

# Secularization, European Identity, and “The End of the West”<sup>1</sup>

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If Europe is so uniquely secularized—as most scholars of religion, Western European intellectuals, and U.S. conservatives seem to agree—why is its secular character so widely and vigorously debated in the legal and political context of European integration, in the institutions of the European Union and those of the current (and future) Union members? Many disputes and disagreements surrounded the mentioning of the Christian heritage in the constitution of the European Union, the French decision about the wearing of *foulards*, and the debates about the public role of religions in the Netherlands, Poland, or Italy. For anyone watching—social scientists in particular—the right thing to do is not to reiterate the too often repeated arguments about European uniqueness but to ask: *why* are discussions about public religions and affirmations of European secular heritage happening precisely now?

This question is the point of departure for a correlation I want to draw between the insistence on the secular character of Europe, the diversification of the European religious context, the struggle to define the symbolic foundations of European identity, and the positing of America as Europe’s Other. The usual way to understand the “Europe versus America” phenomenon is to contextualize it in the end of the Cold War era; to explain its source as the rise of religious conservatism in the U.S., politically affirmed in the Bush administration; or to point out that Europe is undergoing a serious and

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often disquieting quest for its geo-political and cultural boundaries.<sup>2</sup> The focus here is different: the goal is to understand the place of religion within today's European cultural and political currents, as these factors particularly shape "the end of the West thesis" and, moreover, the paradox bound up in this thesis.

The current context of the European Union, by which it is greatly defined as an economic and political entity, is that of integration, enlargement, and immigration. What comes out of these processes that bring together countries as distant and as different as Lithuania, France, and Malta, and introduce into the heart of Western European cities immigrants from Africa and Asia, is a crisis of European collective self-understanding. During the first decades of the existence of some form of European integration processes, economic rationale had been a dominant and, it seemed, sufficient rationale for these processes. In post-World War II Europe, the prevalent view was that economic cooperation guaranteed peace. But during the last several years, more and more voices have expressed a serious worry that economy and market cannot be the foundation for solidarity among different European peoples. Discussing these questions, the working group of intellectuals and politicians organized around the Vienna *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen*, initiated by a former president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, concluded that "markets cannot produce a politically resilient solidarity" that would result in "a genuine sense of civic community."<sup>3</sup> The main concern of European intellectual and political elites has become the determination of the features—boundaries and characteristics—of European identity.

To paraphrase T. G. Ash, while the Americans are asking "What are we to do with who we are?" Europeans are still asking "Who are we?" The European identity is anything but defined, and steps toward definition are multiple and range widely—from a view of European identity as a new national identity,<sup>4</sup> to an attempt to define European identity as a cultural identity,<sup>5</sup> or as "something" that has been and will remain, to be defined by "unity in plurality." In this context, where the definition of what it means to be European is at stake, the religious processes that define the everyday life of Europeans and the political discourse negotiating the proper place of religion in European societies are not the homogenizing forces that can provide the foundation for what it means to

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent succinct statement of the contextual variables surrounding the twenty-first-century notion of the crisis of the West, see Timothy Garton Ash, *Free World: America, Europe, and the Surprising Future of the West* (New York: Random House, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> For the report of this working group, see *IWM Newsletter* no. 4 (Fall 2004): 86.

<sup>4</sup> See the statement of the former French finance minister, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who, upon watching the demonstrations against Bush's war in Iraq all over Europe, declared: "On Saturday, February 15, a new nation was born on the street. This new nation is the European nation" (Ash 46).

<sup>5</sup> For a critique of the possibility of creating European cultural identity from different national cultures and for a notion that the elements of "European" identity are only aspects of modernity, see Agnes Heller, "Europe: An Epilogue," *The Idea of Europe: Problems of National and Transnational Identity*, ed. Brian Nelson, David Roberts, and Walter Veit (New York: Berg, 1992).

be European. Within the processes of integration, enlargement, and immigration in Europe, contemporary religious developments lead not toward a unified secular destination—as many Western Europeans would like to believe and religious scholars still prophesy—but into a religious diversification; not toward a new collective effervescence, but toward new divisions.

The first and oldest component of European religious pluralism is the difference in the levels and character of religiosity between Catholic and Protestant countries. As studies clearly point out, the level of religious practices is much higher in Catholic Italy, Spain, and Ireland than in historically Protestant Netherlands and Great Britain.<sup>6</sup> A second component is the emergence of new religious movements with their individualistic character and “here-and-now” spirituality.<sup>7</sup> Both components are indigenous to the European West. The Catholic-Protestant difference was the hallmark of European religious history, while new religious movements are perceived by some as the result of secularization, since the spiritual revivals that embody the sacralization of life and the self are highly individualized and de-institutionalized religious expressions.

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But neither the argument about Catholic-Protestant difference nor suggestions about the spiritual revival of Western Europeans seriously challenge the dominant narrative of progressive secularization within the European world. Two other processes do, however. The first phenomenon that is changing the European religious scene is Islam. As many commentators point out, it is impossible to overemphasize the general cultural and political impact, and the specifically religious impact, that the public presence of Muslim believers is already generating and will continue to generate in European societies. Currently, there are more than ten million Muslims in Western Europe.<sup>8</sup> This number can only grow in coming decades, especially as new countries such as Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania approach the Union. With Turkey in the European Union, the number of Muslims within European borders would increase by more than sixty million.

The other major, yet much less discussed, phenomenon that adds to the diversification of the European religious scene is that of collectivistic Christianities. “Christian

<sup>6</sup> See Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 11.

<sup>7</sup> See Paul Heelas, “Detraditionalizing the Study of Religion,” *The Future of the Study of Religion*, ed. Slavica Jakelić and Lori Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 2004) 251–73. See also Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> See Joel S. Fetzer and J. Christopher Soper, eds., *Muslims and the State in Britain, France, and Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

identity” usually denotes an identity that crosses ethnic, gender, national, and class boundaries, an identity that links the individual into a universal community of salvation. However, and perhaps counter-intuitively, Christianity also developed many collectivistic traditions. It is too often forgotten that in a number of cases Christianity is constitutive, often *the* constitutive, element of people’s collective memory. In Orthodox Christian churches—in Bulgarian, Russian, or Serbian Orthodox churches, to name a few—the church as an institution and Christianity as a religious tradition have been distinctively embedded in vernacular liturgy since medieval times. Institutionally and symbolically often inseparable from the political establishment, these Christian churches are, and have long been, focal in defining the boundaries of the collective identities of Bulgarians, Russians, and Serbs.

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One can recognize collectivistic religions in the institutional and historical applications of Roman Catholicism as well, although the Roman Catholic Church explicitly understands itself as a universal church. Collectivistic Catholicisms are not simply grounded in the localization of universal meanings or the localization of rituals, processes that happen with Christianity all the time. Rather, collectivistic Catholicisms are religious traditions and institutions that developed under very specific historical contexts—such as in Poland, Ireland, or Croatia—domesticating themselves most evidently with regard to the existence of a religious other.<sup>9</sup> While different in the extent of their institutional sovereignty, all collectivistic Christianities have in common historically embedded meanings of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> To be Serbian has for centuries meant to be an Orthodox Christian, and vice versa; to be Polish has meant to be a Catholic. Put differently, the key aspect of collectivistic Christianities is *belonging* shaped by religious identification that is ascribed to individuals rather than chosen by them, and experienced as fixed rather than as changeable. This type of identity gives to the collectivistic Christian communities the primary meaning of primordial and only secondary meaning of universal communities of salvation.

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the Polish case and its specific historical context, see José Casanova, “Catholic Poland in Post-Christian Europe,” *Tr@nsit online* 25 (2003) <[www.iwm.at/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=239&Itemid=415](http://www.iwm.at/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=239&Itemid=415)>. For a discussion of the historical context of Croatian Catholicism, see Slavica Jakelić, *Religion as Identity*, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>10</sup> The Eastern Orthodox collectivistic Christianities are autocephalous national churches, while the Catholic Churches belong under the jurisdiction of the Pope.

Christians, and four million Roman Catholic Croats. Students of religion usually perceive these Christianities as something that connects the Old and New Europe—not as something that further complicates the European religious scene. Most social scientists suggest that collectivistic Christianities are suffering the same enervation as Western European Christianity. Studies of religion and religious institutions in post-Communist societies—where collectivistic Christianities are primarily located—seem to show that the “commitment to the Church” and “the level of religious practice” are generally lower than they were during the Communist period, even “as low today as in the most secularized Western European societies.”<sup>11</sup>

In addition, social scientists regularly study collectivistic Christianities under the title of “religious nationalism.” Such a conceptualization contains an inherent assumption that Christianity is secularized because it is linked to nationalism and results in an interpretation of Christianity as epiphenomenal to nationalism.<sup>12</sup> Due to this approach, what gets overlooked is the rootedness of a people’s collective self-understanding in Christianity and the historical processes of that collective identification that long precede the age of modern nationalisms.

In order to understand that collectivistic Christianities are a significant religious force operating in Europe, and in order to understand what these Christianities may do for the European Union, one needs to appreciate their key aspect: *belonging*. This belonging is specific, historically embedded, and—something that collectivistic Christianities share with Islam—public. Even when this belonging is without believing, as social scientists triumphantly declare, it has a different character than in Western European Christianity: it is rarely private and it is rarely de-institutionalized.

To be sure, the argument about the strength and potential of collectivistic Christianities could be relativized if one is to follow the only unquestioned paradigm that has remained from the old theory of secularization: that the march of secularization is unstoppable whenever Europe is in question. Then, the claim could be made that even if the collectivistic Christianities are now public and highly institutionalized, they will become less so when they become integrated into the European world.<sup>13</sup> In Europe, as the argument regularly goes, secularization begins with modernization and always ultimately ends in secularization.

But this thesis about European secular exceptionalism, just like the old theory of secularization, has an inherent teleological quality to it, and as such must be re-assessed in

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<sup>11</sup> See Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart quoting Irena Borowik in *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 113.

<sup>12</sup> On the treatment of religion as an epiphenomenon, see David Martin, “The Secularization Issue: Prospect and Retrospect,” *British Journal of Sociology* 42.3 (September 1991): 465–74.

<sup>13</sup> My thanks to Joshua Yates for pointing this out to me.

the face of the specific historical moment.<sup>14</sup> Today, different religious traditions—collectivistic Christianities and Islam—present a challenge to the idea of Europe as defined by Western European, post-Christian civilization and the secular foundations of contemporary European democracies. These traditions may present this challenge for very different reasons, but they nevertheless share this agenda. Both Muslims in Europe and Europe’s “new” Christians have a public character.<sup>15</sup> They are very much the internal European religious Others. They are also numerous enough to make the establishment of secularism as a common legacy and foundation of identity for all Europeans rather difficult. And, I suspect, Muslims and these “new Christians” would want their places at the table where the elements of Europeans’ collective memory are to be defined.<sup>16</sup>

Put differently, Europeans today are making intellectual and political efforts to forge their identity by creating the symbolic and cultural foundations of their political community. The questions surrounding religion and secularism can hardly be separated from this European quest for self. Islam’s immediate presence in most European societies, as some have pointed out, makes defining Islam as Europe’s religious Other a catastrophic move.<sup>17</sup> The “end of the West” thesis, which defines America as that Other, appears a better option. In a situation in which Europe is experiencing the diversification of its religious landscape—quite opposite to the dominant view that Europe is both secularized and secularizing—American religiousness emerges as the ideal opposite pole to Western European secularism, because it enables Europeans to reaffirm their secular identity around that opposition rather than against occurring religious pluralization. Stated succinctly, while Europeans need some Other to define themselves, they need the American Other to unify themselves.

And here is the paradox related to this dominant view of European secularism, the view so constitutive of the “end of the West thesis.” In essentializing the differences between European and American religious past and present, what is being neglected are the circumstances—historical sources and structural legacies in a relationship with contemporary developments—that shape the current America’s religious Otherness. In insisting that America is the religious Other to Europe, Western European elites, religious scholars, and social scientists miss that the European religious scene today is not

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<sup>14</sup> On the teleological feature of the secularization thesis, see Casanova.

<sup>15</sup> Another group that constitutes Europe’s “new Christians” and that needs to be at least mentioned here is African immigrants who, as Philip Jenkins argues, represent the future of Christianity in Western Europe; see Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Their presence in Europe supports the claim about the diversification of the European religious scene.

<sup>16</sup> On the relationship between religion, memory, and European identity, see Davie 2. For an important systematic discussion of this relationship, see Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> See Tony Judt, “Europe vs. America,” *The New York Review of Books* 52.2 (10 February 2005) <[www.nybooks.com/articles/17726](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/17726)>.

very different from that of America. It is much less secular than many think, and it is increasingly pluralistic religiously.

For Europeans, for their elites and their citizens, disregarding religious pluralization would be a serious misstep in fully grasping the magnitude and political implications of their own religious differences. The short-term consequence of such an oversight might be the imposition of secularism as a defining element in the identity of all Europeans, old and new. In the long run, however, the price for finding European Others in religious America and thereby affirming a secular European identity could be too high for Europe itself, since the accompanying failure to address religious differences is nothing short of dangerous for any contemporary political community, especially the one that is now being created.