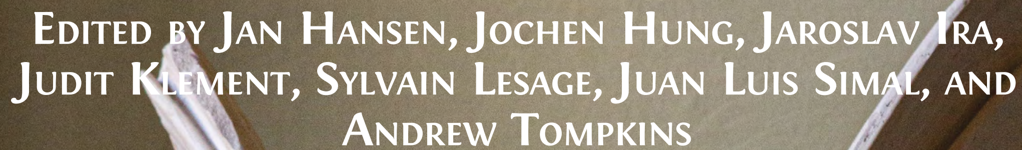
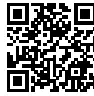


Edited by Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal, and Andrew Tompkins

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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6.1.3 Religions in Contemporary History (ca. 1900–2000)

Laszlo Csorba, Sylvain Lesage, Ángela Pérez del Puerto, and Thomas Schad

Introduction

In the twentieth century, the role of religion and religious institutions in Europe was far from uniform across the continent's diverse landscape of religions and confessions. From Portugal in the southwest to Russia in the northeast, these range between traditional forms of religion like Catholicism, Protestantism (Lutheranism, Anglicism, Calvinism, etc.), Judaism, (Greek, Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Russian, etc.) Orthodoxy, Islam, and even Buddhism (in Russia's Kalmykia). On the other hand, the increasing number and impact of atheism, agnosticism, anti-religious regimes, alternative spiritual movements, civil religions, and immigrated religions also played a significant role. As this chapter will show, religion remained a highly relevant category in Europe: whether on the side of the powerful (as in Spain), as an important differentiator of national identity (as in Northern Ireland), or as a target for oppression (as in the case of the Holocaust or in the Balkan Wars).

This chapter chooses to follow a chronological order, and focuses on a series of key moments illustrating the transformations of religions in Europe: *laïcité* and the separation of church and state in France; the Russian Revolution as the starting point of state-led, socialist secularisation; the interwar period and Second World War and the project of eradicating religious 'minorities'; post-war economic growth and the challenge posed by increasing individualisation; Vatican II and the major *aggiornamento* by the Catholic Church, and so on.

Separating Church and State

In France, the 1905 Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State marked a turning point in relations between churches and the state, and encapsulates the challenges faced by religions in the twentieth century in

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liberal democracies. Passed in a climate of conflict, the 1905 law was initially a law of rupture that put an end to a century-old regime, established for the Catholic Church by the Concordat negotiated by Napoleon Bonaparte with Rome in 1801, and extended by the Organic Articles to the two reformed confessions, Lutheran and Calvinist, and then to Judaism. Based on the neutrality of the state and the plurality of religions, this regime functioned with varying degrees of success for about a century. The 1905 law separating churches and state unilaterally abrogated this treaty-based system and completed the evolution initiated a quarter of a century earlier by the secularisation policy of the Republican Party, which aimed to remove society from the control of the Catholic Church. With the culmination of this policy, the French Republic no longer recognised any religion: this was the end of the public service of religion. From now on, there were to be no legal relations between the public authorities and any religious denomination. However, the law did not exclude the presence of religions in society—how could it do so, except by engaging in a policy of persecution? Yet the inspiration for the Law of Separation was tolerance. It ensured freedom of conscience: this was, in fact, its *raison d'être*.

To an even greater extent, 1917 represents a milestone in the new relationship between church and state. The year 1917 was a major turning point for the history of Russia as well as the Russian Orthodox Church. The Tsarist government was overthrown by the February Revolution and after a few months of political turmoil, the Bolsheviks took power in October and, among other things, declared a series of radical changes in the private sphere of society. The decrees issued on 17 and 18 December in the spirit of secularisation and female emancipation stated that in the future the Russian Republic would only recognise civil marriages (and divorces), and would consider church weddings as private affairs for married couples in addition to compulsory civil marriages. On the last day of the year, a decree was issued separating the state and the Church and the Bolshevik Government seized all church lands. The official religious status of Orthodoxy was denied, although in January 1918 the freedom of 'religious and anti-religious propaganda' was also declared.

The decrees led to a marked decline in the power and influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. It was also caught in the crossfire of the Civil War that began later the same year, and many leaders of the Church supported the 'white' counterrevolutionary forces, which would ultimately be the losing side. According to the main leader of the Communist Party, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924), a communist regime could not remain neutral on the question of religion but had to show itself to be merciless towards it.

After the Civil War, the Soviet Union officially claimed religious tolerance, but in practice the government discouraged organised religion and did

everything possible to remove religious influence from Soviet society. Actions against Orthodox priests and believers included torture and execution, or transfer to prison camps, labour camps or mental hospitals. In the first five years after the Bolshevik Revolution, 28 bishops and 1,200 priests were executed. The Solovki Special Camp was established in the monastery on the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea. Eight metropolitans, twenty archbishops, and forty-seven bishops of the Orthodox Church died there, along with tens of thousands of the laity. Of these, 95,000 were put to death, executed by firing squad.

After Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, the party and state leader Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin (Joseph Stalin, 1878–1953) decided to revive the Russian Orthodox Church as a means of intensifying patriotic support for the war effort. On 4 September 1943, three metropolitans were officially received by Stalin and they discussed the details. Certain temples were opened and on 8 September 1943 the Synod elected Sergius (Stragorodsky) as the new Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia (Patriarch Tikhon had died in 1925). Some priests were released from the prisons and camps and were forced to serve the Soviet dictatorship, but everyday church life became possible again. This model was followed by the new 'People's democracy' regimes after the Second World War.

The First World War, the Interwar Period, and the Second World War

The interwar period and the Second World War were a difficult and violent time for millions of Europeans, many of whom did not survive the oppressions or were forcibly expelled from their homes. This especially applies to those who were perceived as national and religious minorities by the respective dominant population. Due to its religious and confessional setup, the situation was especially complicated in the continent's southeast. The relatively new nation-states in the Balkans—including Serbia, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Albania, and Croatia—inherited their religious-confessional diversity from the preceding Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian rulers, who did not pursue the ideal of homogeneity in their populations. The idea of the European nation-state, however, is based on the assumption of a homogenous national identity. In the Balkans, nearly all of these national identity concepts (with the exception of Albanian nationalism) followed the pattern of one nation, one religion (or confession). Building on the so-called millet system of the late Ottoman period, the Balkan nations evolved out of the structures of the religious millet.

The combination of the idea of homogeneity with high religious diversity among the Balkan populations meant that the new national elites operated as

demographic engineers and decided to expel those who were unwelcome due to their religious identity, while new fellow nationals could be drawn from adherents of their own group. The most prominent case of this 'unmixing of peoples' is the Turkish-Greek population exchange, as sanctioned *ex post facto* in the Treaty of Lausanne (1924): nearly all Muslims had to leave Greece and were brought to Anatolia and Eastern Thrace, while conversely, all Christians were expelled from present-day Turkey—with some exceptions, like the autochthonous Greek Orthodox inhabitants of Istanbul: the Greek nation-state would become a Christian state, while Turkey saw itself as a Muslim state. However, the interwar period saw a much broader series of resettlement agreements in the post-Ottoman sphere. Each of the respective groups for resettlement was defined according to religious affiliation. Examples include the Turkish-Romanian agreement on the resettlement of tens of thousands of Romanian Muslims in 1935, or the Turkish-Yugoslav agreement targeting 200,000 Muslims from Yugoslavia.

While these deportations and resettlements did not include plans for killings, religious affiliation alone turned out to be a death sentence for millions of people in this period, particularly in the case of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust (also called Shoah). During the Armenian Genocide from 1915–1916, nearly the entire Armenian Christian population of the remaining Ottoman Empire was extinguished, whether directly or indirectly. In the same context, members of other Christian denominations were targeted, like the Syriac Christians of South-Eastern Anatolia. It is estimated that at least one million Armenians died, while the death toll for Syriac Christians amounted to around 250,000 people. The most well-known case of genocide according to religious affiliation is the Holocaust: nearly the entire German and European Jewry, at least six million, were killed.

Catholic Identities in Europe after the Second World War

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) profoundly changed the direction in which Catholicism was evolving, perhaps to an extent comparable to the Council of Trent (1545–1563). The Second Vatican Council is undoubtedly the most significant event in the history of the Catholic Church in the twentieth century, symbolising its openness to the modern world and contemporary culture, taking technological progress, the emancipation of peoples, and increasing secularisation into account. As a result of years of hard work and discussion by more than 2000 participants, the council adopted many dogmatic texts, among which the four 'constitutions' had a major impact. The first, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), marks the end of the Latin Mass. It is in fact devoted to the renovation and simplification of the rites, allowing for celebration in vernacular languages and thus greater participation of

worshippers in the liturgy. The second constitution, *Lumen Gentium* (Light of the Nations), abandons the dogma of papal infallibility, which made the Pope a true monarch. Instead, the constitution emphasises the equality of the members of the "people of God", where each is "called to holiness", as well as the role of the bishops and the laity. The Catholic Church also recognises in this central text that there are "elements of truth" in other Christian churches, not mere heresies to be eradicated. The declarations *Nostra aetate*, on relations with non-Christian religions, and *Dignitatis humanae*, on religious freedom, also mark a clear shift in favour of tolerance and religious freedom. In the last constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church officially expresses its position on "the Church in the modern world", affirming its commitment to the poor.

If Vatican II corresponds to an opening of the Church to the world and an *aggiornamento*, the pontificate of John Paul II (Karol Jozef Wojtyla, 1920–2005) corresponds to a backlash. While he was a cardinal, Karol Wojtyla was an active member of the Second Vatican Council. A proponent of modernising the image of the Catholic Church, he supported many of the reforms adopted by the Assembly of Bishops. From his native Poland, he nevertheless observed with concern the consequences of the Second Vatican Council on a Church that was undergoing profound reform, not without trauma and internal conflicts. Close to Opus Dei, he was critical not only of certain liturgical excesses (the introduction of secular texts or music, among other things), but also of many of the concrete applications of the council's decisions. He was strengthened in his convictions by his Polish Catholicism, vigorous in his spirituality marked by the cult of the Virgin Mary, rigid in his morals, culturally hegemonic in Polish society, where he was the cement of the nation and the soul of the resistance to communism. All of this was to lead the Pope to a doctrinal, moral, and institutional restoration of the Catholic Church at the end of the twentieth century.

Twentieth-century religion developed very differently depending on the national context. In the case of Spain, after the secularist experience of the Second Republic between 1931 and 1936, Catholicism played a very active role in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) in its decision to support the *coup d'état* against the democratic republican government. The Catholic 'Crusade', as the war was called, initiated a close collaboration between the Catholic Church and Franco's dictatorship, consolidated after the Second World War when the dictator moved away from the defeated fascist ideas and completely redefined the dictatorship as a conservative, Catholic and anti-communist regime—an ideal definition to navigate the dynamics of the Cold War. Spanish Catholicism would thus enjoy decades of doctrinal and ideological hegemony. This situation was confirmed with the signing of the 1953 Concordat between the Spanish State and the Vatican, which legitimised the dictatorship through mutual collaboration. This marked the beginning of National Catholicism:

the participation of the Church in Franco's government and, therefore, in its repressive policies.

This process of collaboration crystallised in the 1950s with the arrival of prominent politicians from the ranks of Opus Dei who pushed the dictatorship towards openness and international acceptance. However, this decade was also when the dynamics began to change. The Second Vatican Council meant for Spanish Catholicism a new look at the modern world and freedoms in issues such as liturgy, parish government, the role of the faithful in the Church and in society, as well as demands for dialogue and recognition and tolerance towards other forms of militancy. This was closely connected with the ideological process of Liberation Theology, with a growing transfer of Catholics towards militancy and political commitment to the left or, at least, to democratic proposals. In addition, there was a clear influence in the 1960s of Marxist doctrine in the Catholic and workers' ranks. The dictatorship tried to curb this tendency with some concessions and, on the other hand, support of the most conservative sectors of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This led to an absolute rupture in the Spanish Church during the 1960s, between two different ways of understanding the church-state relationship: a conciliar Church, critical of Francoism and open to democratic and socialising options, and an anti-conciliar Church that validated Franco's Spanish Catholic model.

The arrival of Pope Paul VI (1897–1978) at the Vatican consolidated this gap, since his figure was key in the rupture of the Spanish Church with the Franco regime in the 1970s. Bishops were renamed, and figures of the hierarchy strongly identified with Francoism were removed. The role of the Church in an increasingly secularised Spanish society was set in motion. This was accompanied by the increased militancy of Catholics and priests in dissident movements against Francoism, the creation of clandestine Catholic political parties, and the affiliation of many of the faithful to progressive and left-wing labour unions.

This rupture connects the Spanish Church of the 1960s and 1970s with the international dynamics of a post-conciliar European Catholicism: dominated by a tendency towards secularisation; the adoption of concepts and methods of Marxist analysis; the crisis of faith and Christian and ecclesial identity; and disaffection towards the Church as an institution. This process eventually led Spanish Catholicism to play a decisive role in the transition to democracy after 1975, and to participate in the signing of a constitution recognising the existence of a secular state. By the 1980s, these changes allowed Spain to have a legal framework that regulated the life of an increasingly secularised society with a growing rate of civil marriages and divorces, a decline of the faithful, and openness to incorporate into its legality social advances such as marriage equality, approved in 2005, which made Spain the third country in the world to guarantee this right to its citizens.

Religions in Central/Eastern Europe after the Second World War

After the Second World War, Europe was divided by the Iron Curtain, as agreed by the world powers. Joseph Stalin wanted the creation of a 'sphere of influence' in Central and Eastern Europe in order to provide the Soviet Union with a geopolitical buffer zone that separated it from the Western capitalist world. Soviet-style dictatorships and ecclesiastical policies were soon introduced in countries occupied by the Red Army. In this zone, religion was subjected to varying degrees of restriction. Bishops who resisted were imprisoned on fabricated charges, such as Cardinal József Mindszenty (1892–1975) in Hungary. In Albania all religion was rooted out, and it was professed to be the world's first truly atheistic state. Churches in Bulgaria, Romania, and Yugoslavia worked under severe restraints. However, in Poland the level of religious freedom remained extremely high for a communist state. The overwhelming majority of the people identified with the Roman Catholic Church, and it provided the spiritual and ideological backing for the Solidarity (*Solidarność*) movement which in 1989 formed the first non-communist government in Eastern Europe since the imposition of socialism in the immediate post-war years. In Hungary, the 1956 Revolution was defeated by the Soviets, but the situation of the various religions improved from the 1960s.

The churches supported the Prague Spring reforms of 1968 and the mass protest against Soviet pressure in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. But after the armies of four Warsaw Pact countries—the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Poland, and Hungary—invaded Czechoslovakia, the reform movement collapsed and the position of religious institutions temporarily deteriorated.

The regime of the (East) German Democratic Republic guaranteed a substantial level of religious freedom and the existence of university theological faculties, religious publishing houses, and a large number of churches. But there was subtle discrimination in employment against practicing Christians, and the regime provided various substitute rituals and activities to lure young people away from religion. More significantly, in 1978 church leaders reached an understanding with the state which allowed churches greater freedom of action. They, in turn, agreed to function as 'the Church within socialism'—that is, to minister within the system.

Although the Church laboured under severe constraints both in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, it was clear by the 1980s that times had changed. When Mikhail Gorbachev assumed power in 1985, he proclaimed new policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, which included the further relaxation of pressures on religions. Prisoners in labour camps were freed, Bibles were allowed in the country, closed churches reopened, regulations restricting

religious education were modified, and Christian leaders could freely attend international gatherings.

Then in 1989, when it became clear that the Soviets would no longer interfere in the internal affairs of the bloc, a wave of grassroots uprisings swept through Eastern Europe. Following the Polish example, first Hungary and then East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania replaced their communist regimes with democratic ones. Christians were visible in all of these societies, and the appeal and power of religions in all the countries of the region was temporarily strengthened. Another consequence of the abolition of censorship was the appearance of different esoteric cults and alternative movements thriving strongly among other faiths.

Fig. 1: President Ronald Reagan Meeting with Pope John Paul II at The Fairbanks Airport in Alaska, 2 May 1984, Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President_Ronald_Reagan_meeting_with_Pope_John_Paul_II_at_the_Fairbanks_Airport_in_Alaska.jpg.

Following the Second World War, the censuses of countries under the influence of the Soviet Union did not measure religiosity. It was thought that religion as a social phenomenon would gradually disappear. Yet from the late 1970s, indirect data indicated an increase in religious activity—perhaps an expression of political resistance against the communist dictatorships. This was confirmed by the significant contribution of the spectacular world politics of Pope John Paul II to the fall of the socialist states in the 1990s, for example his trip to Poland and Hungary on 13–20 August 1991.

During the 1990s, the influence of previously established religions initially grew stronger in Eastern European countries, because the collapse of the party-state dictatorship now raised the prestige of those previously persecuted in the

eyes of many. By the early 2000s, however, the strengthening of religiosity had faded, while the number of groups claiming to be religious in their own way, or to practise their religiosity specifically outside of church organisations, was increasing. The number of believers continued to decline in the 2010s, while the appeal of non-traditional denominations and the so-called small churches increased. Furthermore, the number of people who do not even comment on their religion or worldview in opinion polls is continually growing.

Conclusion

The ideas presented analyse the trajectories of religions in Europe throughout the twentieth century. Beginning with the official separation of church and state in 1905 in France, the different relationships that religious institutions have established with the state are presented. In Russia, the Civil War and Bolshevik policies after 1917 brought about a secularisation that in practice resulted in the persecution of religious practices and the cornering of the Orthodox Church until, for the needs of the Second World War, Stalin restored a relative normality to religious life. In other regions of Europe, for example in the Balkan area, the interwar period involved a process of construction of national states that based their national identity on features of religious homogeneity, which led to the persecution and expulsion of minorities that did not conform to these identity patterns, the Armenian Genocide being a clear example of this. In Spain, the Church, in its strategy of survival after years of secularist republicanism, allied itself from 1939 with the Franco dictatorship to restore its sphere of power until at least the 1960s. For their part, the religions of the countries in the Soviet sphere of influence saw their presence in society greatly reduced, with the exception of Poland, until well into the 1980s, when Gorbachev relaxed the pressure on churches. In this whole process, the Second Vatican Council and its redefinition of the principles and values that defined the Catholic Church, as well as its relationship with the population and with other religions, marked a turning point in the changes that crystallised at the end of the century with the restructuring of the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Discussion questions

1. The first half of the twentieth century was full of violent conflicts in Europe. What role did religion play in these conflicts?
2. “The Catholic Church helped end the Cold War.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

3. Religion played an important role in politics in twentieth-century Europe. Compare this to the role of religion today. What are the differences and similarities?

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