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BRILL

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Article Review



The Changing State of Religion in Europe Over Time

Robin Gill

Emeritus Professor of Applied Theology at the University of Kent,
Canterbury, UK, and editor of the journal *Theology*
r.gill@kent.ac.uk

Grace Davie and Lucian N. Leustean (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, 820 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-883426-7 (hbk). £110.

This is a very substantial collection of forty-five authoritative essays in five sections, edited by Grace Davie, Professor Emeritus in the Sociology of Religion at the University of Exeter, UK, and Lucian Leustean, Reader in Politics and International Relations at Aston University, UK. The whole work is dedicated to the late David Martin ‘who inspired us both’, say the editors (just as he did me). In their Introduction, Davie and Leustean make it clear that Martin’s sophisticated sociological understanding of European secularisation, along with that of Hans Joas, has shaped this collection, together with a Weberian, interactionist take on religion as both a dependent and independent social variable. For them, religion and politics mutually influence each other, synchronically and diachronically, across European societies. Inevitably this leads to a complex and winding narrative. This is not a collection that delivers a monodirectional account of religion (which, surprisingly, the editors refrain from defining) in Europe. Quite the opposite. This is a book to dip in and out of, being read by students researching the impact of religion from one European country to another and from one topic to another. At this price and size it is probably not a student course-book (sadly, those days have probably gone): it is a book destined for the shelves of any good library.

In the first section, 'Religion and the Making of Europe', Ryan Szpiech typifies this approach with his essay on 'Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Medieval Europe'. In this he takes a close look at the complex, polemical and synchronistic relationship between these three faiths in medieval Iberia. It would be just too easy to depict this as a clear case of Christian triumphalism, with both Jews and Moors being inevitably driven out of Spain by the triumphalist Catholics in 1492. Of course, they were driven out (something that medieval Christians and Muslims readily did to each other in Iberian cities), but the assiduous work of, notably, David Morgan in Brill's twenty volume work *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, shows that Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars there also had a long and rich debate *and* dialogue. And a tour of Moorish-style buildings in Andalusia today soon reveals that churches became mosques and then became churches again during the course of this highly confusing medieval period, while many Jews, Christians and Muslims lived side-by-side for centuries, harmoniously or otherwise. This cohabitation, Szpiech argues, mutually affected their 'legal norms and social practices' until, finally, 'the Christian conquest of Muslim Granada led to the displacement of perhaps 75,000 people' (p. 94). He might have added that, once Gibraltar was captured by the British in 1704, Jews and Muslims once again found a foothold in Iberia, where they continue to live harmoniously today.

Another article in this section that typifies an interactionist socio-historical approach is Steven Grosby's 'Religion and Nationality in Europe'. For Grosby, 'The relation between religion and nationality throughout European history has been varied and complex. Numerous times throughout that history religion has been a bearer of national traditions and a nation has been a bearer of religious traditions. However, there have also been times when sharp tensions have existed between religion and nationality' (p. 156). Inevitably, he points to the example of Archbishop Thomas Becket and King Henry II and then to much later attempts to mediate, such as the 1555 Peace of Augsburg and the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, while concluding that 'tensions persist' and commending (p. 171) David Martin's sweeping 1978 overview in *A General Theory of Secularization*. Of course, he is right: history is messy. But perhaps such socio-historical essay-overviews yield little beyond this truism.

The second section 'Religion, Ideology, and Modernity in Europe' – despite this rather rambling title – has a much sharper focus, as its opening essay 'Religion and Dictatorship in Europe' by Richard Steigmann-Gall indicates. Most of the essays in this section focus on the role of religion in supporting or challenging twentieth-century totalitarian regimes and then in addressing both the aftermath of the collapse of Soviet communism and the influence of post-war peace-building institutions. Steigmann-Gall, for instance, points

to the irony that in Germany ‘select individuals such [as] Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemoeller ... became the focus of inordinate attention and were elevated as standard-bearers of normative behaviour at the expense of their religious confrères who had proclaimed Nazism to indeed be a Christian politics, and who unsurprisingly fell into an embarrassed silence once the war was over’ (p. 191).

Diane Kirby’s essay ‘Religion and the Cold War in Europe’ concludes, somewhat cynically, that ‘the failure of communism was not a triumph for organised religion but for the neo-liberal project of deregulated market capitalism’ (p. 228). I am not sure that Pope John-Paul II or even Margaret Thatcher would have agreed with that conclusion. In contrast, Lucian Turcescu and Lavinia Stan in their essay ‘Religion and Europe after the Fall of the Iron Curtain’ argue, more positively, that after 1989, ‘states granted citizens the freedom of religion and conscience and religious denominations the right to a presence in public affairs’, albeit with ‘distinctive historical legacies’ still accounting for ‘some notable variations across the region’ (p. 248). And in her essay, ‘Religion, Secularity, and Secularization in Europe’, Grace Davie takes issue with the assumptions that Europe is both ‘post-secular’ and ‘exceptional’. From these examples, it can be seen that there is, indeed, a sharper focus here and, interestingly, some departure from the approach of ‘avoiding truth claims of any kind’ commended in the Introduction (p. 5). There is, perhaps, a danger that ‘avoiding truth claims’ amounts to ‘pedestrian’. This section, thankfully, is not pedestrian.

The focus of the third section, ‘Religious Dialogue, Public Policy, and International Institutions in Europe’, is essentially organisational: concerned with European law, the European Parliament, European Churches and voluntary organisations, the European Bishops’ Conferences, security structures, the European Court of Human Rights, and the United Nations. Whereas Grace Davie brings the previous section to a close, her co-editor Lucian Leustean, given his political expertise, very appropriately opens this one. Each of these institutions is vast across Europe and each has many strands, as Leustean recognises: ‘Religious institutions have had a complex relationship with the EU ... finding the right way to engage with a wide variety of religious and convictional bodies which advance their own values remains a contested issue’ (p. 302). Having taken part in a number of debates and discussions within a variety of European bodies over the last three decades in medical ethics, I can only concur. Finding common ground on issues, and then, agreed practical policies, within contesting religious bodies often has proved exceedingly difficult.

I doubt if these kinds of agreement are any easier to achieve in many other areas of social and political concern. Nonetheless, Norman Doe and Frank

Cranmer, both teaching at the Cardiff Centre for Law and Religion, argue that 'The EU is neither a state-church system nor an exclusively secular institution: rather, it recognizes the value of religion in the life of Europe' (p. 319). However, EU recognition may or (more probably) may not result in agreed policies in such areas as legalised abortion or voluntary euthanasia. In the following article François Foret admits that 'Faith has less and less relevance in individual and collective lives', although it may perhaps 'find a fresh, subversive function' (p. 334), especially in the 'advocacy of human rights' (p. 346). I can concur with that too. Frank Turner particularly points to the two formal addresses to the European Parliament, in 1988 by Pope John Paul II, and in 2014 by Pope Francis. No other faith leaders in Europe could expect to exert that degree of influence. Jeffrey Haynes, too, detects that 'the UN has moved over time from a position where "religion" was effectively absent from its deliberations to one where it is more prominent in a range of concerns, including human rights' and he concludes that 'the organization is now replete with religion-influenced activities' (pp. 430–431).

The fourth section is concerned with 'Religious Diversity, World Religions, and the Idea of Europe', with essays on: Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, Eastern Religions, and Non-Religion. A final, collaborative essay looks at 'Managing Religious Diversity in Europe'. The inclusion of non-religion in this list is significant. The authors, Stephen Bullivant (author also of the excellent study *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II*, Oxford University Press, 2021) and Josh Bullock analyse recent survey data showing a considerable rise in those identified as having 'no religion'. Like Lois Lee in her well-received book *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford University Press, 2015), they realise that this 'no religion' response covers a wide range of identities, from the indifferent to the militantly hostile. Yet they point out that in the 2016 European Social Survey, in the Czech Republic 80% of adults self-identified with non-religion, as did 72% in Estonia, whereas in other East European countries, only 9% did in Poland and 11% in Lithuania. Within Western Europe, 69% did in the Netherlands, 62% in Sweden and, in contrast, 25% in Italy and 26% in Portugal (compared with 56% in the UK). Those aged 16–29 in all but one country showed even higher scores. These findings are striking, are in line with other longitudinal surveys such as British Social Attitudes, and represent a growing challenge to faith groups in Europe. Bullivant and Bullock conclude:

both within and between the two main groupings ... across all countries, with the single exception of Slovenia, young adults are appreciably more

likely than the general adult population to identify as having no religion ... there is now a very strong body of evidence suggesting the likelihood of generational decline. (p. 558)

This verdict fits the authoritative books of Clive Field over four major British studies: *Britain's Last Religious Revival? Quantifying Belonging, Behaving, and Believing in the Long 1950s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); *Secularization in the Long 1960s: Numerating Religion in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); *Periodizing Secularization: Religious Allegiance and Attendance in Britain, 1880–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); and, most recently, *Counting Religion in Britain, 1970–2020: Secularization in Statistical Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). In the last of these studies Field concludes (somewhat mournfully):

The incremental demise of a Sabbatarian culture has been facilitated by legislative changes, growth in leisure destinations, and easier access to public or private transport. These have enabled people to exercise freedom and choice in how they spend their Sundays, seeking potentially more interesting and enjoyable ways than going to places of worship, and thus virtually sounding the death knell for churchgoing ... However, it was the collapse in religious socialization which perhaps had the greater impact on religious allegiance by the end of the twentieth century. One by one, parents, the church, and the day school have become less effective agencies for passing on the faith ... decade by decade, year by year, each birth cohort was less religious than the one before. (p. 295)

Field concludes: '[T]he process [of secularization] may be incomplete, but it has now taken such deep root, including the formerly deeply religious nations of Wales and Scotland, that there seems little prospect of it being reversed (pp. 296–297).

Of course, the other essays in this section of the Handbook reveal pockets of persistence, even increase (thanks in part to migration and different birth rates), among religious minorities within modern Europe. Yet, as far as 'Christian Europe' is concerned, signs of persistence are becoming increasingly rare. It is difficult to avoid Bullivant's and Bullocks' conclusion that 'non-religion – in whatsoever forms it manifests itself – looks set to be an ever-prominent feature of the European religious landscape in the decades to come' (p. 564). In the face of such evidence, the final joint essay in this section concludes:

Europe is witnessing a paradox: religion continues to lose significance for individuals and society but is more present, sometimes assertively so, in the public sphere and so is a growing object of unease and controversy. While in many cases, the latter has to do with the presence of Muslims, and especially of politically radical or socially conservative Islam, it also has to do with the fact that many Europeans think that religion should not be active in the public sphere at all. (p. 581)

The fifth section, 'Religious Geography, Society, and Politics in Europe', does a swift tour around different European countries. Here, Catholic Ireland (somewhat uneasily) gets coupled with the United Kingdom and Ukraine (ominously) with Russia. More obviously, Spain is coupled with Portugal. Amazingly, Field's mammoth statistical work is ignored in the essay on the UK, where churchgoing across most denominations declined long before Catholic mass-attendances did in Ireland. In contrast, Portugal and Spain have many points in common: both are Catholic countries, both have a history of anti-clericalism, both had twentieth-century dictators until the mid-1970s, and both had a long record of being colonisers. Yet Spain abandoned its colonies long before Portugal and Portugal became a republic two decades before Spain. In both countries, Julio de la Cuieva argues, 'the transition to democracy was accompanied by processes of secularization in both state and society, as well as by growing religious pluralism' (p. 741).

The essay on Ukraine was written before the current, egregious Russian invasion. However, Heather Coleman's essay astutely detects problems, concluding with these prescient sentences: 'the past looms large in the complex religious relations within modern Ukraine and between Ukraine and Russia. The conflict is not only political, but civilizational' (p. 779). Although much of Coleman's essay is concerned with the huge religious changes in Russia following the demise of General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev – who 'launched a fierce attack on religion ... [when] more than a third of registered places of worship were closed by 1964' (p. 773) – she does make a few telling observations about Ukraine. For example, she notes that the Russian Patriarch Kirill (enthroned in 2009 and still in office) 'embraced a missionary vision to rechristianize Russian Orthodox space, one that challenges pluralism, rejects the Western secular discourse on human rights, and argues for a distinctive Russian civilization' (p. 775) – a vision that is popular with Putin but 'elicited considerable protest in Ukraine' when Kirill was a visitor there (p. 776). A disastrous 'civilizational' clash.

The whole collection ends with two useful, albeit speculative, charts of affiliation statistics across European countries, islands and principalities. This *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe* has been a huge undertaking and the two editors are to be congratulated on their assiduous labours. It is a major achievement and will be useful for many years to come.

