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Religion and Civil Society: Comparing the USA and Europe

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“Religion and Civil Society: Comparing the USA and Europe”

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Travellers and students who venture in either direction across the Atlantic are likely to discover many contrasts, but among the most visible are the striking differences in the religious cultures to be found. Despite the presence of magnificent cathedrals across the European landscape, those same churches are likely to be quite empty when the time for worship arrives. Churches in the U.S., by contrast, may less often be on tourist itineraries, but more often full on Sunday. But how do those visible differences translate into the organization of civic life and the delivery of social services to the respective populations of these societies? Work that allows careful comparisons between the U.S. and Europe has become very useful in generating new knowledge and new questions about the role of religion in late modern contexts. Those comparisons require attention to the particular political, historical, legal, cultural and demographic factors at play in each of the many European societies in question, looking for both intra-Europe comparisons, as well as contrasts with the U.S.

This essay will attempt to draw out useful comparisons from my own and other research based in the U.S., alongside, especially, the research generated by the Welfare and Values in Europe study (WaVE). This important project examined the role of churches in the social economy of countries with different welfare models and church traditions:
Sweden/Finland/Norway (Social Democratic/Lutheran), England (liberal/Anglican),
Germany/France (Corporative /religiously mixed), Italy (Corporative / Roman Catholic) and
Greece (Corporative /Orthodox). Financed by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation
and administrated by the Foundation Samariterhemmet, this project sent twenty-five
researchers from eight countries into diverse community settings to interview service
providers, civic officials, and church workers, among others (Stålhandske 2010). Research
reports from this project provide an intimate window on local realities across Europe. But to
set the stage for the comparisons, we begin with the key features of religion on the other side
of the Atlantic.

The U. S. Religious Context

The role of religion in civil society in the U.S. is shaped by two important realities: legal
disestablishment and the relative strength of religion in U.S. culture. Almost all Americans say
they believe in some sort of God, at least most of the time. For three quarters of them, it is a
personal God, and 64% say they depend on this God for strength and support in times of crisis. ¹
Only 22% say that faith in God isn’t very important to them. While the terms “religious” and
“spiritual” are highly contentious, and even some strong believers reject them, sixty-one
percent of American adults say they are at least moderately religious, and 62% say they are at
least moderately spiritual. Even people who have become religious “nones” (expressing no
religious “preference”) usually are believers of some sort (Hout and Fischer 2002).

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all U.S. statistics in the following pages were calculated by the author from the
General Social Survey (NORC 2001).
In a nation where religious beliefs are so prevalent, it is perhaps not surprising that religious rhetoric is also ubiquitous in political discourse. To a degree that scandalizes many Europeans, public officials in the U.S. seem to end nearly every speech with some equivalent of “God bless America,” and American conversation about what it means to be a citizen is likely to presume that the nation’s religious heritage is part of its strength (Bellah 1963). The persistent collective mistrust of those without beliefs (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006) reinforces the assessment that religion and civic life are, for good or ill, historically intertwined in the U.S.²

Americans not only believe; they belong. While only a quarter of the population is among the most devoted who attend worship services every week (or more), almost that many more claim to be present at least once a month. In other words, about half of American adults have a fairly serious habit of attending religious services. Another quarter show up once or a few times a year, while the last quarter attends rarely, if ever.

The places where they attend represent a remarkable diversity of religious traditions, and that is one result of the second key factor distinguishing the U.S.: disestablishment. Law and society in the United States have created a space for voluntary religious communities, and believers of all sorts have taken advantage of that free space. The range of belief and practice in U.S. culture is greater today than ever before, but diversity has been a fundamental fact of U.S. religious organization nearly from the beginning (Butler 1990; Greeley 1972; Hatch 1989). Pluralism is, as Stephen Warner (1993) puts it, “constituitive” of American religion. In spite of the fact that dozens of religious groups would argue that they and they alone have the true way

² Jose Casanova (2009) has observed the contrast between Americans and Europeans on this point. He notes that while Americans tend to exaggerate their religiousness to pollsters, Europeans tend to exaggerate their secularity.
to live, disestablishment means that no one of them has the power to coerce obedience
(Demerath 2001). When the “Standing Order” was abolished in Massachusetts and that state’s
constitution amended in 1833, the last vestige of state-sponsored religion ended. Each new
group of immigrants has had to learn that in the U.S. “denominational” system (Handy 1972;
Mead 1963), all religious groups are equally powerless to enforce their ways.

They are also equally required to generate their own support, without the help of the
state. The denominational system permits free exercise, but requires each group to function as
one among many and to take responsibility for its own wellbeing (Ammerman 2005, ch. 7). If
religious groups are to sustain a distinctive way of life, they have to engage in the work of
worship, religious education, and fellowship among their own members. The result is that they
spend most of their organizational energy on creating a store of religiously-based “bonding
social capital” (Putnam 2000), and such bonding capital can lead to insular communities that
respond to civic life and cultural diversity in hostile and unhelpful ways (Wuthnow 2003).
Religiously-sanctioned racism, anti-Semitism, and nationalism come to mind, with “Christian
Identity” movements being perhaps the most extreme example (Aho 1990). Sometimes the
benefits of a group’s bonding redound only to its own members, generating corresponding
costs for those deemed “other.” While most religious gathering in the U.S. has no such
fractious consequences, neither are voluntary and diverse religious gatherings always civically
virtuous.

In the midst of enormous religious diversity and potential civic tensions, however, the
U.S. also sustains a remarkable consensus about values shaped by the “Golden Rule” – do unto
others as you would have them do unto you. When we asked churchgoers of all sorts what
counts as a “good Christian life,” they tell us a person should be kind and decent and honest and help people who need help (Ammerman 1997). As I will note below, the political contours of the American welfare system are shaped by other values, also religiously based, but a foundational commitment to serving others is, as I will also suggest below, a point on which nations on both sides of the Atlantic may find some common ground.

**The European contrast**

While there are significant differences among the many nations of Europe, the contrast to American voluntary religion, diversity, and disestablishment are worth noting. There is certainly no single “European” model of either welfare, state or church, but all of them are strikingly different from the American model. In each nation, there is some history of links between a single religious institution and citizenship in that nation state. Consequently, in each European context, there is more likely to be an assumption of religious homogeneity than of diversity. And, in most European contexts, the organizational well-being of churches is much more dependent on the state. While church-state regimes have been changing in recent decades, the ties are by no means gone (Backstrom and Davie 2010).

Also changing, of course, is the presumed religious homogeneity of many European nations. Immigrants from outside Europe have begun to pose visible and significant challenges to assumptions about what it means to be “European.” Long-dormant notions of Christendom, along with long-accepted notions of secularity, stand in contrast to the presence of practicing Muslims and enthusiastic immigrant evangelicals and Pentecostals. The WaVE project took just those changes into account, as it examined both the presence of religious diversity and the
reality that welfare are religion are intertwined in European welfare states (Manow and van Kersbergen 2009).

What I read between the lines of the reports from the WaVE studies was actually a surprisingly common agreement across these European societies that people owe each other assistance when times are tough and owe it to each other to cooperate on doing things that make communities happier, healthier, more culturally enriching places – a set of values not unlike the “Golden Rule” orientation I have seen in the U.S. Without doubt the Golden Rule assumes more cultural consensus on how to treat each other than exists nearly anywhere in the world today. But one of the most striking findings was how seldom those differences in values or religious belief interfered with an attempt to recognize basic human needs and organize to alleviate them.

Caring for each other in this way stands in contrast to the picture of free-market actors or collectivized workers, for whom either the market or the state are sufficient mechanisms for human flourishing. The ideal is that each person will have a job that will provide them with access to income in normal times, insurance against abnormal times, and benefits with which to pursue cultural enrichment and leisure. What none of these systems has yet been able to accomplish, however, is such an ideal arrangement. Markets, even collective ones, have not always produced utopian flourishing. At the very least, they need regulation and assistance from governments if they are to tend to human needs.

And so it is that the mapping of welfare systems in each of the communities the WaVE team studied begins with the organizations that have been put in place by local, regional, and national governments. If markets do not always treat vulnerable people well, societies must
collectively put the golden rule into practice in the form of hospitals and job training programs, places to live and opportunities to learn. When we look at the collective efforts put in place by governments, however, we see enormous variation in the capacity of those governments to deliver on promised well-being, especially for the immigrants and other minority populations that now dot the European landscape. Most are feeling the strain of a contracting economy, with both greater need and diminished revenue. And nearly everyone is recognizing that the demographics of an aging population similarly mean greater demand for services with fewer workers paying the taxes that will support those services. Those common structural strains are very real, but so are the disparities between a place like Sweden, where the health and welfare of the population is still fairly generously and comprehensively supported, and places like Croatia, Romania, and even Poland, where economic crises, political transitions, and war have seriously depleted the collective reservoir.

These differences are at least in part a result of differing welfare-state ideologies (Esping-Andersen 1990) – social democratic, liberal, corporatist/conservative. These categories tell us a good deal about how the state and the market are expected to work together to tend to the wellbeing of citizens whose families and communities lack the capacity to meet their needs. What they do not fully account for are the organizational resources that reside beyond state and market. They tell us how much the state is expected to do in comparison to what the market is expected to do, but they tell us less about networks among institutions or about what happens when both state and market are too weak to do much of anything. A look at day-to-

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3 While I will give primary attention to immigrant, especially Muslim, minorities, the WaVe project is significant for its attention to Roma and other indigenous groups.
day realities in a variety of European communities in the WaVE study has shown the many ways state efforts are complemented by work in other sectors of society.

As in the U.S., a grassroots-level look at welfare services rather quickly uncovers the degree to which care depends on family, church, and voluntary associations alongside the assistance provided by state-organized agencies. The principle of subsidiarity argues, of course, that each form of assistance should be undertaken at the lowest or closest level of society that can do it well (MacCormick 1997). And nearly everywhere, it seems, families would like to be able to take care of each other, and individuals would like best being taken care of by a network of kin. Even where social democratic welfare systems attempt to remove the burden of care from families (and thereby enlarge the choices available to women),\(^4\) it seems foolish to deny that families, in one form or another, are a critical and desirable partner in providing care to people in need. Future citizens both learn and practice the golden rule first in the context of households, where families care for each other (Daly and Lewis 2000; Perry and Katula 2001).

That instinct to rely on family seems especially strong when the cultural distance between new immigrant families and state welfare agencies is greatest. When minority populations fear misunderstanding at best or condemnation and punishment at worst, they may not seek care from public providers (e.g., the Croatian case study, see Geiger, Zrinscak and Puhovski (2009)). As the WaVE researchers talked to welfare professionals and to potential clients, they often encountered the frustrations on both sides, frustrations that had a good deal

\(^4\) As the WaVE studies pointed out, of course, the professionals who populate service agencies are themselves overwhelmingly women.
to do with each group wondering how best to navigate the cultural divides (e.g., the Schweinfurt case study, see Biendarra (2009)).

The state’s services, even if not trusted by minority communities, have the significant advantage of being universal – no particularist ethnic or gender or religious membership is required. All citizens and legal residents are welcome (although that begs the question of what to do with those who are not legal). The value placed on universal access is clearly so fundamental that it forms a bedrock of how most European societies understand themselves. In practice, it often transcends the question of legal status. Anyone who needs care is treated as if entitled to care – “do unto others” includes anyone who needs it. The challenge at this point, however, is not the principle of universal access, but the principle of universalist rules. Is it possible that care for one will differ from care for another? Do rules that systematically disallow official ethnic identifiers, for instance, actually disserve the interests of ethnic groups? Margarita Mooney’s comparison of Haitian immigrants in Montreal, Paris, and Miami suggests that immigrants without full citizenship resources are disadvantaged when they cannot organize into ethnic-specific groups and must make their way into presumably-equal universalist associations (Mooney 2009).

The particularizing of care is certainly not a value shared across many of these societies, nor would it likely be endorsed by many welfare professionals, but it is a value that helps to drive the creation of voluntary networks of care in many of the places that were studied by the WaVE team. When the state’s rules or the state’s modes of care fall short, groups organize to provide that care by other means. Mostly informal and unofficial and often organized through a mosque or other religious community, immigrants find ways to help each other locate jobs
and housing and child or elder care (e.g., the Pakistani association in Thiva, Greece (Fokas 2009)). They band together to provide necessities in the face of tragedy or hard times. They may be entitled to welfare subsidies for any number of these needs, but the food provided by their own community simply tastes better.

Do these particularistic networks of care threaten the social cohesion of the society? The American answer is that they clearly do not. Sociologically, my observation is that the informal networks of care the WaVE project documented are neither strong enough nor enduring enough to become oppositional institutions that threaten the larger social fabric. The vast majority do not provide a comprehensive social system that isolates groups and actively militates against integration. Rather, by filling critical gaps, they may prevent the very social rupture many fear. Many networks are bridges that not only hold the immigrant community together, but also help to make strategic connections to the larger community (Kniss and Numrich 2007). If nothing else, the way immigrants organize is likely to be isomorphic with the larger culture, mirroring form if not content.5 The long history of immigrant congregations and other associations in the U.S. illustrates the degree to which such particularistic religious communities serve civic functions far more than divisive ones (Warner 1999).

These ad hoc immigrant networks of aid stand alongside the enduring presence of Christian churches as pillars in the service delivery of every European nation that was part of this study. Virtually every country, even the formerly-communist ones, has some form of church tax or public fund that supports clergy, buildings, schools, cemeteries, and/or social

5 Stephen Warner has called the American version of this isomorphism “de facto congregationalism” (Warner 1994). The larger theoretical point is that organizations in a “field” tend to take on characteristics that imitate each other, respond to similar regulatory demands, and facilitate functional interchange (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).
service delivery. There may be enormous variation in how big and how organized the Christian pillar is, and how firmly it is linked to the state’s efforts, but there can be no doubt that Christian religious organizations are a primary embodiment of European commitment to living out the Golden Rule. Among the many things included in what Grace Davie (2006) has called “vicarious religion,” are the caring functions administered by the religious institutions willingly (tax) supported by people who never darken a church door (see also Pessi 2009). The question of whether Europeans believe in God or attend religious services is simply irrelevant here. The churches, as institutions, are alive.

In the former-communist states, the role of the churches is obviously much weaker. The voluntary sector as a whole is relatively weak, having been largely replaced by the state. After half a century of suppression and of exclusion from official public roles, churches in Latvia, Croatia and Romania are only slowly rebuilding their institutional and public presence. As in Poland, there are now church taxes, collected by the state, to support the rebuilding and restaffing of religious organizations and religiously-based community services. In each of these places, the religiously-based social institutions that survived – old age homes and schools and chaplaincies – provide much of the modest base on which voluntary sectors are being rebuilt. While Latvia has emerged as a multi-religious society that includes a significant secular sector, Croatia, Poland, and Romania have populations that overwhelmingly identify with their historic national churches and, at least in the latter two, baptize their children as universally as ever

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6 On these changes in the post-Soviet era, see the work of Paul Froese (e.g., Froese 2001).
7 See the case studies from each of these countries -- Borowik, Dyszewska and Litak 2009; Geiger, Zrinscak and Puhovski 2009; Graudins, Berdnikovs and Mazura 2009; Zagura 2009.
into the Church. An enduring religious culture is clearly present in these societies, but churches are relatively understaffed and thinly institutionalized.

The religious institutional presence is stronger in Poland than in the other post-communist countries, perhaps resembling the situation in Italy or Greece almost as much as it does its politically-transitional cousins. In Italy and Greece, the role of the national church relative to the state has been far from unproblematic, often the source of inefficiencies and conflict and political entanglement (e.g., Fokas 2009; Frisina and Cancellieri 2009). In each case, state funds and functions are often channeled through the churches and church agencies to people in need, as well as providing significant support to the churches, church schools, and clergy themselves. While the political picture in each of these cases can get complicated, the institutional one includes a religious welfare sector that is relatively robust.

The same is essentially true in England and France, although each diverges from the pattern of collecting church taxes, supporting the churches themselves, and thereby also supporting religious structures that provide welfare services. The English picture is thoroughly mixed, with a welter of entanglements and disentanglements between church and state. The Church of England retains myriad symbolic ties to the state, but its financial support comes largely from its own properties and voluntary contributions, even as its welfare agencies remain critical players in care for the population (Middlemiss Le Mon 2008; 2009). The French picture reflects the French state’s longstanding policy of laïcité, which means that religiously-based welfare services are still very present and active, but have to be officially quite separate from the church itself (Valasik 2008). This is, ironically, roughly the American system, as well. In these two cases, religious institutions are present and are critical players in the overall delivery
of care to those in need, but the support they get from the state must come in a roundabout (secular) way.

At the rich end of the institutional resource spectrum stand the churches of the Nordic countries. In Sweden, Norway, and Finland sizable portions of the population pay their church taxes and thereby support well-staffed ecclesial and social service institutions. While each country is undoubtedly feeling the pinch of hard economic times, the social contract – and the role of the churches in delivering on that social contract – is as strong as ever. The strength of this social contract, and the role of the churches in it, highlights the way differing histories can indeed shape different welfare regimes. Here I will draw the contrast largely between the Lutheran heritage that has shaped these countries (as well as Germany, although there it is mixed with Catholic and secular elements) and the evangelical Protestant heritage of the United States. In the evangelical piety of the U.S., providing assistance to a (deserving) needy person is a personal virtue, and the state has no special place in the enactment of this sacred duty (Quadagno and Rohlinger 2009). In this theology, *individuals* are charged with acting like citizens of the heavenly kingdom. If they happen to band together into an earthly government that does good deeds, that is nice, but it is not integral to God’s grand plan.

In the states where Lutheran teaching has historically played a role, the picture is quite different. Given Luther’s conception of two kingdoms, earthly government is part of God’s plan (Kahl 2009; Manow and van Kersbergen 2009; Thiemann 2005). God gave human beings minds to use and expects them to use those minds to tend to the human and material world - in part because that is where the work of the spiritual kingdom has to be done. The Church, in other

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8 See, for example Angell (2008); Beckman (2008); and Yeung, Helander and Gronlund (2008).
words, expects the State to do the work of caring for the created order. The ripple of these early theological values seems to have extended into the political and economic policy decisions that shaped the distinctive Nordic states (Kuhnle 2000). The political system that has evolved expects, in turn, that the churches will supply both the legitimation and much of the mechanism by which the state will do its welfare work. There is a symbiosis between religious work and state work that is simply unimaginable in the U.S. context – not because of the complicated American constitutional separation of church and state, but because evangelical Protestants do not expect the state to help them serve God (Chaves 1999; Ebaugh, Chafetz and Pipes 2006).

Nordic universalism may not be so thoroughly built into the theologies of other European religious traditions, but the practice of working in a highly open and inclusive way seems to be much more the norm than the exception among European religious service providers. If policy makers worry that religious agencies may be exercising subtle or not so subtle rules of exclusion, this research should largely put that worry to rest. The case of reproductive health services in Padova stands out as an exception, with its relatively high level of conflict between religious providers and the needs of the community (Frisina and Cancellieri 2009). A few other religious welfare providers did note that religious ritual observance was part of what they do, but all of them seemed aware that some recipients might want to opt out of those rituals. Far more common in these communities were religious groups that engaged in practices of civic inclusion that belied any notion of religious particularism.

One of the more interesting results of working at a grassroots level is the discovery of the work being done by minority Protestant groups in several locations. The Baptists and
Pentecostals and Adventists are present in many of these communities, although never more than a few dozen strong. These are groups whose religious identities make them seem strange and sometimes place them at odds with their own communities; but rather than making them isolationist or combative, they seem mostly to have adopted a stance of eager openness to being a partner in caring for the community. They can rarely support large programs, but in England, Latvia, Croatia, Romania, and Poland, researchers were surprised to find these minority Protestants doing more than their fair share and doing so in ways that were open to everyone. The researchers in Przemysl, Poland, for instance, noted that the local Pentecostals were exceptionally well organized and served mostly people from beyond their own membership, never expecting any ritual participation from those they served (Borowik, Dyszewska and Litak 2009).

The question of religious plurality and social cohesion, then, is not a straightforward matter. For the most part, majority churches are not trying to impose their religious beliefs and practices in exchange for the welfare services they provide. Indeed, neither are most of the Protestant minority groups. And the immigrant religious groups are mostly just tending to their own – partly because they fear or reject the values of the dominant culture, but mostly because their own informal networks of care are the most easily accessible and comfortable to them in the early years of acculturation.

The presence of multiple, minority religious groups still seems like a worrisome rending of the social fabric in nations accustomed to uniting around one church. In Padova, the researchers noted with some apprehension that immigrant churches were often formed along lines of national origin (Frisina and Cancellieri 2009). The reality, of course, is that there and
elsewhere religious membership and national origin have always been linked within the
majority churches themselves. To be Polish is to be Catholic, and to be Greek is to be Orthodox.
When immigrants form religious communities that link their faith and their ethnic culture, they
are simply doing what the majority culture does. But because the majority culture has
hundreds of ways, large and small, to reinforce that civic religious link, no single organization
has to do all the work. Social cohesion rests on memberships in any of dozens of majority-
culture groups. For immigrant Nigerian Pentecostals or immigrant Pakistani Muslims, all the
cultural and religious and caring work has to rest on a relatively thin organizational base that, as
a result, requires more intense individual and community investment to keep it going.

When native Europeans observe that immigrants are excessively religious, that is part of
what they are observing. The range of mechanisms for expressing social identity is much
narrower for a newcomer, and the identities may seem correspondingly more focused and
intense. A native Italian or Greek, on the other hand, can demonstrate social membership in
hundreds of ways that may or may not include personal participation in the national religious
traditions that they nevertheless would claim as their own (and into which they are sure to
baptize their children). The religious pillars of natives and immigrants may look very different,
but they always include both social and religious identification.

These countries vary enormously in the degree to which there is significant internal
cultural diversity. Greece, Germany, France, England, and Sweden are the places with
significant foreign-born populations, with Germany, France, and England experiencing the
highest levels of inter-group tension. Here the presence of Muslim minorities is a reality, but
throughout Europe the question of religious and cultural diversity is overwhelmingly conceived
as “the Muslim problem.” Even when the number of Muslims is tiny, the building of a new mosque in town or the appearance of a woman in a veil raises significant concern.

Still, one of the most important lessons of the WaVE research is that local communities are dealing with questions of inclusion and integration far better than the national pundits and presses would have us believe. There certainly are problems, but in community after community, this team found Muslims and other minorities living in relative harmony with the majority culture. They are neither fully integrated nor fully segregated. They neither embrace the culture around them nor reject it. They are finding ways both to tend to their own needs and to access the public and other majority-culture services available to them.

The political transitions of the last twenty years, and the emergence of the EU as a new economic and political entity have combined to raise the question of how the shifting nations and populations will live together. In nations whose core identities have long been linked (admittedly in complicated ways) to a single, established religious tradition, the growing presence of Muslims has raised unsettling questions about the role of religion in European identities and polities. That Muslims and others are choosing religious ways of organizing to express their differences and to serve the needs of their kin stands in contrast to their host societies, but in parallel to the experience of immigrants in the U.S. The long history of religious diversity in the U.S. has meant a relative openness to immigrant religious communities. If anything, organizing a mosque or temple is honored as a civic virtue. That has not prevented terrible backlash against Muslims post-9/11. Nor has it meant that persons who are not “white,” no matter what their religion, can easily find a place in American society. It simply
means that religious pluralism can be a sign of social cohesion, not always a sign of conflict or chaos.

In Europe, as well, the WaVE project found that plural religious organizations are participating in the delivery of social services, and they seem mostly not to find themselves in conflict with each other. The fundamental human value of mutual caring seems to sustain the work that is being done in many organizational settings – from families to churches to immigrant networks to welfare agencies. Whether the agent is a professional hired by the state or a volunteer working in an NGO or a distant cousin from the mosque, a great deal of the social provision present in European societies is likely fueled by a basic human value that finds expression in nearly every world religion. Love your neighbor as yourself.

References


