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Religious indifference and atheism: Developments over time and national differences in Europe

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Sociology has focused much on the analysis of religions and has left in shadow the study of secularity and irreligion.

It is important to distinguish religious indifference from militant atheism (Quack, Shuh, 2018; Bréchon, Zwilling, 2020).

Indifference: I am not interested in religion, I have no knowledge of any major religion, I have no convictions about them, I am neither for nor against, this religious world is foreign to me, I am unconcerned.

The atheist on the contrary has convictions. He is anti-religious. He thinks that the Gods do not exist, that they are an invention of human people.

What is **the evolution of secularity** in Europe? Is there an increase of it as the theories of secularization say? We will see that the answer to this question must be nuanced for several reasons:

- All the indicators of the secularity-religion dimension do not evolve in the same way,
- The evolution of secularity is different in different parts of Europe (the West is much more secular than the East),
- It is also different according to the dominant religion that has shaped the culture of each country.

This paper uses data from the European Values Survey from 1990 to 2017, on 22 countries for which data are available for the whole period. It is the best tool for my research aims as there are many indicators about religiosity and secularity and the main dimensions of values for a long period of time.

Institutional secularity can be measured by the not belonging to a religion

Table 1. **No religious affiliation** (EVS)*

Tradition	Pays	1981	1990	2008	2017-2018	Average 2017
Protestant	Iceland	1	2	8	17	53
	Demark	6	8	12	18	
	Finlande	-	11	24	27	
	Norvay	4	11	20	36	
	Sweden	7	19	37	38	
	Great Britain	in	42	45	61	
Multi-confessional	Germany	9	18	20	38	42
	The Netherlands	39	54	53	62	
	Estonia	-	87	56	80	
Catholic	Poland	-	4	4	8	35
	Lithuania	-	37	15	12	
	Italy	7	16	16	20	
	Portugal	-	28	18	24	
	Austria	-	15	15	26	
	Slovakia	-	29	26	29	
	Slovenia	-	27	29	35	
	Spain	9	14	25	37	
	Hungary	-	42	47	55	
	France	26	38	51	58	
	Czech Republic	-	60	71	76	
	Orthodox	Bulgaria	-	64	26	
Romania		-	6	2	4	
European Mean		-	33	29	38	38

* In all tables, data are weighted by socio-demographic variables and population size. The results for 1999 are not presented in order not to make them too cumbersome.

Very strong differences in the level of non-religious affiliation.

People without affiliation are much more rare in orthodox countries but much more numerous in countries with a Protestant or multi-faith tradition, while the level is average in Catholic countries due to very strong differences (for example between Poland and Italy on the one hand, and France on the other).

In countries with a Protestant tradition, there is a big difference between the Scandinavian countries, where membership of Lutheranism is as much an expression of adherence to the nation as an indicator of religiosity, and the Anglican Great Britain, where many people have no religious affiliation.

Subjective identity: religious, “not religious” people or “convinced atheist”

Table 2. Feeling non-religious or convinced atheist (*in %*)

Country of tradition	1990		2008		2017-2018	
	Not religious	Convinced atheist	Not religious	Convinced atheist	Not religious	Convinced atheist
Protestant	33	5	46	8	49	13
Multi-confessional	69	4	37	7	37	12
Catholic	31	4	26	9	27	12
Orthodox	33	3	28	3	18	2
European Mean	37	4	31	8	32	11

Source : EVS.

Atheism was rare in 1990, but is multiplied by almost 3 in 30 years. Opposition to religions is thus on the rise overall (except in Orthodox countries).

Countries where atheism is the most developed (in 2017): France: 23%, Sweden: 20%, Spain: 15%, Czech Republic and Slovenia: 14%, Great Britain: 13%, Germany: 12% (but much more in the ex-GDR). These are the countries where anti-religious values are the most developed.

Religious indifference was already strong in 1990. Globally, we do not observe an overall rise in secularity, but rather a shift from indifference to atheism. Secularism is in fact progressing essentially in Protestant and multi-faith environments.

If religion is of little or no importance in one's life, this reflects either an indifference or a rejection of the religious dimension. **There has been little change over the past 30 years in the direction of a slight decline in secularity.** Above all, it is necessary to underline the differences according to the dominant religion of the country. Secularity is much stronger in Europe with a Protestant or multi-confessional culture. The regression of secularity is very strong in Orthodox countries.

Table 3. Religion, little or not at all important in my life (*in %*)

Country of tradition	1990	2008	2017
Protestant	66	68	65
Multi-confessional	77	65	65
Catholic	50	54	48
Orthodox	39	34	23
European Mean	57	55	53

Source : EVS

Educating children in faith, a rare concern

In the battery of 11 qualities that can be privileged in the education of children, religious faith is the one that is the least cited, and is falling (everywhere except in orthodox countries), a sign of a low valuation (compared to other dimensions).

Tableau 4. Citing religious faith as a quality to be encouraged among children (%)

Country of tradition	1990	1999	2008	2017
Protestant	12	10	8	9
Multi-confessionnal	17	11	10	10
Catholic	26	27	19	17
Orthodox	33	43	44	39
European Mean	20	23	19	15

Source : EVS

Non-belief in God: a small progression...

Small global progression of non-belief but still with big differences according to the religious areas: strong rise in non-belief in Protestant and multi-faith areas, overall stability in Catholic countries, fall in Orthodox countries.

Table 5. Index of non-belief in God (in %)*

Country of tradition	1990	2008	2017-2018
Protestant	30	36	41
Multi-confessional	26	31	38
Catholic	27	22	26
Orthodox	18	11	7
European Mean	27	23	30

* Scores from 6 to 10 on a distribution from 6 to 26.

... while hopes for a future after death are growing

The index of belief in an extra-mundane future is constructed with 3 questions: believing in an afterlife, heaven and hell.

Table 6. Index of non-belief to an extra-mundane future* by to the main religion

Country of tradition	1990	2008	2017-2018
Protestant	58	50	51
Multi-confessional	50	52	52
Catholic	51	43	41
Orthodox	50	46	30
European Mean	53	45	45

*Neither to an afterlife, nor to heaven, nor to hell. In %.

Non-belief has regressed by 8 points in Europe, very strongly in Orthodox countries, quite strongly in Catholic and Protestant countries, stable in multi-faith environments. And hopes for an extra mundane future are also on the rise among young people, who are nevertheless the least religious (Table 7).

Table 7. Index of non-belief in an extra-worldly future* in 2017 by age and main religion of country (%)

Country of tradition	18-34 years	35-54 years	55 years and +	Mean
Protestant	50	50	52	51
Multi-confessional	44	48	59	52
Catholic	38	42	42	41
Orthodox	24	28	36	30
European Mean	41	45	47	45

*Neither to an afterlife, nor to heaven, nor to hell.

The disbelief in the future is stronger among the elderly almost everywhere. Young people do not follow the classic paths of religiosity, but at least some of them develop a form of psycho-religious belief in a future after death. Beliefs in God and the future are linked, although 19% of believers in the future only believe in God to a limited extent.

Secularity/religiosity index

From the numerous indicators of secularity/religion, we can construct an index with 10 highly correlated indicators (member of a religious organization, attending services at least once a month, feeling religious, praying every week, believing in God, believing in a personal God or life force, finding God important in one's life, believing in life after death, in reincarnation, finding important to encourage religious faith among children) ($\alpha=0.82$). We retain here the followers of the secular pole (0-3 out of 10), which declined a bit from 1990 to 2008 and seems stable since then.

Table 8. Importance of the secular pole (0-3) (in %)

Country of tradition	1990	2008	2017-2018
Protestant	53	58	61
Multi-confessional	88	53	55
Catholic	46	47	45
Orthodox	40	40	20
European Mean	54	48	48

Secularity has progressed in the Protestant milieu and has regressed considerably in the Orthodox milieu.

Table 9. Importance of secularity (0-3) in 2017 **by age and the main religion** of country (%)

Country of tradition	18-34 years	35-54 years	55 years and +	Mean
Protestant	66	62	56	61
Multi-confessional	61	64	52	55
Catholic	51	47	38	45
Orthodox	19	18	23	20
European Mean	54	50	44	48

Secularism is more frequent among young people, except in the Orthodox milieu where religiosity is more or less equivalent whatever the generation.

How can we explain the slow growth of secularity?

When a **binary logistic regression** on the level of secularity/religiosity is computed, many variables seem to contribute to explain it. Age is not the most explainable variable. By far, it is the fact of not having been religiously socialized in one's youth that is the most explanatory of indifference and atheism. There is therefore **a strong element of reproduction in secularizing/religious attitudes**, with however a slow loss of religiosity from one generation to the next.

Then comes the fact of being **a man or a woman**, the gap between genders does not seem to decrease, which raises the question: do women have more need for religion? Or do their social roles lead them to be more religious?

Third explanation: **the dominant religion of the country, which is also related to the level of development** (Inglehart, 2018 and 2021). Some religions, more rooted in a culture of duty, of tradition, embodying the cult of the nation, are more resilient. Societies marked by Protestantism, more open to modernity, have been secularizing longer and more strongly.

The most secularized countries are also generally the richest countries and this often corresponds to the regions most marked by Protestant culture. So economic and educational modernization does seem to be a factor in secularization (Inglehart, 2018 and 2021).

Modernization is also characterized by a change in the value system, with the growth of individualization values (valorization of individual autonomy). This evolution of values is more pronounced among young people who are also more secularized. And the more individualized one is, the more secularized one is.

Consequential dimension of secularity/religiosity

With secularization, one could believe that religiosity no longer impacts the value system. But this is not the case. Religiosity and secularity correspond to two distinct value systems (Table 10).

Table 10. Attachment to different values by degree of religiosity in 2017-2018

<i>In %</i>	Religious (6-10) (33 %)	Irreligious (0-1) (30 %)	Mean
Strong individualization (15 indicators)	16	54	35
Strong moral liberalism (5 indicators)	13	50	32
Strong altruism (9 indicators)	65	55	59
Member of at least one association	49	48	48
Trust In others	33	40	36
In favor to a liberal family (5 indicators)	34	65	49
Gender equality in society (5 indicators)	43	61	53
Weak sense of social duties: work, birth, parents	19	38	29
Low value of authority (4 indicators)	40	52	46
Very proud to be from their country	54	37	46
Highly valued work (5 indicators)	54	34	43
Feeling personally happy (2 indicateurs)	60	61	60
Strong politicization (2 indicators)	39	43	40
Strong protest participation (4 indicators)	35	56	46
Left-leaning (1 à 5/10)	40	57	49
Strong support for democracy (4 indicators)	38	42	39
Economically liberal (4 indicators)	53	54	54
Strong intolerance of deviance (5 indicators)	60	45	51
No rejection of foreigners (5 indicators)	52	58	55

The secularists value very strongly the autonomy of the individual, the liberalism of morals (deciding on one's sexuality, life and death), new family forms, equality between men and women, distrust of duties and authority, less national pride and a stronger relativization of work. On the other hand, whether one has little or much religiosity, the feeling of happiness is the same. Religious belief and the hope of eternal life do not seem to generate a stronger "positivity".

Secularists are more active in political protest, expressing themselves more through petitions and demonstrations, and they more often share a left-wing orientation. They are more tolerant of deviance and somewhat more accepting of outsiders.

When we look at a table, as similar as possible to the previous one, built with 1990 data, we observe many permanencies in the relations over the last thirty years. Some relationships have certainly weakened, for example in the sense of happiness or the demand for authority. But we also find reinforcements, particularly for the culture of individualization, which is increasing very strongly in irreligious circles, whereas religious people are as resistant as before to this desire for individual autonomy.

Conclusions

The **slow rise of secularism** is more due to an atheism of conviction than of a simple indifference.

This secularizing climate of contemporary societies in Western Europe does not produce a clear rapprochement of values between secular and religious people. **The ideological-religious divide persists.**

There are many nuances between secular and pure religious people. **Individualized recompositions** (“I take some and I leave some in the universe of my religion”) are very numerous, as we have seen particularly with the development of hopes for a future beyond the world among people who do not adopt the grand narrative of religious institutions. There is therefore a lot of **deregulation of religious universes, less and less controlled by the great institutions of belief.**

Europe is religiously very composite and more divided than before because of the contrasting evolutions between countries resistant to secularity and very secular countries. To consider all Europe as highly secularized and to speak of a European exception (Davie, 2002) in a world that would be increasingly religious is dubious. It is especially the west of Europe that is very secularized. The European situation is not very different from the US: too often we forget that secularity has progressed strongly in recent years in this country, especially in certain states (church attendance going from 63% in Mississippi to 23% in Vermont and New Hampshire).

Thank you for your attention.