

## Grace Davie, *Religion in modern Europe: a memory mutates* (Oxford 2000)

### Introduction

The division between eastern and western Europe is more meaningful along religious rather than political lines. Former communist states which had western Christian traditions (Latvia, Estonia, Czech Republic) are still more aligned with the west, so look likely to succeed better in developing western democracy and capitalist economy. They share the experience of renaissance, reformation, scientific revolution, enlightenment, romanticism.

### 1. Facts and figures: a profile of religion in modern Europe

Recurring question: Is it still true that religion is at the centre of our value system?

Measurements of church membership or ritual participation show undeniable secularisation in Europe, but more numinous things such as beliefs and experience are very persistent. This is clear from the results of the *European Values System Study Group* survey:

#### Church attendance in the UK (fairly typical for Europe):

13% at least once a week  
10% once a month  
12% at Christmas etc  
8% once a year  
56% never.

#### Extent of religious belief in UK (close to the European average):

71% God	30% devil
64% soul	25% hell
44% life after death	68% sin
53% heaven	32% resurrection

In Sweden only 45% believe in God, and in Ireland 96% do. But although it varies, the rank order amongst items is almost identical across Europe.

A problem with the study is it is too small to take religious minorities into account. Europe has around 1 million Jews, 6 million Muslims (3% of most countries).

European history since the early modern period has been dominated by the rise of the nation state, in which the religious factor has played an important part. This trend now seems to be being reversed, with the European Union and ecumenism.

### 2. Theoretical Perspectives

#### The Secularization Thesis: Steve Bruce

The Reformation encouraged *individualism* (which 'threatened the communal basis of religious belief and behaviour') and *rationality* (which 'removed many of the purposes of

religion and rendered many of its beliefs implausible'). Religious conflict gradually gave way to religious toleration. The problem with this theory is that it only makes sense in Europe.

### **Religion in the modern world: Jose Casanova**

Secularization involves three quite different processes:

- ✚ differentiation of secular spheres from religious institutions and norms,
- ✚ decline of religious belief and practice,
- ✚ the relegation of religion to its own private sphere.

While the first of these aspects does characterize modernity, the other two do not.

### **Religion as collective memory: Danièle Hervieu-Leger**

An awareness of shared memory is essential to individual and social identity, and facing the future. Modern European societies are less religious not because they are more rational but because they are less capable of maintaining the memory. However, losing traditional religion leaves 'utopian spaces' where people vainly seek new answers.

### **The mechanics of memory in the European case: building on Hervieu-Leger**

So how do different groups - social, racialial, gender, generational - pass on and receive religious memory?

## **3. Vicarious memory 1: the churches**

Churches play a greatly reduced role in Europe: they only have the allegiance of a minority, and cannot control the views of society, even on matters of religion and morality. However, as voluntary organisations they are very successful.

### **Financial Arrangements**

The Scandinavian Churches have a church tax from which people can opt out. 80% pay the tax, but only about 4% attend church. Church buildings and staffing is therefore excellent, and take-up of occasional offices is high. At the opposite extreme, churches in France and Britain have no state help apart from some tax benefits. In Belgium and Greece the state pays stipends.

Many churches are under strain from rising pension costs, as clergy retire earlier and live longer. However, good financial provision does not equate with religious vitality.

### **The professional ministries of the European Churches**

Recruitment of priests in the Catholic church is in crisis: numbers are declining, average age is rising, and tens of thousands of parishes are without a resident priest. France is the extreme case, having 40,981 priests in 1965 but only 19,700 in 1995, with an average age in 1989 of 66, and a much greater workload. However, this has resulted in creative alternatives across Europe; for example celebration of the mass by laity, with women in central roles, is permitted under ADAP (Assemblées Dominicales en l'Absence de

Pretre). This has considerable implications for the continuation and mutation of memory, as does the admission of women to the Protestant ministry.

In Lutheran Churches, on the other hand, ministry is a well paid, secure, and well respected career, and recruitment has been stable or rising despite the low levels of religious practice. They also employ a large number of lay professionals, but there are few roles for volunteers. In the Anglican church, the number of ministers has fallen, but this has been partly compensated for by increase in readers and non-stipendiary ministers.

The press likes to castigate religious professionals when they do not live up to exacting moral standards, while clearly not expecting their readership to do the same. This is a symptom of how society wants the church to preserve a vicarious memory of religion on their behalf.

### **The voluntary sector: the effective level of operation**

Religion is not the only casualty of changes in civil society. Political parties are rejected in favour of short-term single-issue pressure groups; trade unions are increasingly irrelevant in a flexible labour market of short-term contracts and private pensions; communism has fallen far more heavily than Christianity, and Rationalism is also faring badly, as humans are increasingly seen as part of nature not its masters. Many attitudes are changing, and if religion has no wider provenance than individual beliefs and lifestyles then so do many other things.

However, the changing public sphere does offer new opportunities which the churches could grasp, though not by separating church and state which would mean only that they ceased to be the preservers of vicarious memory.

Hope lies in the church's place at a local level, standing for human contact against the impersonality of late modernity. One study found that in the UK a disproportionate number of those in the skilled voluntary sector (prison visitors, charity workers, bereavement councillors etc) were churchgoers. This finding has a sociological explanation (the local network) as well as a theological one (ethic of altruism). This is becoming relevant in Europe, where the social democratic and corporatist traditions begin to fail under pressures of capitalism (such as the entry requirements for the Euro). The Catholic Church has a very strong voluntary sector.

This new focus will not bring people back to church, but will mean that the historic churches continue to have a significant role in modern Europe.

### **A variation on the theme: central Europe**

Here the Churches were carriers of an alternative memory, and are now called upon to fill the void in civil society. In Poland, where the church still has resources and influence, it is inclined to dominate, rather than participate in democratic processes, and there is a risk of returning to the old clerical/ anticlerical battles. In Estonia, on the other hand, a tiny church almost collapsed, but now both Lutheran and Orthodox Churches have emerged as accepted partners of the state and crucial participants in reconstructing democracy.

## **Vicarious memory**

In Protestant countries, religion tends to be delegated to the professionals; whereas in Catholic ones, there is a tradition of clerical/ anticlerical conflict, and a sense of remaining a Catholic even when practice has ceased. However, the lay-clerical distinction is being replaced by an inactive-faithful one; and while religious sensitivity remains, religious knowledge has collapsed.

## **Vicarious memory 2: the Churchgoers**

### **Europe's demographic profile**

This does not always react to changing society the way one would expect. For example, Swedish women have more children than Italian ones: this is because in Sweden it is accepted that women will balance careers and motherhood, so there is support for working mothers; whereas in Italy, where mothers are expected to stay at home, women prefer not to be mothers. The ageing population (especially as women live longer) maintains an artificially high level of religiosity in Europe. Education is prolonged, meaning that young people can spend an extra decade questioning authority, having little money, and having more sexual partners. As soon as longevity made marriage of 30 or 40 years the norm, it started coming under strain. Serial monogamy has always existed, but the reason is now divorce rather than death.

### **Europe's churchgoers**

Churchgoers are elderly and predominantly female, across all ages and denominations, as are people who believe in God. If old people and women are intrinsically more likely to be religious, then this pattern will persist, and the church will grow as the population ages; but if it is characteristic of the generation of women who are now old, then this pattern will change, and numbers will fall.

One study found that private prayer remained very much the preserve of women. This might be connected to women's place in nurturing the next generation: parents are more religious than couples. Parenting seems to encourage religious responses; and the family becomes an important place for handing on religious memory.

Relationships between religion and class are complicated. In the west, the more educated you are, the more likely to go to church. In central Europe it is the other way around. Belief is different, however: everywhere, the more educated you are, the less likely to hold religious beliefs. So in the west, the educated are more likely to act on their beliefs: the less educated are content that the church is there.

### **A variation on the theme: the other faith communities**

Minorities have much higher levels of religious practice, as it is one of few ways to hold on to their identity, although this may not always be the case. It is rare for Europeans to convert (with the exception of Buddhism).

### **The Occasional Offices: the markers of the life-cycle**

**Baptism:** This remains almost universal in the Lutheran north, the Latin south, and Greece; but much lower (around 50%) in Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands where church membership is not part of citizenship. This is partly because parents no longer want it, and partly because churches are getting more strict about administering it. However, there is a corresponding (though not compensating) growth in adult baptisms and confirmations: 40% of those confirmed in the Church of England are over 20. Given the greatly reduced rates of infant mortality, which along with the exclusion of unbaptised infants from consecrated ground would concentrate the mind, it is surprising that baptism rates remain as high as they do.

**Marriage:** There are more religious marriages in the Catholic south than the Protestant north, but they are declining gradually in most of Catholic Europe, stable in Britain and Denmark, and rising in Scandinavia and south east Europe.

**Funerals:** Death remains the great mystery of late modern (supposedly rational) society. The most striking change in religious practice at funerals is that in Protestant Europe cremation has become the norm. Does this huge change in practice since the 1950s imply a change in belief about the afterlife? It certainly requires changes in liturgy. Few people have secular funerals, but most combine institutional religion with the personal and popular. *[I'd like to know whether the way people approach their own death has changed since decline in religious faith. Do they find it more scary?]*

**Two public funerals:** Francois Mitterand had a Catholic funeral although he stood for secular socialism. There seemed to be a need for a religious ceremony, and the Republic was unable to rise to the occasion, although there was a perhaps more meaningful gathering of French socialists at the Place de la Bastille when Mitterand's writings were broadcast to the crowd.

The public responded to the death of Princess Diana with numerous shrines (of very mixed symbolism) and gathering to lay flowers, many of them congregating in buildings of institutional religion. They queued for hours in churches to sign books of condolence (which testify to strong belief in an afterlife, untroubled by the fact that Dodi al-Fayed was a Muslim), light candles and lay flowers. The institutional church was vital to provide the liturgy to mark her death and express public loss.

### **Conclusion: a return to vicarious memory**

Just as the institutions of religion cannot continue without passive acceptance by the population, so informal popular religion cannot continue without institutional churches. They may seem mostly dispensable, but not at death.

## **5. Precarious Memory: religion in the education systems of Europe**

### **Education in a post-industrial society**

Education has two functions: to give people skills for their livelihood (in the late modern world this means IT) and to pass on the norms of society to the next generation. However, Christianity has ceased to be the cultural norm and value system of Europe, and nothing has emerged to replace it. When most employment involved strong muscles,

the traditional family, division of labour, Christian work ethic, all followed. Now the whole system is changed beyond recognition.

### **The Churches as owners/ managers of a significant number of schools**

Almost a quarter of pupils in the state system in England and Wales go to denominational schools. Denominational schools are sought after: parents think they will give children a good education. This seems to be because they are seen to fulfil the second function of education - imparting values, as well as the first - teaching skills. In France, state education is completely secular (religion is a strictly private affair), and private schools are usually Catholic. Over the years, Catholic schools have become more secular (fewer teachers are members of religious orders), in exchange for some state help.

### **Moral, social and religious education**

In Finland, RE is central to the school curriculum. 97% of children follow the Lutheran courses (broadly confessional, but teaching about other religions and tolerance is included), and there is provision for religious minorities and a philosophy of life course for non-religious children. In Germany, most RE is confessional and either Lutheran or Catholic, but increasingly with broader elements. In Italy and Greece RE is strongly confessional and although parents can withdraw their children, few do. France is exceptional in having no religious education, and the story of this is an important part of French national consciousness. However, there is an increasing awareness that French children are not equipped for life in the modern world: they lack awareness of the religious needs of others (especially Muslims) and do not understand religious conflicts.

This issue is very complicated: a confessional education may produce children who are committed to and knowledgeable about their own faith but also better able to understand the religious aspirations of others, while a multi-faith education may end up respecting the faith of no-one and devaluing the concept of religion altogether.

Religious illiteracy amongst young people is widespread, and it is entirely possible that the religious memory of Europe, in terms of a widespread understanding, may simply disappear. But the debate about religious education is just beginning ...

## **6. Mediated Memory: religion and the European media**

The media feeds on realities but modifies them to create new symbols and points of focus. Relationships between churches and the media are a minefield of misunderstanding, but religious concerns dominate the media's agenda, and churches ignore them at their peril.

American-style televangelism has been largely unsuccessful, because it does not attract enough viewers to be paid for by advertising, not do Christians support it financially. However there is public service broadcasting. British hymn-singing programmes are surprisingly popular, though almost all the audience are old people, who grew up knowing the hymns, so they will probably disappear in a generation. For other religious programmes, the audiences tend to be churchgoers. Flourishing media religion in Europe centres on personalities: the Pope is the prime example; Mother Theresa is another.

Media and reality interact: after Diana's death, a few people spontaneously went to lay flowers, but by the middle of the week thousands were doing it. The media and public opinion reinforce prejudices. While new religious movements are generally peaceful, the media always gives maximum coverage to outrages. As the public has no other source of information about them, people tend to believe they are all bad.

Advertisers who want to use religious imagery have to know what references the public will pick up: although a priest in a shovel hat and a nun in full habit are rare sights in Europe, Benneton knew that a picture of them kissing would elicit a second glance. The public's idea of 'paradise' is conditioned largely by Thomas Cook adverts.

Sport has changed in a similar way to religion: it is games which can be pursued alone or in informal groups which are popular, whereas organised team games are flourishing at the top level. The fall in attendance at football matches mirrors the decline in religious attendance: the graphs fall at the same speed for the same reasons, and while the top clubs or cathedrals flourish, the ordinary local ones decline.

## **7. Alternative memories 1: pluralism and the law**

Which organisations are given the rights and privileges of religions in terms of finance, marriage, education, media, and what is expected of them in return? In other words, what is the legal definition of a religion?

Jews are greatly threatened by European tolerance, and risk disappearing completely: Deaths and emigrations to Israel greatly outnumber births, and marrying out is increasingly common: 'assimilation' for a long time an ambition, has become very threatening. Time will tell whether Jews will find a way of re-establishing themselves in Europe, but their plight puts Christian fears into perspective.

**The Rushdie controversy:** Post-enlightenment Christians did not understand this, because if someone mocks or blasphemes their faith, they do not consider it to harm the faith itself. Most Europeans never think about the concept of blasphemy, whereas it is central to Muslim daily life. Rushdie made things much worse by saying he had become a Muslim and trying to make reparation, and then changing his mind: he epitomized the European who cannot take religion seriously.

**The 'affaire du foulard':** (whether Muslim girls should be allowed to wear headscarves to school in France) caused tremendous indecision amongst the schools and government, and enormous controversy throughout the country. The freedom of conscience (claimed by the Islamic families) and the freedom of thought (claimed by the teachers) came into conflict when pushed to the extreme.

France did not understand why Britain was getting so worked up about blasphemy laws, and Britain did not understand why the French made such a fuss about headscarves (the problem in Britain was that headscarves were not part of school uniform: the problem was solved by stipulating that they had to be in the regulation colour).

Perhaps 30% of Europeans are not religious, and are aware of the need to establish an alternative source of values both for daily living and for judging ethical issues. It is

difficult to find out about this group, although they are disproportionately present in certain places such as the media and university systems.

Unbelief is probably even more varied than belief, but it is also conditioned by history: the God that secular Europeans do not believe in is a Judaeo-Christian one. It is not clear what this secular system should be: anticlericalism, indifferent tolerance; and failed communism provide very different starting points. Decisions are forced upon us every so often concerning divorce, abortion, embryo research, euthanasia, AIDS, which are made through the democratic process, after consultation with various 'experts'.

About 30% of Europeans are relatively committed to their religions, and 30% completely secular: what are the rest?

## **8. Alternative memories 2: Religious innovations**

Regular gatherings are losing out to the special occasion, often stressing spontaneity and emotion.

### **New Age**

New Agers agree in assuming that the self is sacred, and we have to recover our authentic nature from our contaminated mode of being. The other common theme is holism – in the person (body, mind and spirit), or in the universe.

Is it counter-cultural, challenging the answers given by science and materialistic society; or is it a product of our culture, in its internationalism, professional and managerial clientele, and individualism? Is it an ally of Christianity, in its emphasis on the spiritual rather than material fulfilment, or against it, in its rejection of authority and emphasis on the self? Some more conservative Christians see the New Age as the principle source of evil in the modern world; but others have reassessed Christian teachings in the light of New Age insights, particularly on the environment. Is it New Age new, or just a modern form of the informal and theologically dubious belief systems which have always existed alongside institutional Christianity?

Opus Dei is a 'neo-conservative' movement in the Catholic church which rejects the values of modernity in the social and moral spheres, but happily endorses capitalist enterprise: it is in many ways the opposite of the New Age. Catholic Action and liberation theology take the opposite view: that Christians need to engage with the real needs of the world, not condemnatory.

### **Sociological approaches to religious innovation**

Religious life has changed: women in the professional protestant ministries, much greater role for laypeople in all denominations, preference amongst young people for one-off events rather than regular attendance (eg Journées Mondiales de la Jeunesse, Greenbelt).

The Kirchentag of the German Protestant Church attracts around 100,000 people. It takes place every two years, is lay-led, gives the experience of gathering with large numbers and the opportunity for vision-building and experimental worship, is popular amongst young people, involves shared living in primitive conditions, is a temporary

'utopia' away from the everyday, but at the same time forges connections between religion and daily living.

The Thomas Mass in Finland attracts around five times as many people as for a normal service. Traditional but flexibly used liturgy, long (2 hours or more), attracts people of all ages and social backgrounds (although still dominated by women), called 'Thomas' as designed for doubters and those on the fringes, attracts many first-timers, has very positive media coverage. There is lots of movement in the service: sharing the peace, coming forward to request intercessory prayer, Eucharist. The emphasis is on music and silence rather than spoken word. Sense of sharing, community, bringing needs. A successful form of urban ministry.

Local Saint festivals in Spain have grown rather than diminished in popularity with larger economies and centralisation.

## **9. Aesthetic or symbolic memories: the cultural sphere**

### **Pilgrimage and place**

Pilgrimage is very popular, with increasing numbers every year at all the major European sites, and cathedrals. There is a fine line between pilgrims and tourists. Santiago has benefited not only from revived spiritual interest, but from a major injection of European cash and attention by the Spanish tourist board.

Pilgrims to Marian shrines tend to be under 30, female, regular mass attenders, and about half are first-time visitors. They come with sincere spiritual intentions, and many are ill. This deep spirituality sits alongside modern tourism, with its quick turnover and often tawdry commercialism.

Many pilgrims choose not to travel by modern transport, but the hardships are today chosen rather than imposed: spending time journeying to a particular place is one of the ways in which pilgrimage allows Europeans to escape from the pressures of modern living, which involves travelling as fast as possible without a clear idea of the destination.

War memorials form alternative places of pilgrimage and a strong European identity.

### **From cathedral to museum**

Church buildings are everywhere, and are often taken for granted: it is only when one is threatened with destruction that communities realise how much of their shared memories reside in them.

The cathedrals of Pisa, Siena and Florence do not charge for entry, and attract huge numbers of visitors. They all have attached museums, which do charge, which house the cathedrals' priceless works of art, and are considerably more peaceful, but only a certain kind of person goes there. The line between cathedral and museum is also fine, but any suggestion that cathedrals should charge for entry is hotly contested, which is strange in a secular society. Sacred space is public space, even if most people aren't often there.

The needs of the visitor must be balanced against the regular worshipper, and churches need to rediscover their community role as registrar, library, museum, community centre, tourist attraction. [*an opinion on tourists in Cathedrals is offered in the July Life & Work, p.41*]

### **Telling the story**

Stained glass windows are supposed to be books for the unlearned, but how much do they convey to the modern visitor, although [s]he be considerably better educated? The average Nordic parish employs one or two professional musicians, and hymn singing is an important part of community culture: most people own a hymnbook. But most people don't accept the doctrines expressed in the hymns.

Gregorian chant is on the rise in the same way as pilgrimage, but again, it is about choice and consumption: you choose a CD, you do not spend your entire life in a monastery.

### **Aesthetic memory: art and its audience**

Museum-goers are usually advantaged: although it is nice to think art appreciation is innate, in practice you need the background knowledge to know what you are looking at. The gulf between modern Europeans and their artistic heritage is growing. CASA, *Communités d'Accueil dans les Sites Artistiques*, is a French voluntary organisation which exists (as their leaflet says) 'to welcome visitors [to churches] in such a way that they move beyond the architectural and iconographic qualities of the building and are able to discover its spiritual dimensions.' You don't have to be Christian to join.

## **10. Conclusion: the memory mutates**

National churches are still important and viable for three reasons:

- ✚ the need to restore churches in post-communist Eastern Europe
- ✚ the way religious communities value and compete for the privileges of historic churches
- ✚ the attitudes of non-churchgoers to the faithful and the churches, which is one of vigilance not indifference.

Openness to spirituality may increase as knowledge of institutional religion diminishes, because experimentation becomes possible.

Chains of historical memory which have been broken can reassert themselves: the Catholic memory in Britain, for example.

Modern forms of communication, which rely on visual as much as verbal communication, hold considerable potential for communicating an essentially dramatic message.

Unless Europe consciously develops a shared spiritual identity, it is unlikely the EU will ever have more than an economic function.