



Commissioned papers for the  
**Voices for the *Res Publica*: The Common Good in Europe**

# Religion

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## Germany: Religion

Hasret Karacuban

### Religious Diversity

The dominant religion in Germany is Christianity. Social and political structures in Germany are highly influenced by the Christian churches, which is best demonstrated by the fact that the biggest welfare organizations are connected to Catholic and Evangelical Churches and that one of the two big political parties, the CDU ('Christlich Demokratische Union' – 'Christian Democratic Union'), finds its main motivation in a Christian world-view.

Nevertheless, Germany has developed a noticeable religious diversity during the last decades, mainly because of the high number of immigrants and their children from various countries. Moreover, a large number of Germans have left the Christian churches, either converting to rather popular religions like Buddhism, or joining one of the various religious sects. We now have about 50,000,000 Christians, 3,300,000 Muslims, 200,000 Jews, 90,000 Hindus and 245,000 Buddhists in Germany.

While most of the smaller religious communities are hardly noticed, Muslim communities are closely observed. The reasons for this special attention are the high number of Muslim immigrants in Germany since the 1960s, their distinctive features such as their skin and hair colour and clothing, the war on international terrorism, which dominates the media coverage and links terrorist acts to Islam and the fact that Muslim communities are growing fast while the Christian churches are struggling with the ongoing high rate of secession. But the main problem for the Muslim communities in Germany is the fact that they have not received acknowledgement as religious communities in a legal sense. Three of the four umbrella organizations were founded by Turkish immigrants of the first generation and have differing political positions. Only the 'Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland' ('the Central Council of Muslims in Germany') has defined itself from the beginning as a German organization and has been trying to unite the

umbrella organizations in order to achieve the legal status of an acknowledged religious community and to speak with one voice as German Muslims. Finally, in 2007, these four umbrella organizations came together in the *Koordinationsrat der Muslime in Deutschland* (the Coordination Council of Muslims in Germany) and are now working on the process of becoming an acknowledged religious community.

The Jewish communities in Germany have also been experiencing a crucial change since the 1990s. After the collapse of the USSR a large number of people of German origin came as 'repatriates' (*Aussiedler*) and 'late repatriates' (*Spätaussiedler*) to Germany. Many of them were Jews. Before 1989 there were about 30,000 Jews in Germany. After 1990 their number rose continuously. Now we have 105,000 Jews organized in the *Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland* (the Central Council of Jews in Germany), 5,000 in the *Union Progressiver Juden e.V.* (the Union of Progressive Jews) and 90,000, who do not belong to any Jewish organization, in Germany. So 170,000 of the 200,000 Jews in Germany are immigrants, or have an immigrant background. This change in the community structure of Jews in Germany confronts the Jewish communities with new challenges which concern immigration, rather than religion.

Another growing religious community is the Buddhist community. With 245,000 members, the Buddhist community is the third biggest religion after Christianity and Islam. Even though the Buddhist community is numerically bigger than the Jewish community, it hardly draws attention to itself. The only occasions when Buddhism gets some media coverage are the visits of the Dalai Lama and public expressions of criticism about Chinese-Tibet politics, as we saw recently before and during the 2008 Olympic Games.

All in all, Germany is facing a new, more diverse religious landscape caused by secularization, immigration and cultural globalization and must get used to this situation. Interestingly, most of the German population is ignorant or unaware of these fundamental changes which affect non-Christian immigrants and their children, while these 'guests' have already settled down in Germany, both physi-

cally and psychologically. So the (re-) construction of the religious dimension of German identity is a real challenge for society.

### Social structure

The social structure of the Federal Republic of Germany, seen through the eyes of religion, shows that religious minorities in Germany are facing numerous difficulties, not merely because of their differing faiths but because of their immigration history (*Migrationsgeschichte*). Jewish and Muslim communities happen to be the religious minorities that permanently attract attention on a level which permeates the whole society. Both also happen to have evolved mainly through immigration processes which have brought significant numbers of individuals to Germany. Both are struggling with economic issues such as unemployment. And both have to deal with racist hatred in the shape of antisemitism and islamophobia. None of these issues is linked to the religious belief of the individuals and communities concerned, but to their differing ethnicity. By contrast, for instance, the Buddhist community, half of which is German by origin, has no complaints of this sort.

### Historical background

Key to understanding the religious dimension of German identity is understanding the historical background which confronts the German people. Germany is the country that caused two world wars, one of which aimed to erase the Jewish people and ended in the Holocaust, probably the most horrific crime ever committed by mankind. The entire identity of the Federal Republic of Germany is grounded in the shock of the Holocaust and the promise never to let anything like this happen again. Over sixty years after World War II, Germany is still keeping the memory of its cruelty alive. It is trying to take responsibility for the crimes of the past and will most likely continue to do so for at least another sixty years.

This historical consciousness made it possible for Germans to tolerate ethnic, cultural and religious diversity and kept German nationalism to a relatively low level. In fact the generation of 1968 was not even happy to be German at all. They were

ashamed of their history and confronted their parents with the role they played in it.

But in recent years we are experiencing a new patriotism. Germans are beginning to develop a positive relationship with their national identity, which is generally regarded as a kind of healing process. However, at the same time, right-wing extremist parties are growing because of their anti-Muslim propaganda. Criticism and fear of Islam have reached mainstream society, which makes it quite difficult to locate the borderline between conservative positions and right-wing extremist views. Because of this trend, statements such as 'they (the Germans) will do with us what they did with the Jews during World War II' can be frequently heard from the Muslim community. Frankly this is quite unlikely to happen, but it is a marker of the anxiety the Holocaust and the growing patriotism/nationalism are causing for religious minorities.

### The German identity of religious minorities

While mainstream society thinks of religious minorities as 'guests' in Germany, most individuals belonging to these religious minorities regard themselves as Germans. In particular, young Muslim immigrants of the second and third generations, who have been socialized in Germany, have a very positive relationship with the German legal system (particularly with the *Grundgesetz* – the Basic Constitutional Law) and with German society. Their understanding of German society is determined by the rule of law, human and civil rights, freedom, the merit principle and multiculturalism. This is what they have been taught in school and it is easy for them to locate themselves in this image of Germany. So they are willing to participate in the political, economic and social systems in order to shape and improve their society.

Young Muslims are founding registered associations with the purpose of serving the community. There are numerous Muslim parents associations, women associations and youth associations trying to build bridges between mainstream society, or, to use a new term, the *bio-deutsche Gesellschaft* (bio-German society) and religious and ethnic minorities. Organizations like the *Begegnungs- und Fortbildungszentrum für muslimische Frauen e.V.*

(Meetings and education centre of Muslim women) or the *Muslimische Jugend in Deutschland e.V.* (Muslim Youth in Germany) offer community service and promote and practise dialogue between the Muslim community and mainstream society. There is also a group of young Jews and Muslims who have realized that the Jewish and Muslim communities in Germany have a lot in common regarding their status in German society and are interested in learning more about and from each other. The JuMuDia (standing for Jewish-Muslim Dialogue) has been founded on the StudiVZ, an online social network for students, and will soon become a registered association.

It is these young people, these cultural hybrids, we must put our hopes in. It will not be the state, or large companies, social scientists or traditional institutions who will form a German and European *res publica*. The future will be shaped by these cultural hybrids, who have internalized the ideas of human and civil rights, freedom, the rule of law and diversity. And this is not because of their intelligence, ethical correctness or outstanding skills, but because the demographic trends and globalization are demanding diversity.

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*Hasret Karacuban MA is a sociologist and spokesperson for the 'Green Muslims' Working Committee, 'Die Grünen' North Rhine-Westphalia.*

## The Netherlands: Religion

Famile Arslan

In the past few years, religion has been a hotly debated topic in the Netherlands and elsewhere, and this will remain so for some time to come. Obviously, the debate around religion and the manifestation of religious groups is not limited to the Dutch borders; it has become an international issue partly because of the attacks on 9/11, as well as the period leading up to the attacks, which has influenced the current climate. Everybody has a view on religion and many people ask whether there is still a place for religion in public life. At the same time, this negative attention stimulates quite a few people to delve deeper into religion.

There are two competing visions on the role of religion: there is one group that considers religion as a significant social and public factor, while there are others who are keen to keep religion as far away as possible from the social and public realm. Even though I think that there is some validity in both points of view, my own personal preference is for people to have the freedom to adopt or reject a religious belief. I am convinced, however, that the government should remain detached and should not be allowed/able to interfere with religion and religious issues. The Dutch government is not entirely straightforward in this respect.

The Netherlands upholds the principle of the separation of church and state. We can speak of a separation of church and state when the political and church powers are not in the same hands and when they do not have any significant influence upon each other. This means that the state and the church each look after their own affairs and do not interfere with the other or tell the other what to do. This division is thus first and foremost about keeping an organizational and governmental separation between these two powers. Public servants do not meddle in church affairs and church officials do not meddle in affairs of the state. The separation of church and state is therefore not about a separation of religion and politics, even though that is a common misconception.

However, this principle is not part of the Constitution of the Netherlands. Furthermore it is not sufficiently legally defined, which is why there is now a lot of discussion/noise regarding the meaning and repercussions of this principle. It is worth mentioning that the principle of separation between church and state has always been controversial, while the definition itself remains unclear.

This principle cannot be considered in isolation from three other fundamental principles. First of all, there is the principle of freedom of religion, which means among other things that every religion, every denomination is simply *allowed* to exist: the state should not hinder the establishment of a religion or religious community, nor should the state make it difficult or impossible for a religious community to exist. Secondly, there is the principle of equality of religions and churches: they ought to be treated equally by the state under equal conditions. These principles are good values but they can be at loggerheads with the last principle, namely that of the neutrality of the state.

In the last few years we have had much discussion in the Netherlands about rights and their embodiment. This is partly as a result of the imposed European identity, which is why the Netherlands felt the need to re-emphasize these Dutch characteristics. There is also another reason, which is not insignificant, and that is the fact that Dutch society was confronted with a new religious group, which it had created itself. A non-homogenous group of people with a similar cultural-religious background has been shaped into a new religious minority: the present-day Muslims.

Once the new religious minority manifested itself as a group and wanted to claim the rights and their embodiment of which the Netherlands had always been so proud, it turned out that they were not that natural after all. Or at least not for everybody. The special schools are an example of this. The new Dutch with an Islamic background decided at some point to set up primary schools with an Islamic outlook. Even though they had the right to do this according to the Dutch Constitution, this decision created a storm. There were discussions to scrap article 23, which forms the constitutional basis for this right. Even though this issue also affected

other religious groups, the focus was firmly on the Islamic schools. Just when Muslims, quite sensibly, started to make use of this law, many laws were questioned, while the separation of church and state was referred to all the time in order to curtail these liberties. The same liberties that the Netherlands had been so proud of were being questioned when Muslims made a claim on them.

At the moment there is a fierce discussion surrounding Islamic marriages. An Islamic marriage is a ceremony whereby two people vow to live together in the presence of a number of witnesses and a religious leader, but it has no legal implications. It is not recognized by any institution, but it is being questioned although it is a generally accepted form of cohabitation. Yet again the separation of church and state is referred to in order to present religion as problematic.

It must be pointed out that religion has always played a part in Dutch society. Dutch society has never been neutral in terms of religion. On the contrary, it is one of the defining characteristics of Dutch society. For instance, the Dutch anthem is full of Christian elements; there is a prayer on the coinage; the head of state is inaugurated in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam; gifts to the church or the mosque are not liable to income tax; religious groups are entitled to airtime on the public broadcasting system, which is subsidized by the government. The same is true for areas such as spiritual care in prisons and in the army. What stands out most among developments in recent years is the creation of an imam training course. This is not the result of a societal need but of a purely political decision. By setting up such a training module, the government hopes to be able to influence the Muslims and their emancipation process. Prior to an imam training course, there needs to be an *umma*, a faith community, which can define the role of the imam as well as the need in society. The government still needs to keep a reserved stance when it comes to interfering in religious communities.

It does seem in recent years as if there were only Muslims living in the Netherlands. Not a day passes without an article in the press about Muslims or Islam. Naturally, there is often a negative undertone. The idea that Islam is incom-

patible with democracy is thus created, and the government, the media and the Islam-bashers search for confirmation. Cultural, not religious, expressions are also labelled as Islamic and are used against Muslims. Islamic fundamentalism is juxtaposed with secular/atheist fundamentalism. Both forms of fundamentalism are extremes that propagate fear and division.

Religion in the Netherlands has a past and a future. However, it is crucial for the cohesive fundamental principles to be implemented consistently. Europe has created a new religious minority. How it deals with its minorities is a challenge, while at the same time it is also an indication of its attitude towards human rights. The current climate does not reveal a great deal of respect for human rights, while it has always been a stick for the Netherlands and Europe to beat other countries with.

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*Famile Arslan is a lawyer with her own law firm in The Hague.*

## Poland: Religion

Zuzanna Radzik

When talking about *res publica* in Poland, it is impossible not to bring religion into the discussion. Since 94 per cent of Poles declare themselves to be believers, it is obviously an important factor in everyday and political life. At the same time religious discourse in Poland mainly relates to the dominant Catholic Church, which is still one of the major players. Statistically speaking, 39 per cent of Poles state that they believe in their own way (within the framework of Christianity or of non-Christian traditions) and 55 per cent claim that they adhere to the rules of the Catholic Church. There is therefore no other way, when talking about religion in public life in Poland and its contribution to *res publica*, than to talk about the Catholic Church in Poland.

### Weaker but still a giant

The Polish Catholic Church, compared to other countries, still enjoys a very high percentage of participation, meaning that people attend Sunday services regularly (45.8 per cent of Catholics). Interestingly, we have not noted a major decline in participation over the last twenty years and the number of those who take Communion has even risen. This shows a surprising stability, whereas many expected to see increased secularization as a result of democratization and of Poland joining the EU. At the same time some statistics demonstrate other trends. In spring 2008 a Gallup poll was published about the level of trust shown by Poles in their religious leaders; at 8.8 per cent, this was one of the lowest in Europe, far behind Germany (30 per cent) and Ireland, where sex scandals have ruined that trust (42 per cent). This may reveal a popular mistrust of priests and a tendency to be slightly anti-clerical, but is a result of last year's situation, when bishops and priests were seen as anti-heroes. As for the level of belief, statistics may not be the best tool to research it, but they can give some insight. Another poll (I. Borowska & T. Doktor, Kraków 2002) shows that 80 per cent of Poles practise their religion regularly or irregularly, and have some association with the Catholic Church,

but only 15 per cent try to deepen their religious life in everyday situations, and only 30 per cent are knowledgeable about Catholic doctrine.

We can therefore say that there is a wide identification with Catholicism, although, on the doctrinal level, it is often very superficial and without any real understanding. Nevertheless, full Churches do not make the news, and there is no real evangelizing work aimed at adults. What is alarming is that we find that the most significant atheism is to be found in the 18-25 age group, who were, paradoxically, those who studied catechism at school. Moreover, middle school students are the group who are the least interested in doctrine and who do not accept the moral and sexual teachings of the Church. It is therefore easy to foresee a future decline in participation and commitment to the Catholic Church.

There is undoubtedly not enough internal dialogue within the Church in its decision-making process. The influence and involvement of lay people is limited. There are not many ways for lay people to exert any real influence on decisions that are taken. A symbol of this lack of cooperation is the Church of Providence, which is currently under construction in Warsaw. It is obvious that people do not want or need this big sanctuary, but a previous bishop decided to start its construction. People voted against this idea 'with their wallets' by not donating money. Unfortunately, the ground was already broken, which left no choice but to finish the building. This is an ironic symptom of the failure to listen to the needs of believers.

One may simply say that it is enough that the Polish Church still has jobs for its priests and that the hierarchy does not need to ask lay people for help in running this enterprise. But it is all a lot more complicated than that. Priests who wish to build parish life on the involvement of their parishioners complain that they are passive, that they expect to be looked after, have Sunday services and nothing more. Certainly many people do not wish to make any personal contribution to parish life.

At the same time we have a large number of Catholic organizations and movements, which bring together 2.5 million people mostly for prayer (i.e. 1,357,925 Rosary groups) and charity groups. This

shows that the activity of lay people is channeled in meaningful, but not powerfully connected spheres of life. However, one needs to be careful not to see these groups in a stereotypical way. Even retired ladies gathered in a pious circle devoted to Our Lady in a small town may hold almost heretical ideas, and have a rebellious approach towards the hierarchical Church.

In fact, most often Catholics feel that 'the Church' means something external, that it is run by its own secret rules, and by people they do not know. What infects our Church is too often the arrogance of its hierarchy and the ignorance and passivity of its lay people. The remedy might be for both parties to understand that they both represent 'the Church', and moreover, that they are 'the Church' together.

### **Black cloud?**

Being weaker but still a giant, the Church is and will remain one of the main players on the Polish public scene. The World Values Survey placed Poland in the position of one of the countries in which religion has the highest presence in its public life (coming just after the US). This presence, or more precisely its form, is a matter of many disagreements within the Church itself and in society at large. Some of the problems with the presence of the Church in public discourse are reflections of its internal conflicts. There are many reasons to question the Church's presence and to criticize it, but I would hesitate to use the metaphor of the 'black cloud' which casts its shadow over the entire country, as used in the Polish round table session.

The Polish round table happened to take place in June 2007, during the lifetime of the previous parliament, when we were all struggling with the political situation in our country. There were no supporters of the ruling coalition in the room, but we still strongly disagreed about numerous things. As can be seen in Diana Pinto's report, the Church was one of the issues about which we argued heatedly.

It is not difficult for me to understand where the anger of our lay participants came from. I imagine that there was no Catholic in the room who would agree with the form of the presence the Church had

chosen in this last parliamentary period. We were all disgusted by the most ridiculous coalition that was being planned and negotiated on the advice of one of the bishops and his office. The Church's hierarchy did not hesitate to put pressure on members of parliament and many of them helped the Church, even without being asked. One such case involved giving a state subsidy to fund the construction of the Sanctuary of the Providence. Another example was the constant presence of government members and other politicians in the Radio Maryja audition, a radio station which causes many problems, which is still run by priests and which many bishops support. I am aware that such cases are only the tip of the iceberg. Personally, I feel embarrassed and regret that the representatives of the Church of which I am a member, involved itself in political games and did not hesitate to exploit the situation. And yet, I still disagree with the 'black cloud' metaphor.

Condemning the Church *en bloc* benefits no one; its presence is too important and it is such an integral part of the fabric of Polish life.

Much more is going on behind the scenes than is shown by the media. It may seem controversial to say this to those who disagree with the Church's worldview, but the Church organizes people's minds and provides stability to cope with a changing reality. People feel less lost in their surrounding world. Of course what people are taught is one thing but how they behave is quite another, but people need answers, especially those who are not highly educated, or able to search for them independently.

Being a member of a parish is, for many, almost the only experience they have of belonging to a group. The parish itself is an umbrella for numerous small groups. Not only those who pray or discuss the Bible, but also those who do charitable work, help disabled people, the elderly, the poor, or provide legal advice. They provide day care institutions for the disabled, shelters or kitchens for the homeless and jobs for the unemployed, all of which are organised, sponsored and run by parishes. In this way they support and enrich their local community. The Church and the religious orders run big charitable institutions, orphanages and homes for

addicts; they work on the streets with children and prostitutes. One should add to that the activities and organizations of lay people who do what they do because of their religious association.

The CBOS report gives an interesting insight into the beliefs and religious practices of Polish citizens. Published in 2000, it is a wide-ranging survey carried out between 1986 and 1999, which shows a visible connection between the level of religious practice and engagement in communal life. This engagement includes voting in elections (both national and local) and involvement in non-governmental organizations. The authors conclude that since the establishment of the Third Republic of Poland (in 1989), the religious attitudes of Poles noticeably encourage civic attitudes and active participation in the democratic changes which are happening in the country.

In short, all this contributes to the network of help, support, social life and activities and also to the formation of good citizens on the local and national level. Far from being a dark cloud casting its shadow over the entire country, the Church may initiate and inspire activities because it is spread over the entire country. With all its limitations, it is the biggest and most powerful non-governmental organization in Poland.

### Church and the *res publica*

The Catholic Church has a long tradition of being the main power in national life. This started with Partitions in the 18th century and continued during all the country's misfortunes during the 19th and 20th centuries. The situation during the Communist era again regularized the position of the Catholic Church since it provided a space of freedom and supported the opposition movement. Unfortunately for itself, the Church failed the test at the beginning of the democratic era. Religious leaders constantly wanted to influence political life. There were some famous cases where parish priests and bishops even suggested for whom people should vote. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the new system opinions about the involvement of the Church in politics were sympathetic towards the Church, but by 2007, fifty percent of Poles wanted Church leaders to wield less influence in politics. It looks

as if the Church lost the trust of the public through its political involvement.

At the same time, it is hard to imagine the absence of the Church from significant debates. I believe that it is not its presence so much as its form that has been controversial. Moreover, for my part, as a practising Catholic and theologian, the way the Church often took part in a debate was unacceptable. A letter from the episcopate to members of parliament about *in vitro* fertilization is symptomatic of this. In this letter bishops did not gently request attention, but demanded obedience and used very harsh language.

*In vitro* fertilization touches the same delicate problem of sanctity of life as abortion and therefore the Church cannot withdraw from the debate about it. In my opinion it has every right to publicly express its opinion about this problem and even to write to parliament, but certainly not to use such a tone.

In conclusion, I agree with the essence of the Church's message on both abortion and *in vitro* fertilization, but I disagree with the language and methods used. I believe that they are counter-productive and do not convince anyone.

Basically, the Church should understand that they are only one of the players in public discourse. They might be listened to but will not necessarily be obeyed. Someone also suggested after the first *in vitro* discussion, that the Church should let the experts – the doctors, specialists and lay people – speak on its behalf, because they are regarded as more competent in that field than any bishops.

Generally, the way debates are conducted in the Polish public scene resembles the polarized discussion of our seminar. We were supposed to be able to talk, but I must admit that the 'dark cloud' made me think that we were not really able to do so. This is symptomatic, because if lay intellectuals and more moderate Catholics are not able to talk peacefully with each other than one loses hope that a broader discussion between more radical parties could be possible.

I believe that both sides are guilty of not listening to the other.

Hopefully, the world is not divided between anti-clerical liberals and dumb, fundamentalist Catholics (or generally religious people). Between those extremes there is a moderate majority who may and do talk with each other, when it is not paralyzed by generalizations and polarizations. Again, from what I have seen, both sides, religious and non-religious, are guilty of polarizing debate. This definitely does not serve the cause of public debate, nor can it help build the common good. As a first step toward real debate, we should try to get to know each other, but the *real* 'other', not the imaginary 'other'. More care in listening and defining our opponents is necessary.

Instead of a conclusion, I want to answer the question about my own personal policy in respect to this diagnosis. As shown above, I often disagree with the ways the Church manifests itself in public life. At the same time I consider myself to be an 'open orthodox' Catholic – someone who may discuss with people from outside and inside the Church, but who stays within the framework of orthodoxy in its essential teachings. I believe that I have the right to question some of the teachings and forms of the Church's life, or at least to ask for more coherent explanations. At the same time, I believe in my right to express my voice as a citizen in public life, even if that voice is inspired by Catholic teaching. I therefore have both rights and responsibilities as a Polish citizen and a Roman Catholic.

When someone sees the Church as 'a black cloud' I react in two ways: I think it is an unfair judgement, but also that I have not done enough to show the other face of the Church. Therefore my personal strategy would be to help build a platform that can bring Catholics together and enable them to discuss difficult issues of faith, ethics, law and social life and prepare to take part in public discourse. It is not so much about generating that voice but about making it stronger. Many Catholics disagree with the negative aspects of the presence of the Church in public discourse, but their voice is dispersed. In short: be louder, more visible, show the new quality of the presence of

the Church in public life. If we cannot count on the Church hierarchy to provide a moderate Catholic voice in public discourse, we need to speak up for ourselves.

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*Zuzanna Radzik is a theologian involved in Polish-Jewish and Christian Jewish dialogue in Poland, and a member of the Centre of Culture and Dialogue in Krakow.*

## Sweden: Religion

*A non-religious country with untouchable religions*

**Maria Södling**

Sweden is often referred to as the world's most secular country. Some would argue that this is a misleading description. Surveys on people's philosophy of life show that the majority claims to believe in 'something'. Indeed most Swedes still belong to the former State Church (the Church of Sweden is also reckoned to be the world's largest Lutheran community) and the culture sections of newspapers regularly deal with spiritual matters.

However, in terms of secularization the harsh statistics provide as clear a picture as that provided by religious sociologists. Fewer and fewer Swedes define themselves as practising Christians. Once other experts have had their say, there seems little space for the church's crisis managers to talk about the spiritual needs brought to the surface by national disasters, such as tsunamis. The Confirmation ceremony, which for previous generations marked the transition to adulthood, now attracts ever fewer young aspirants. The overall picture is one of institutionalized religion becoming marginalized: in terms of personal beliefs, a religious presence in public life and collective rites in day-to-day living. Yet the country's bishops are experiencing a growing interest in spiritual matters, and attention to that interest is gradually becoming a part of their job description; in the same way university theologians are finding themselves increasingly invited to take part in debates on morality in society and on the meaning of life.

Religion – which, in the Swedish context, continues for the most part to mean Christianity, in the Church of Sweden mould – as a common, unifying force and as the structure for society, has become significantly weakened. Is this a good or a bad thing? Good in the sense that the narrow space that the Lutheran view of society allowed the individual has been replaced by the freedom to shape one's own life that modernity affords. Good in the sense that ecclesiastics are no longer allowed to define the proper place of women in society in general, or sexuality in particular. Good in the sense that

monopolistic religious demands no longer prevent people from seeking their own way in life. Above all, secularization is a good thing in the sense that no religious affiliation or adherence to a non-Christian faith is any longer defined as 'other'. In addition, when the Church of Sweden was disestablished from the state, the concept of the respect of the government for its citizens' freedom of choice and equality was strengthened: no one religion or way of life now takes precedence over, or is *a priori* more the norm than any other.

On the other hand secularization can be a bad thing. Throughout its history, Christianity has provided rites and a vocabulary to express faith, gratitude, anxiety, guilt and a sense of meaninglessness. For repetitive, everyday life and for tragic events it has provided a religious repertoire, a language that not only expresses people's own experiences, but also carries forward centuries of experience. The theology that has been formulated in Bible exposition, sermons and hymns has given an understanding of the condition of other human beings and an insight into how previous generations conducted their lives. If one sees religion as a language, this means that, as a result of secularization, people today are at risk of becoming illiterate in both religious and existential terms. In saying this I do not mean to imply that the non-religious view is superficial or bankrupt, but rather that the experience of life as expressed by religion is becoming a world to which fewer and fewer people have access. And the range marketed under the brand name of 'spirituality' – covering everything from healing to colonic irrigation – is often seen as a poor alternative.

If we see this existential trivialization as a lack in the individual's life, we also see that our modern ignorance of religion has implications for society. It appears to be a contradiction, but the fact is that with secularization, religion has gained space it never occupied before. The background to this, I would say, is that when religion is marginalized it also acquires a distinct space in society – a minimal one, of course, but one of its own. It has therefore been freed from the demands of ordinary life in terms of reason and comprehensibility. Religion has become something special, a 'language game' with its own system of logic that cannot be synchro-

nized with other languages, let alone communicated. Secondly, this religious sphere has acquired an aura that can only be defined as sacred. Time and again we see normal, secularized Swedes who, though they may feel alienated from, or who even dislike religion, nevertheless express respect and even reverence for the religious. The response from the religious sphere is to demand respect for its unique identity and above all a desire to prevent its faith being 'violated'.

Paradoxically, therefore, we see how an increasingly non-religious society has acquired religions that are untouchable, beyond communication, beyond criticism. The current age-old debate on women priests shows how unprecedented gender discrimination is treated seriously – even with great respect – just because it is formulated in religious terms. Political deference acceding to demands for religious schools is another example of how otherwise undisputed values – children are entitled to an all-round education – are anxiously giving way to claims made in the name of religion.

### Religion's contribution to the *res publica*

This is undeniably a bleak picture: not only existential impoverishment, but a society in which a combination of alienation, ignorance and unquestioning respect allows space for the destructive side of religion. In light of this destructiveness, is there any reason to want religion back again? I think there is. Firstly, for the simple reason that people are religious. Secondly, religion could be a constructive force in people's lives and in society in our own time. But at the same time as recognising that people are and want to be religious, with good reason, it must also be kept in check.

The basis for such a dialectic approach (seeing religion as both a good and a bad thing) is the concept of religion as a human creation. Theology and church history show that religion is not given directly by God, but is always shaped by, and mediated by, people. This means that a religion is not a uniform entity, but rather a cluster of spiritual and intellectual traditions. In addition no religion is a ready-made intellectual and moral package that one can either unpack and accept, or choose to reject. On the contrary, all religious people are

constantly faced with the choice of religious traditions and individual interpretations: how do I read the sacred texts? How do I read the historical dogmas, how do I justify my ethical stance? Here all believers have an intellectual and a moral responsibility. How to choose is not obvious, but there needs to be a minimal theological criterion, by which I mean that religion must respect and promote equality and the unique value of the individual. In light of such a criterion certain religious views are morally impossible (for example, to defend apartheid with the argument that God has created different peoples), while other interpretations will be consistent with the way people want to shape their lives, in a decent manner.

The question is where and by whom this constructive type of religion is formulated? The task of creating a creative theology rests first and foremost with the religious communities. Here it may be noted that in church history the 21<sup>st</sup> century is often described as being unique. Never before has the church faced such challenges, we hear, as it does in this millennium of pluralism. But it is a description ignorant of history, which overlooks the fact that as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Church of Sweden was in a similar situation. Under the old peasant society system, workers and the intellectual bourgeoisie became increasingly alienated from the Church of Sweden, which was associated with authority, lack of freedom and oppression. The Church's theological response, in the nationalist language of the time ('the Swedish people a people of God') confined all the people in an all-inclusive Christian community. The basis for this inclusive theology was a Lutheran anthropology which claimed that everyone, regardless of personal piety or moral character, is a sinner and in equal need of God's grace. The only problem was that this concept of equality, or similarity, was targeted at people who were indifferent, reluctant or directly hostile to being included in a religious community under its well-paid clergy. Even today, a hundred years on, pluralism in society is a fact, as is people's alienation from the religious world. And even today it seems natural to regard the concept of human equality and a common existential situation as tools for managing this diversity. But there is one crucial difference between then and now. What the philosophy of the last few

decades and social debate have clearly shown is the significant effect of failing to recognize one's neighbour as different – or as different as he or she wants to be recognized. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the church cannot meet the needs of pluralism in society by preaching equality and similarity, while ignoring difference. In a pluralist society the church must recognize the particular while affirming the universal – at one and the same time.

The contribution of religious communities to the *res publica* will therefore be to formulate a theology which argues for human equality, without losing sight of difference. With their academic and practical knowledge of religion as a social phenomenon, church theologians are also in a position to identify and analyse destructive theology and destructive forms of religion. But ultimately, responsibility for the type of religious critique that every society needs rests with society itself. Just as the collective trains first-class medical students, political scientists and technologists, society has an obligation to train skilled religious experts. Some of them will work in churches and communities, where they can make use of their academic knowledge in theological reflection and practice. But most will operate in a non-ecclesiastical context – as teachers, politicians, officials, journalists – where their religious skills will be necessary for identifying and confronting destructive religious messages.

Religion is not a good thing in itself, but good religion can have a positive effect. In this sense theology and religious practices that affirm people's similarities and differences contribute to the *res publica*. To formulate such a theology is the responsibility of society. Being on our guard against destructive religion is a common task.

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*Maria Södling is a theologian.*

## The United Kingdom: Religion

Jonathan Magonet

When discussing the state of religion in the UK today certain general propositions seem to be commonplace. The first is the decline in the importance and authority of the Church of England. Church attendances have been down for decades and, like other faith communities, the church is affected by the general decline in commitment to organized religion as a natural component of family life. In part this can be traced to the changes in British society since the sixties, with greater independence of young people, smaller families, breakdown in traditional family structures and the creation of newer ones which do not fit so obviously or comfortably into traditional religious frameworks. Where there is growth in the church it is to be found in more radical and conservative areas, reflecting the kind of polarization that is also widespread. In the case of the church it is in the growth of the evangelical movements, where a stronger commitment to faith in a somewhat simplified set of beliefs and expectations, and to a selective set of 'traditional teachings', seems to provide the certainties and security that some find very attractive. For such movements the middle ground, with its classical *laissez-faire* approach to individual commitment and practice, and openness to a variety of changes, is seen as compromised. So alongside the loss of authority of the church establishment, there is not just indifference but also a pronounced move towards polarization in terms of values and related political stances. There seems to be little sympathy for the problems of the Archbishop of Canterbury in trying to hold together the disparate churches that make up the worldwide Anglican Communion. Issues like the ordination of women still continue to raise problems, despite the equality of gender roles that is assumed, if not always adhered to, in the wider society. Even more dramatic is the question of homosexuality, where liberal human values come into direct conflict with perceived divine commandments and supposedly 'natural' feelings. Concerns about the ordination and promotion of known homosexuals, and about same sex commitment ceremonies, are challenges that liberal theologians feel committed to address, while their conserva-

tive opponents see these as reasons for leaving the Church of England, either for Roman Catholicism or for newer independent movements.

If there are attacks on the church from within, there has also been a recent trend in attacks from without, with the appearance of two best-selling books: Richard Dawkins' 'The God Delusion' (2006) and Christopher Hitchens' 'God is Not Great' (2007), which are seen as articulating the disquiet of ordinary people at crimes and violence committed in the name of religion. Curiously, many of the challenges they pose are precisely those that are addressed by liberal elements within organized religion, who once again find themselves under attack from within and without, and by virtue of their intellectual and spiritual breadth of perspective, unable to respond with the same simplistic clarity and force of their opponents. Rabbi Lionel Blue once pointed out that he had never met anyone crazed with liberalism!

If the church is seen as being in decline, there is conversely a growth in the number of adherents to Islam, and this calls for a different kind of attention in the wider society. The principal emotion is one of anxiety, clearly caused by the new reality of terrorist threats following 9/11 and 7/7, but also by the popular media's reporting, and sometimes exploiting, of the fears that have arisen. But it is possible that in addition to the physical threat that people fear there is another unexpressed dimension beneath the surface, which can only be described as a kind of spiritual envy. How can these people be such committed believers in our secular age? How can they hold so fast to their tradition to the point of giving their lives? How can they recruit new members when we cannot? Are we missing something? Or are they so very different from us that we should really see them as a threatening alien force? But if there is something missing in our lives, is it the Church that can provide it? Surely that means surrendering our hard-earned independence and freedom to do whatever we like, and accepting a whole series of moral, intellectual and practical constraints? These various emotions came together following a seemingly innocuous statement by the Archbishop of Canterbury about the possibility of incorporating aspects of *Shariya* family law in the UK to meet the domestic needs of

Muslims. Though such has been the case for the Jewish community for a long time, this parallel, equally limited, suggestion invoked a media frenzy, feeding those whose paranoia has already seen a threat in every Muslim. Though the issue is of religious significance it cannot be separated from issues of racism and Islamophobia that are part of British culture. (I do not know whether similar arrangements are also made for the legal recognition of aspects of Hindu religion, but it is interesting that this does not seem to be a subject that is raised. Moreover, that no fears were expressed about the fact that Jewish law is similarly recognized suggests that Jews have become assimilated into some kind of acceptably British identity that is not seen as a threat.)

Having mentioned Judaism, one can see parallels in the problems confronting the Church of England. The orthodox 'United Synagogue', headed by the Chief Rabbi, has effectively been the 'established church' for the Jewish community, and all other movements, Liberal and Progressive, Reform, Conservative have been marginalized. However their relative growth in the post-war period, now collectively about one-third of affiliated Jews, makes them increasingly part of a new emerging 'establishment'. One cause for the growth must be in the provision of rabbinic training through the creation of Leo Baeck College. In contrast, the United Synagogue's venerable 'Jews' College' has effectively closed and rabbinic leadership has had to be imported from Israel, or through the willingness of Lubavitch Chasidim to infiltrate the community, with some success but also with the disenfranchising of classical 'middle of the road' Orthodox members. Parallel to the Christian 'right', it is the ultra-orthodox community that is growing in a period of continuing numerical decline of the community as a whole, largely due to their high birth-rate. It remains to be seen whether their demographic success will fulfil expectations of a move to the religious 'right' of the community as a whole in the coming decades.

It has been necessary to discuss the 'organized' religious communities, but this does not fully address the complexity of religious and spiritual issues that are also to be encountered in Britain today. The quest for 'spirituality' outside the tradi-

tional frameworks is another feature of contemporary British life. One can point to the growth of 'alternative' spiritual movements from New Age to various 'cults'. Yet at its most simplistic level, it might be suggested that the need for ritual in life and communal shared experiences that were once the particular role of the church have been replaced by the secular options of the pub, health clubs and the club scene for a younger generation, and by football across the generations. The need for spiritual models formerly provided by Biblical figures and spiritual icons is now expressed by a culture of personalities and pop idols, with the tabloids writing the scripture of their lives and loves. This new reality found its greatest expression in the extraordinary catharsis acted out by virtually the entire population (with the notable exception of the Queen, the 'Defender of the Faith') following the death of Princess Diana. Here, otherwise unfulfilled spiritual yearnings seem to have been expressed, but perhaps also a deep-seated sense of guilt at the superficiality and emptiness of such a culture of personality, since she was literally hounded to death by the very journalists who fed and fed off the myth.

While the above may appear to be dismissive, it is only because of the degree to which media coverage determines the extent to which any religious phenomenon is taken seriously. However, what goes unnoticed and unheralded is precisely the regular rhythm of religious life conducted in local churches, synagogues, mosques and temples throughout the country. Such grass-roots communities, representing the many different ethnic groups that make up contemporary multicultural and multi-faith Britain, are essential building blocks of civil society. At their best they exemplify the values of mutual support, welfare for the weak or elderly, education for young and old alike, charity for those in need, occasional political interventions, democratic systems of governance and outreach across their particular faith framework to others. The dramas of individual life transitions are reflected, joys shared and sorrows comforted and festival cycles link communities with one another and to their respective historical roots. It may well be that with the current economic downturn, anxieties will send people back to those kinds of supportive communities and the prayer life that

might, at times, simply be by rote, will recover its edge. If a spiritual awareness is a component of human existence, it is not the formal context in which it is expressed that is important, but the values that it exemplifies and generates within society.

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*Rabbi Professor Jonathan Magonet is the recently retired Principal of Leo Baeck College. For over forty years he has been engaged in interfaith dialogue with Christians and Muslims throughout Europe.*

jpr/ Institute for Jewish Policy Research  
7-8 Market Place  
London W1W 8AG  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7436 1553  
Email: [jpr@jpr.org.uk](mailto:jpr@jpr.org.uk)

[www.jpr.org.uk](http://www.jpr.org.uk)