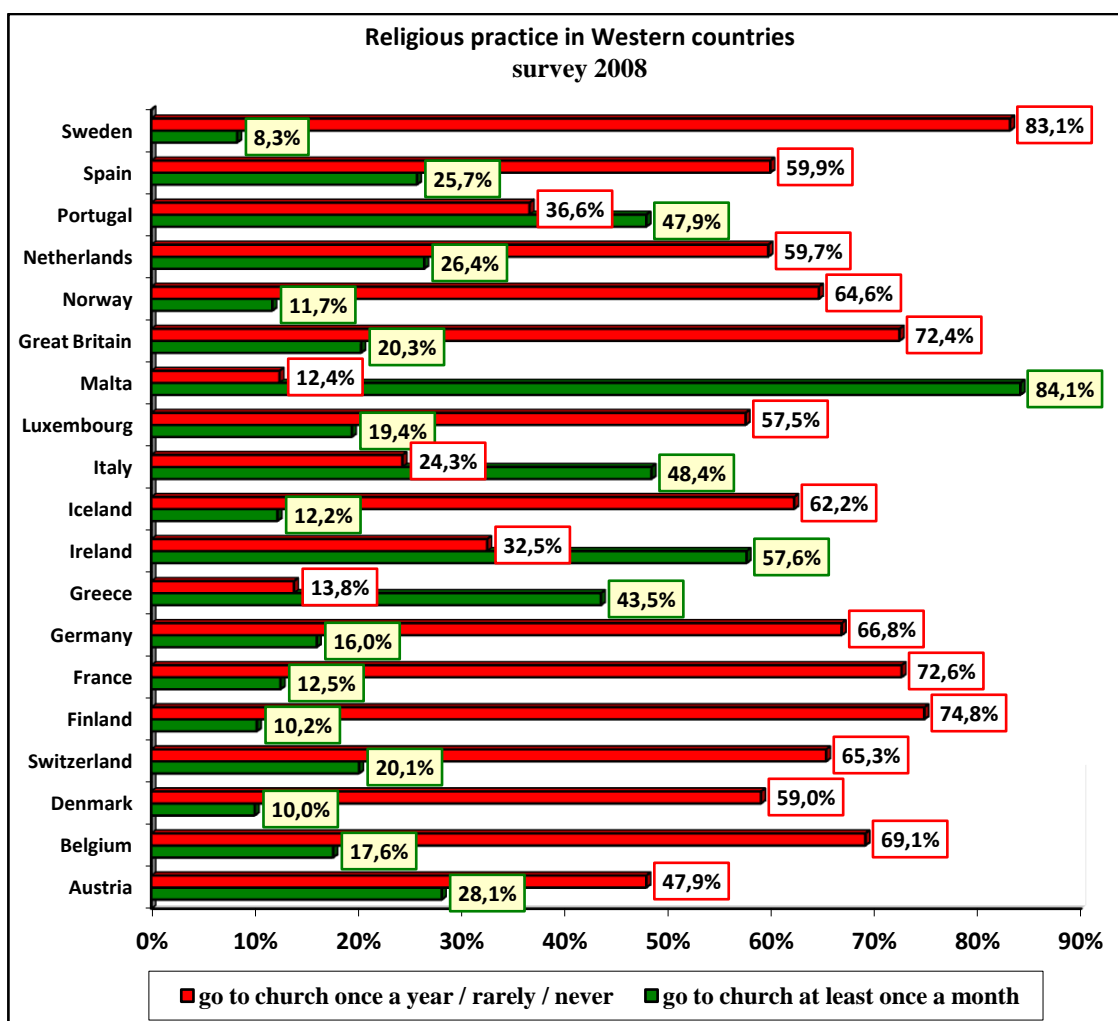
regarding European religious life, Eastern Germany was always included in Eastern Europe. Yet, with the reunification of Germany, Eastern Europe has lost Eastern Germany as a member and therefore we will include Germany as country part of Western Europe.

The research results indicate an erosion of religious practices and a gradual decrease of the influence of faith institutions both individually and socially. Church was excluded from the political, economic and social aspects, limiting its speech to “a number of issues that are peripheral to the future development of society, the major debate issues being generally determined by rational discourse”(Halman and Riis 2003, 2).

Also, to guarantee religious freedom in Europe, namely the right of each individual to choose their own religion and to build their own religious vision, caused a destabilization of the church and a decrease in religious practice. Besides the member recruitment crisis faced by the religious organizations, there is a withdrawal of religious beliefs from people's life and also a replacement of ethical norms required by religion, with a moral individual conscience. Starting from these ideas, Peter Berger defines Western Europe as the single geo-cultural area in which to apply the ideal-typical model of secularization, in contrast to the rest of the world, including the United States of America (Hervieu-Léger 2001, 116). Models of religious decline which comprise the participation, belief and affiliation have been reported by Norris and Inglehart (*Sacred and secular. Religion and politics worldwide*, 2004), Voas and Crockett, Andrew Greeley (using data from the International Social Survey Programme, 2002) Grace Davie (*Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, 2002).

Last wave of the European Values Study indicates a decline in religiosity in Western Europe, the main religious orientations consisting of patterns of unbelief: *religious behavior in a weak form* (low public and private practice), *religious non-affiliation*, *alternative spiritualities*, *religious indifference* and *atheism*.

The figures from 2008 on church attendance indicate a high degree of secularization among countries in Western Europe, the Protestant ones having slightly higher percentages. Most people in Protestant countries, particularly in Scandinavia, fall into the category of “marginal members”, who although has religious affiliation, they rarely go to church. Thus, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Island, Germany, Great Britain register values up to 59% among people who claim to go to church once a year/rarely/never, while Catholic countries- Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain- present elevated values among those who go at least once a month to church. Among the countries included in the analysis, the biggest monthly percentage of church attendance is observed in four Catholic countries (Malta, Ireland, Italy, Portugal) and an Orthodox one (Greece).



Constant participation, understood as weekly church attendance, has registered a decline in fifteen countries, which proved statistically significant in seven of them. Exceptions were Greece, the only country that has had an upward trend, and Iceland which has kept the same percentage over the years. In Finland, weekly church attendance increased between 1990 and 1999, reaching eventually to record a rate of 4,3 % in the latest wave of research from 2008 to 2010.

Predominantly Catholic countries have had the largest decrease among the population that goes to church, especially among nations with the highest levels of religiosity, such as Spain, Belgium and Ireland.

Trends in religious participation between 1981 and 2008 (people who go to church at least once a week)					
Countries		1981-1984	1990-1993	1999-2001	2008-2010
1.	Austria	0.0%	25.9%	22.8%	15.9%
2.	Belgium	30.0%	26.6%	18.7%	10.0%
3.	Denmark	2.8%	2.5%	2.7%	2.6%
4.	Switzerland	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	10.2%
5.	Finland	0.0%	3.8%	5.0%	4.3%

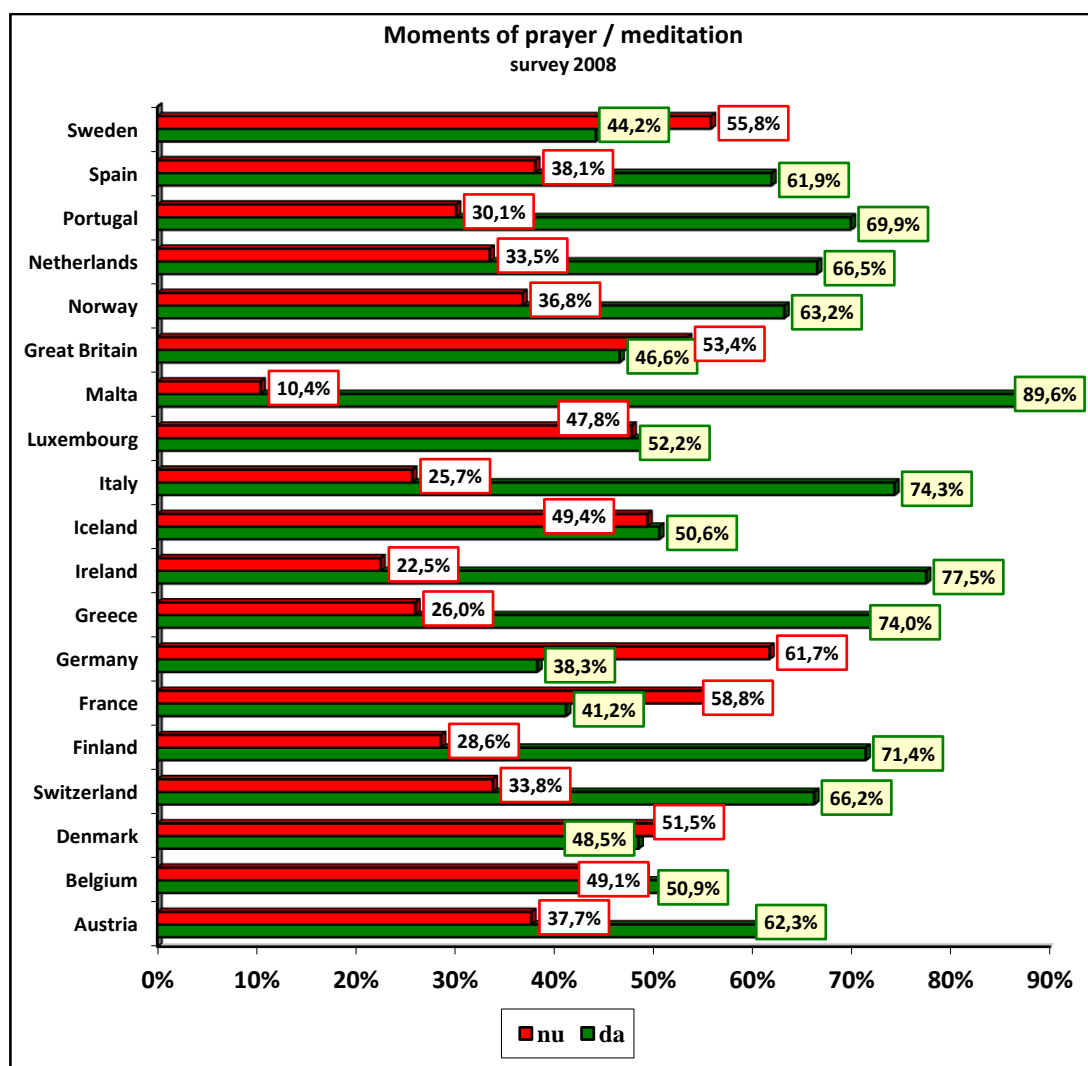
6.	France	10.7%	10.2%	7.6%	6.7%
7.	Germany	0.0%	16.1%	11.0%	6.4%
8.	Greece	0.0%	0.0%	14.0%	21.0%
9.	Ireland	0.0%	80.8%	65.4%	44.3%
10.	Iceland	2.3%	2.4%	2.4%	2.4%
11.	Italy	32.4%	37.9%	40.4%	32.0%
12.	Luxembourg	0.0%	0.0%	20.1%	10.5%
13.	Malta	92.4%	88.0%	82.8%	80.2%
14.	Great Britain	13.4%	14.2%	14.5%	13.3%
15.	Norway	5.6%	5.1%	0.0%	5.3%
16.	Netherlands	25.1%	20.2%	13.9%	16.9%
17.	Portugal	0.0%	39.1%	37.4%	32.3%
18.	Spain	40.1%	30.2%	25.5%	18.5%
19.	Sweden	5.7%	4.3%	3.8%	4.9%

In Western European countries, religious institution is no longer seen as a moral force, individually becoming a single moral authority. The role of the church is reduced to the status of “advisor” in certain moral issues, without having its authority accepted. That does not mean that “churches have totally lost their meaning as religious identity markers, but that they can operate indirectly or through delegate -vicariously religion”(Davie 2006, 24).

All Western European countries indicate trends of institutional deregulation of religion because alternative organizations have taken over the main areas of society: educational, medical, social (e.g., caring for people, schooling of children, provision of health services, security, etc.). Therefore, the role of religious institutions has weakened, the services by them being gradually replaced by the public ones, of the state sector.

The public perception of the various functions and competences of the religious authorities was tested by questions aiming the ability of the church to offer appropriate answers to the spiritual needs, social issues and those related to the family life of the respondents. Thus, between 1981 and 2010, in seven Western European countries, such as Austria, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Malta, Norway and Spain, it is noticed a steady decline in all three lines of research. Although there is still a spiritual role of the church, religious institutions have dramatically diminished their social role and family counseling. It is therefore apparent that in thirteen countries, the church has diminished its role of providing solutions to problems about family life, while in eleven nations it has lost its authority to solve social problems.

Other individual forms of participation are often regarded as equally or even more important than the collective ones, like for example the moments of prayer or meditation. Overall, more than half of the nations say they have had “moments of prayer or meditation”. Catholic and Orthodox countries, due to their high attachment to traditional religious dogmas and rituals, engaged in this kind of religious practice in a higher percentage than the Protestant ones.



Many Western Europeans have ceased to pray, the overall level of disengagement in private practice has advanced the most in France, Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Great Britain, Belgium, Norway. In these countries, over 45 % of the respondents claim that they “never” pray, while high proportions (over 20 %) say they pray “a few times a year” or “rarely”.

The number of those who pray daily changed during 1999-2010, observing a pronounced disinterest of the population towards prayer. The decline is more abrupt in Belgium, Iceland and Austria, while seven societies live modest erosions: Italy, Ireland, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg and Holland. During this period, only four societies have registered a reversal of the decline: France, Greece, Malta and Great Britain.

Trends in prayer during the period 1999-2008

		1999-2001		2008-2010	
No.	Countries	Every day	Never	Every day	Never
1.	Austria	20.7%	20.0%	13.9%	24.9%
2.	Belgia	19.8%	38.7%	11.7%	46.6%
3.	Danemarca	12.2%	51.8%	10.7%	49.3%

4.	Elvetia	0.0%	0.0%	23.8%	28.8%
5.	Finlanda	21.2%	22.3%	17.8%	28.8%
6.	Franta	9.4%	55.9%	10.4%	55.1%
7.	Germania	10.0%	47.3%	8.1%	52.0%
8.	Grecia	35.3%	14.6%	45.0%	12.0%
9.	Irlanda	50.5%	7.0%	45.3%	10.6%
10.	Islanda	23.6%	11.8%	17.4%	23.9%
11.	Italia	37.9%	12.9%	37.1%	16.5%
12.	Luxemburg	14.6%	35.1%	11.7%	41.6%
13.	Malta	63.9%	2.8%	65.3%	2.2%
14.	Marea Britanie	15.6%	47.8%	17.4%	47.5%
15.	Norvegia	0.0%	0.0%	11.2%	45.0%
16.	Olanda	21.4%	49.6%	26.4%	43.1%
17.	Portugalia	0.0%	0.0%	34.2%	16.4%
18.	Spania	22.1%	26.5%	25.6%	31.3%
19.	Suedia	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	54.8%

In the last three decades, traditional religious beliefs and values illustrate a rather mixed picture than a constant decline. The statistics for Western European countries present countries where all beliefs have decreased, in others remained relatively unchanged, while in certain countries only a few have decreased and others have increased.

People who believe in...							
<i>survey 2008</i>							
No.	Countries	God	Life after death	Hell	Heaven	Sin	Reincarnation
1.	Austria	79.6%	61.3%	26.9	40.7%	56.9%	28.8%
2.	Belgium	60.4%	42.5%	17.1	34.4%	43.5%	17.5%
3.	Denmark	63.6%	36.4%	9.0%	19.3%	21.3%	18.4%
4.	Switzerland	75.7%	52.5%	19.9	43.4%	49.9%	28.0%
5.	Finland	69.6%	49.6%	23.6	45.6%	54.1%	24.7%
6.	France	54.1%	42.7%	16.9	32.8%	40.4%	22.6%
7.	Germany	47.1%	31.2%	13.6	25.5%	35.8%	18.4%
8.	Greece	94.2%	60.0%	54.6	58.7%	80.5%	17.4%
9.	Ireland	91.8%	74.2%	52.9	79.8%	78.0%	30.5%
10.	Iceland	72.5%	70.6%	17.5	47.2%	60.6%	36.2%
11.	Italy	90.2%	71.2%	51.5	61.9%	57.2%	19.2%
12.	Luxembourg	65.9%	47.7%	19.5	28.5%	39.8%	26.1%
13.	Malta	98.9%	89.1%	86.7	91.5%	93.9%	19.5%
14.	Great Britain	67.7%	54.7%	33.0	54.3%	64.4%	27.8%

15.	Norway	54.5%	45.8%	15.5	38.4%	30.7%	18.4%
16.	Netherlands	61.4%	51.3%	14.8	40.6%	40.7%	18.8%
17.	Portugal	90.6%	50.7%	42.3	55.3%	69.8%	31.4%
18.	Spain	78.0%	49.9%	31.4	47.4%	48.9%	23.1%
19.	Sweden	48.0%	45.6%	8.9%	24.7%	17.3%	22.6%

During the period 2008-2010, religiosity varies notably from country to country, the percentages indicating a decrease in most Western countries. Nevertheless, the highest values were recorded in the basic beliefs of the religion, namely, faith in God, sin, life after death. For example, nine out of ten people express their faith in God, the highest levels are found in Malta, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Italy. On the other hand, the decline in the fundamental beliefs of religion was clearer in Germany, Sweden, France and Norway. Overall most of these societies have proved skeptical about other metaphysical doctrines, including the belief in reincarnation, Heaven and Hell, the existence of a soul.

The importance of religion has had a downward trend in most Western European countries, the only notable exception being Greece. The lowest points were observed in Protestant countries such as Germany, Sweden and Denmark, while in the Catholic ones, there were observed higher percentages of people seeing religion as “very important”.

The European Value Study results highlight profound differences between Western European societies on identifying as religious people. For the most part, in 14 of 19 countries people say they are religious, while the rest of the nations record percentages below 49 % for the same question. With a percentage of 87.6 %, Greece has the highest number of religious people, followed by two predominantly Catholic countries Italy (85,1 %) and Portugal (83,1 %). Protestant countries are the exception, most of them have the lowest percentages.

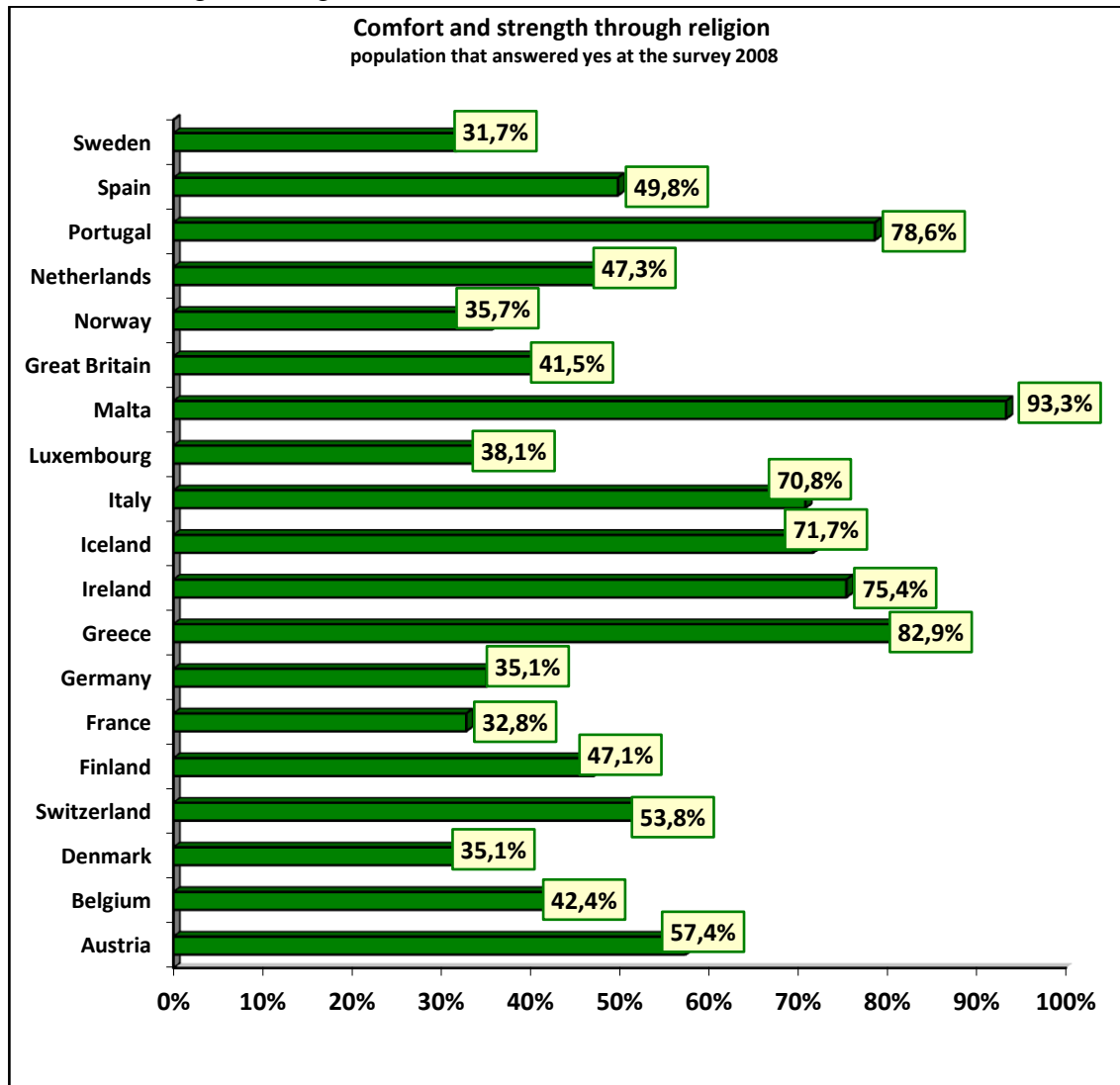
In general, during 1990 and 2010, self-identification as religious person has changed, only four countries (Greece, Italy, Netherlands and Portugal) had an upward trend, the rest being in decline. However, the number of countries that have answered “yes” to the question “Are you a religious person?” almost doubled by 2001, following afterwards a downward trend.

The largest number of convinced atheists is in France, followed at a small distance by Germany and then Sweden. Instead, Malta, Greece and Ireland have checked the lowest values, being found them among the countries with a majority of the population that continues to perceive itself as religious. Greece and Italy have the largest number of individuals who declare themselves religious people, while Sweden, Germany and Norway have the highest levels of religious neutrality.

Also, respondents have different perceptions when it comes to the role of religion in everyday life. Starting with a wide margin - 93,3 % to 32,8 % - mostly Catholic countries declare religion as a source of strength and comfort. The highest values are observed in Malta, Portugal, Ireland, Italy, while France, Luxembourg and Holland record the lowest percentages.

With a similar margin, Protestant countries have values between 71,7 % in Iceland to 31,7 % in Sweden. On the other hand, in the other predominantly Protestant nations (Great Britain, Denmark, Germany and Norway) the percentage of people who answered affirmatively to the question “do you get comfort and strength from religion?” does not exceed 42 %, which positions them at the bottom of the ranking.

Greece, the only majority Orthodox country in Western Europe, confirms its status of powerful religious country, with a percentage of approximately 83 % of respondents who find comfort and strength in religion.



Regression of these beliefs and values can be explained by the revival of alternative spiritual practices (meditation, astrology, medical practices outside of conventional medicine), their apparition being determined by a high level of socio-economic development. In rich countries, citizens can also turn their attention to fulfilling other spiritual needs, in addition to the basic ones, which target the individual’s survival. Instead, Norris and Inglehart claim, the demand or need for religion is strong in countries where there are high levels of existential insecurity: “the need for meaning becomes more obvious at a high level of existential security, thus, even in rich countries, although church attendance is declining, wider spiritual concerns don’t disappear. At the same time, it is clear that the audiences do not continue to

support traditional religious authorities, institutionalized and hierarchical forms of religion or stable religious practices” (Norris and Inglehart 2004, 75).

In the last decades, as societies have developed and life has become more secure, in the countries of Western European part of the continent there were traced clear tendencies of religiosity: low church attendance, erosion of regular private practice, pronounced disregard towards traditional religious values and beliefs, weak involvement in religious institutions. However, we see high levels of formal religious identities, such as the participation in symbolic ceremonies marking important moments of life: birth, marriage, death.

In Protestant countries there is a stronger erosion of religion than in Catholic ones. This reflects, say Norris and Inglehart, the heritage of past centuries and adapting religious cultures to contemporary evolution of attitudes, behavior and moral beliefs widespread among the population. Thus, Protestantism, by promoting a materialistic value system, encouraged economic security by the accumulation of goods and contributed to the development of capitalism and industrialization. That is why the individual in Protestant societies gradually distanced himself from ideas promoted by the Christian church and opted for a religious experience, lacking the intensity and confidence given by real conviction.

Therefore, the high level of economic and technological development, as well as cultural changes are deemed to have imposed post-materialist values in Western societies, giving higher priority to the quality of life (leisure, relaxation and self-fulfillment outside the workplace) than to economic growth (Ibid., 162). That is why religious decline rather involves a change of focus from collective to private practices, i.e. from the traditionally exercised by traditional religious institutions towards the individual ones, represented in the form of a personal spirituality.

In conclusion, it is observed a decline in religious affiliation and practice in most countries of Western Europe, countries that have become increasingly less influenced by religion. This decrease is found mainly in Protestant countries, especially in Scandinavia, where we identify people, who although have religious affiliation, rarely go to church and have a low frequency of prayer.

In Western Europe, religions do not play a public dominant role and faith turns into an individual choice. This setback, said Taylor, assumes a change in the broader cultural framework of a society, establishing an *exclusive humanism*, that is a society independent from any religious faith, based on individual autonomy and self-discipline. Luckmann does not deny the decline of religions, especially in Christian societies. Nevertheless, the author interprets these transformations as a structural change in religion, not as a fundamental decline of religion itself, which he considers to be deeply rooted in the human condition.

In Western European countries there is a trend of institutional deregulation of religion as well. Although in these nations church cannot, as Grace Davie states, discipline the behavior and beliefs of Europeans, it still has a public utility because it incorporates moral codes and offers a space for public debate. Religion has come to operate indirect or through delegate, i.e. an active minority, like the priests, to act on behalf of a much larger number of people, that is the church leaders perform rituals and believe in the name of others.

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