

# Europe

## Religious Identity in a Fragmented Age

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**Abstract:** *The author offers a reflection on the question of Christian identity in a changing Europe. He points out that it was only as the number of practicing Christians in public life diminished that the question of the Christian identity of the continent arose. He questions the kinds of uncritical identification of European and Christian culture that arises in the fact of increased Islamic immigration. He surveys the principal options facing Christians and Christian culture as Europe faces an uncertain future.*

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It is a pleasure to be here again at Sophia University Institute, among many friends and colleagues. During the 1950s, while what was to become the European Union was being launched, the majority of its founding fathers—Schuman, De Gasperi, Monnet, and others—were practicing Catholics. For them, Catholicism was not just an identity but formed the basis of their entire moral and religious framework. Yet, it was an era in which no one felt the need to mention a Christian identity. It was simply not a subject of debate, a nonissue, and the founding documents reflect this situation.

The debate around Europe's Christian identity was to begin only in the late 1990s, a time when this initial situation no longer applied. At this time, the number of practicing Christians in public life had greatly diminished. Christianity, which had in the earlier period been a nonissue, could no longer be taken for granted. The question of so-called Christian identity had begun to emerge in an increasingly secularized Europe.

We should recognize that, in a sense, the expression "European culture" is a vague one. I will not attempt to change that here. Nevertheless, as implied above, in the early decades of what was to become the European Union, there was little or no gap between shared societal values and Christian values. In fact, most existing secular values at that time were simply secularized Christian values. Whether we look at the concept of the family, ideas regarding the "good" and "bad," or values relating to sexuality, we do not find much difference between Christian and secular moral frameworks in this earlier period.

Perhaps an example will make my meaning clear. We could take the case of the debate over the contraceptive pill in the 1960s.

In France, Jeannette Vermeersch, the wife of the general secretary of the French Communist Party, opposed contraception, saying “contraception was a capitalist plot to destroy the worker families.” From our vantage point, this meant she was advocating what we today call family values. At that time, these were seen as values of the working class. Going back even further, we can note that when the French parliament voted in 1921 to permit abortions, this was not seen as a church issue at all; rather it came from a kind of a nationalist reaction to the conclusion of World War 1. Many considered it to be more a demographic issue than a political one, or question of values.

In brief, we can say that until the 1960s, little or no gap existed between secular and Christian sectors of society. In fact, if anything, there was often an association between hard-core believers and atheists during this time. France’s fight over the concept of *laïcité* (secularity) was not a fight of values but rather a fight about political power and control of society. There was, of course, a fight between the secular state and the church, but, compared with the current European experience, a very significant difference. Before the 1960s, in general, secularists were still religiously literate, with a baseline knowledge of religion, many having attended Catholic schools. At some level, in other words, they “knew” religious teachings.

So, we might ask: What changed in the 1960s that caused the development of a divide not present in prior decades? The change, I believe, was in the predominantly secular culture itself. Over a span of some years we witnessed extraordinary, historical changes in value systems, almost all concentrated around issues relating to family and sexuality, the definition of a family, and what constitutes

sexual freedom. Furthermore, the notion of sexual freedom had not been considered under the control of the church, so to speak, before that time.

However it happened that, to respond to the problems posed by such rapid societal changes, the Catholic Church tried to offer its own immediate solution by releasing the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. This encyclical was a surprise for everyone at the time because Vatican II had already been viewed as the church’s theological response to increasing secularization. Faced with this encyclical, the general public, including Christians, saw it almost as a step backward, to a time before Vatican II. In reality, it was not a backward move at all. Instead, the encyclical recognized what could be described as two different societies, two different sets of values. And it is a concept that has been affirmed in different ways by every pope since. Thus, we recognize that from the time of *Humanae Vitae* onward, European values should no longer be regarded simply as secularized Christian values.

This fact is responsible for many of the challenges before us. After this division created what I would call the “moral diversity” in Europe, can we continue to speak of Europe’s *Christian* identity? What does Christian identity now mean?

The term “identity” brings us into contact with the complexity of our situation. Christian identity is not simply identical to Christian *religion*, Christian *culture*, or Christian *values*. The problematic term “Christian *identity*” has quite a history. Everyone in Europe claims an identity and does so in a constantly evolving situation. To give just one example (this is not an in-depth analysis), we are faced with many regional and political claims, from Scotland to Catalunya, to having an “identity.” What does the concept

of identity truly mean? Is it a language? Not always. Is it a way of life? A normative set of values? I would say that the term is almost void of any real meaning. And this is precisely the problem.

So, when opposition to immigration or to Islam comes to the fore, and we hear talk of Europe's identity, or, more specifically, about a Christian, European identity, we must ask ourselves what this means precisely. In Germany or Holland, for instance, government questionnaires for refugees and visa applicants ask if the applicant accepts European values. What are these values? One question in Germany, for example, regards the acceptance of nudity, because according to the questions posed, this is considered commonplace in Germany. So, if you say "No, No, No" in answer to this question, you are out. Similarly, most country questionnaires ask questions regarding homophobia. Forty years ago, it would have made no sense to ask such a question: Homosexuality was a crime in most of Europe until the 1960s. Now the situation is quite different: Homosexuality is legally protected and considered a part of the European value system.

Again, how in today's world do we continue to speak about European values, or the roots of our European identity, in a situation where societal values and norms have so rapidly shifted in forty short years? We can no longer refer to an imaginary European identity still rooted in the Roman Empire, or in the Middle Ages, or in the Renaissance or the period of the Enlightenment, or in Christianity. Europe is clearly dominated by a secular culture, which is no longer a secularized, Christian culture.

Since *Humanae Vitae*, then, the clash between the church and society has increasingly been about values. It is not so obviously about theology. Currently, we are seeing Polish people block their borders, to prevent the entrance of refugees into the country. They

see it as a way of protecting Poland's Christian identity. One archbishop was prompted to remind priests that they are not under any obligation to attend these demonstrations. This is because what is called the Christian identity of Poland, and we can say of Europe, is not based on Christian values.

I am not suggesting that governments should implement Christian values. Current populist movements throughout Europe are, in fact, expressions of contemporary secular society, even if some have their roots in traditional extreme right-wing ideologies, such as fascism. All these populist movements—perhaps with the exception of the Italian League party (formerly Lega Nord)—are "modern" in terms of values. Thus, the Dutch far-right leader Geert Wilders objects to Islam because of its positions on women's and homosexual rights. Even in France, the nation now is promoting *laïcité* rather than Christian identity. While Marine Le Pen's father wished to defend France's Christian identity, his daughter is more concerned with defending France's secular identity.

Thus, secular and Christian members of society tend to drift in separate directions. An ever-increasing divide between faith communities and the secular majority is becoming markedly evident. In France, Catholic faith communities, rather than the institutional church, are beginning to resist the secular agenda: There now exists a militant Catholic movement called La Manif pour Tous that took to the streets. It is the first time in a century that Catholics are going to the streets as Catholics. Thus, we are seeing a kind of radicalization of faith communities. This is true not just in the Catholic world but also among some Protestant Evangelicals and Orthodox Jews, who oppose shifts in Europe's values.

The Catholic Church itself is increasingly acknowledging the fact that at this moment in history, Christian communities are

a minority. And this is still something new. Until recently, the prevailing idea was that European culture is Christian and that Europeans have forgotten this and should return to their religious roots. But in the face of ever increasing secularization, it is clear that this kind of discourse is ineffective. People are not returning to their religious roots. Indeed, in some countries, such as France, religion is now seen by many as *the problem*. If you take a poll of the population and ask people in France what does *laïcité* mean, most will tell you that religion should be kept in the private sphere. Freedom of religion, however, is the freedom to practice the religion. It is not just the freedom of belief. You have the right to practice, and, by definition, you practice in the public sphere. So, there is a discrepancy between the law and how people interpret the law, which is now more and more ideological.

So, with the divide between faith communities and the predominant culture growing, what kinds of actions are needed? What is needed at this point in Europe's history? Until now, most faith communities have chosen one of three options. The first is what I would call the *re-conquest* option. This includes actions such as the legal fight to ban abortion, trying to impose teaching of religion in schools, and so on. We see examples of this option in Poland today and in many predominantly Muslim countries. There are, in fact, marked similarities between what's happening today in countries such as Poland and Turkey. This option of attempting a "re-conquest" of lost values serves only to isolate faith communities more and more instead of building bridges. Over the past thirty years we have seen that leaders who fight against new, secular legislation around issues, such as abortion, gay marriage, and civil unions, almost always lose.

A second option, which Jürgen Habermas discussed with Cardinal Ratzinger years ago, is what I would call the "translation" of religious values into acceptable secular values. Instead of speaking about abortion, speak about life. French Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, for example, chose a similar path in the same-sex marriage debate. He never said that it is against religious laws, values, or teachings but rather that it is a decision that would have a negative sociological and anthropological impact on society. This tactical option found some support among a small number of psychologists and others and some Christian families. But for the most part, it too failed to be particularly effective.

The third option is also the title of a recent (bestselling) book by American author Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option*. All is considered lost and we are now in the hands of the barbarians. Faced with a loss of Christian values, we can withdraw into faith communities, like the Benedictines did, not necessarily by building actual monasteries but by creating more "social monasteries." We must ask: Why not try this third option? If we let each sector of society fight to maintain its own specific identity, we remain a fragmented Europe. We would have faith communities and other groups based on their own different, regional identities. Europe would be transformed into a set of small pieces, all different from one another.

It is of primary importance for secular states to acknowledge and make allowances for religion while maintaining the distinction between civil society and religion. It is not a matter of legality but rather of how religion is perceived. Persons of religious faith must be open to dialogue, acknowledge that they may be in the minority, and understand that dialogue is not facilitated by

continuous fighting against current societal norms and values. In Europe, we are not short on convictions; we have convictions of every sort. We have Christians who have converted to Islam, Muslims who have converted to Christianity, and persons of religious faith who have embraced a deeply secular outlook. What is needed is to reopen and rediscover this historically important relationship between the secular and the religious and the relationships among those of different religions.

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