



## SECULARITY AND IRRELIGION IN EUROPE

Jim Memory

Europe was the first continent to be Christianised and it was the first continent to be de-Christianised. In today's Europe, most public discourse pushes religious matters to the margins or confines it entirely to the private sphere of personal beliefs. And at an individual level, increasing numbers of Europeans say they no longer believe, no longer attend church, and no longer practice their faith in meaningful ways.

This process of secularisation has been a subject of study and debate among sociologists for many years. Some considered it as the inevitable consequence of a rational scientific worldview which, together with the loss of the social significance of religion, would ultimately lead to the disappearance of religion in "advanced" societies. Others observed that many developed societies around the world seemed able to reconcile modernization and religious faith and that, in demographic terms, the proportion of religious people around the world is on the rise. So why not Europe?

### **"religious belief and practice are complex phenomena"**

Yet religious belief and practice are complex phenomena, We cannot measure secularisation by merely asking if someone regularly attends church, for example, There are many who continue to believe in God even though they no

### EDITORIAL: An uncomfortable truth

As Christian missiologists, we are convinced of the truth of the Christian gospel. Yet we are equally convinced that reaching Europe requires us to face up to an uncomfortable truth: Europe is still being secularised. Understanding the processes of secularisation is a vital part of discerning how Europe might be re-evangelised.

One of the tools at our disposal are large-scale sociological surveys like the European Values Study. A pre-release of the 2017-2020 EVS dataset gives us the opportunity to provide what we think is the first missiological analysis of this data.

My lead article revisits our previous attempt in 2010 to synthesise six measures of belief and practice to provide a global measure of secularity and thus identify where secularisation is taking place most rapidly at present.

Jo Appleton interviews Professor David Voas, an authority on both the EVS and secularisation in Europe who highlights some fascinating insights on the data.

Evert van de Poll takes a broader look at some of the challenges of using survey data to measure religious belief and affiliation. And Darrell Jackson explores the EVS for insights on the religiosity of migrants versus native Europeans.

As always, we pray this edition of Vista will provoke reflection and action as we seek to proclaim Christ in a sceptical age.

*Jim Memory*

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longer belong to a church, and in other European countries the opposite is true: people continue to belong, and occasionally attend, a state church even though they have no personal religious faith. To complicate the picture further, similar complexities are evident among the nonreligious. Even in the most secularised countries, the percentage of those who are convinced atheists is relatively small. Self-defined atheism (irreligiosity) and non-belief in God (secularity) are not the same thing, as Kasselstrand and others have demonstrated.

## European Values Survey

One of the most widely used tools to track sociological trends is the European Values Study, a large-scale longitudinal survey across a wide range of human values including religious belief and practice. There have been five waves of research over a period spanning 1981-2017.

In 2010-2012, making use of the fourth wave of EVS data published in 2008, Vista analysed and ranked the relative secularity of countries, based on six measures of belief and practice

Nova Index of Secularity – Global Results							
2008			2017-2020			relative	
Rank	Country	GMean	Rank	Country	GMean	diff	position
1	Czech R.	0.76	1	<b>Czechia</b>	0.77	+0.01	=
2	Germany	0.73	2	<b>Sweden</b>	0.74	+0.02	+1
3	Sweden	0.72	3	<b>Netherlands</b>	0.72	+0.09	+7
4	France	0.70	4	<b>France</b>	0.70	0.00	=
5	Norway	0.67	5	<b>Great Britain</b>	0.70	+0.04	+2
6	Belgium	0.67	6	<b>Denmark</b>	0.68	+0.05	+5
7	Great Britain	0.66	7	<b>Norway</b>	0.68	+0.01	-1
8	Finland	0.65	8	<b>Switzerland</b>	0.66	+0.05	+5
9	Hungary	0.64	9	<b>Germany (EVS)</b>	0.66	-0.07	-7
10	Netherland	0.63	10	<b>Spain</b>	0.65	+0.02	+2
11	Denmark	0.63	11	<b>Finland</b>	0.65	0.00	-3
12	Spain	0.63	12	<b>Hungary</b>	0.63	-0.01	-3
13	Switzerland	0.61	13	<b>Austria</b>	0.61	+0.02	+2
14	Bulgaria	0.60	14	<b>Bulgaria</b>	0.58	-0.02	=
15	Austria	0.59	15	<b>Russia (EVS)</b>	0.58	+0.02	+1
16	Russian F.	0.56	16	<b>Portugal</b>	0.54	+0.08	+5
17	Albania	0.53	17	<b>Croatia</b>	0.52	+0.03	+1
18	Croatia	0.49	18	<b>Italy</b>	0.52	+0.06	+4
19	Ireland	0.47	19	<b>Ukraine</b>	0.50	+0.03	+1
20	Ukraine	0.47	20	<b>Albania</b>	0.47	-0.06	-3
21	Portugal	0.47	21	<b>Poland</b>	0.43	+0.01	+3
22	Italy	0.46	22	<b>Greece</b>	0.41	-0.02	+1
23	Greece	0.43	23	<b>Turkey</b>	0.40	+0.05	+2
24	Poland	0.42	24	<b>Romania (EVS)</b>	0.39	+0.02	+1
25	Romania	0.37		<b>Belgium</b>	did not participate in EVS2017-20		
26	Turkey	0.35		<b>Ireland</b>	did not participate in EVS2017-20		

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- Do you believe in God?
- How important is religion in your life?
- Do you consider yourself a religious person, not a religious person, or a convinced atheist?
- How often do you attend religious services?
- How much confidence do you have in the church?
- How often do you pray to God outside of religious services?

These six questions were chosen to explore the multi-dimensional nature of religious belief and behaviour. For example, someone may believe in God and pray frequently outside of religious services, but rarely attend or have confidence in the church. Or they may attend church but rarely practice their faith or even believe in God. The responses from the six questions were then normalised and combined into a single measure of secularity, what we called the Nova Index of Secularity after the then Nova Research Centre at Redcliffe College.

The publication of a new wave of data for the period 2017-2020 has caused us to revisit these questions and compare the results with those from ten years ago. We have also ranked countries according to their relative increase or decline in secularity and noted which countries have moved most significantly up or down in the ranking.

The new EVS data from 2017-2020 suggests that Czechia, Sweden and the Netherlands are the most secularised countries in Europe and that Turkey and Romania are the least secularised. When we compare the 2017-2020 NIS values with those from 2008 it is clear that, in the vast majority of countries, a degree of secularisation is continuing, and in some countries markedly so.

**“in the vast majority of countries, a degree of secularisation is continuing, and in some countries markedly so”**

The countries showing the biggest change over this period were the Netherlands, Portugal and Italy indicating that these are the countries where secularisation is occurring most rapidly at present. Only two countries show any significant opposite trend Albania, and most notably, Germany. This striking result caused us to do some further investigation and, in particular, to consider if there might be a sampling error.

Given the significant arrival of Muslim refugees into Germany and some other countries a quick check was made of the percentage of Muslims in the datasets from 2008 and 2017, and this was then compared with the Pew Research Center

data from their 2017 report, Europe’s Growing Muslim Population.

The higher percentage of Muslims in the 2017-20 Germany sample relative to 2008 may help to explain some of the secularisation, but more generally, these percentages show a significant under-sampling of Muslims in the EVS when compared to the Pew 2017 study.

Country	2008	2017-2020	Pew 2017
Germany	1.3	3.7	6.1
France	3.1	4.7	8.8
Great Britain	2.1	3.1	6.3
Sweden	0.5	0.7	8.1

**Relative percentage of Muslims surveyed**

### Findings from the Six Questions

#### ***NIS1 – Do you believe in God?***

Sweden, Czechia and the Netherlands showed the highest NIS values for this question, though the high percentage of Czechs (16%) who did not give an answer may have skewed the numbers. 61% of Swedes, 53% of Dutch, 51% of Brits and Norwegians, and 50% of Czechs say they do not believe in God.

When we compare the two waves of EVS data for this question, we note that Great Britain, Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark have less belief than in 2008 but Germany appears to have more. Looking at the data in more detail we note that the number of those saying they believed in God in GB has fallen from 57.7% in 2008 to 47.8% in 2017-20, whereas in Germany it has risen from 43.3% in 2008 to 58.2% in 2017.

#### ***NIS2 – How important is religion in your life?***

As authors like Kasselstrand have observed, secularity is a complex phenomena and measures of indifference to religion are also required. Using our index, the top three countries on this measure were Czechia, Denmark and Sweden and the bottom three were Turkey, Greece and Romania.

Once again the longitudinal comparison throws up some interesting observations. The Netherlands, Denmark and Turkey show a lessening of importance of religion whereas in Albania and Germany the opposite trend could be noted.

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### ***NIS3 – Do you consider yourself a religious person, not a religious person or a convinced atheist?***

We might ask if this trichotomous question is really an effective way to explore religious (or irreligious) identity, but it does at least enable us to make comparisons. Sweden, France and Czechia show themselves to have the highest secularity on this measure whereas Romania, Poland and Greece show themselves to have the lowest. Yet here perhaps the raw data is more illustrative. Whereas Sweden shows itself to have the lowest percentage of people who self-identify as religious (26.7%) it is France that has the highest percentage of convinced atheists (22.7%).

The longitudinal comparison however reveals some even more surprising shifts. The country with the biggest NIS3 difference was Ukraine, which on closer inspection was largely down to a striking decrease in the number of people who say they are religious, down from 81,8% in 2008 to 59.3% in 2017-20. In fact, most countries showed a secularising tendency in this measure. The one exception again was Germany showing a marked rise in the number of religious people from 35% in 2008 to 52% in 2017. Some of this can be explained perhaps by the greater number of Muslims in the sample but once again, it runs against the general trend in the rest of the data.

### ***NIS4 – How often do you attend religious services?***

This is a measure of religious participation which serves as another take on measuring secularity. At the top of the 2017-20 league table are Czechia, France and Sweden and at the bottom we find Poland, Romania and Greece. Whereas in Poland an astonishing 47.1% of people say they attend a religious service at least once a week, the lowest percentages of attendance are to be found in Denmark (2.5%), Finland (4.6%), Sweden (5.3%) and Norway (5.6%). What is interesting to note in the case of all of these Scandinavian countries is that, though they have the lowest weekly attendance, many still do attend church at some point during the year. The highest percentage of those who never attend a religious service is in France (63%), Czechia (61%) and Britain (60%).

Perhaps the most striking change between 2008 and 2017-20 corresponds to none of the aforementioned countries but rather to Portugal. There was a drop in “at least weekly” attendance from 32% in 2008 to 17.5% in 2017-20, and a rise in those who never attend a religious service from 18.5% to 31% over the same period.

### **NIS5 – How much confidence do you have in the church?**

The lowest level of confidence in the church, and therefore the highest degree of secularity, corresponds in this case to Czechia, Netherlands and Spain. Conversely Romania, Ukraine and Turkey show the highest levels of confidence.

When a longitudinal comparison is made between 2008 and 2017-20, Turkey, Romania and Croatia show the greatest decline, though in the first two cases this was from a very high level. Perhaps more interesting are the countries that show some recovery of confidence in the church since 2008: Greece, Finland, Norway and Sweden. In the case of the Nordic countries, it is notable that high levels of secularity, or even increasing degrees of secularity by some measures, do not necessarily mean that confidence in the church as an institution is also decreasing.

**“Europe is frequently characterised as a secular continent, yet a striking number of Europeans continue to pray regularly”**

### **NIS6 – How often do you pray to God outside of religious services?**

Europe is frequently characterised as a secular continent, yet a striking number of Europeans continue to pray regularly. Even in the most secular countries, around one in every six or seven pray at least once a week: Czechia (15.1%), Sweden (15.7%) and Denmark (13.5%). Having said that, in all of those countries, more than half of the people say they never pray. The countries which pray the most are Romania, Albania and Turkey, with 79.8%, 79.2% and 77.5% respectively praying at least once a week.

When we compare the latest wave of EVS data with that which was obtained in 2008, we note that prayer is becoming less frequent in Portugal, Turkey, Netherlands, Italy and Spain, and more frequent in Albania, Germany and Greece. Once again, a closer analysis of the actual data reveals fascinating details in these shifts. In 2008, 59.1% of Portuguese people said they prayed at least once a week but by 2017-20 this had fallen to 40.4%. Likewise, the number of those who said they never prayed in 2008 was just 15.8%, but by 2017-20 this had risen to 29.5%.

## **Conclusions**

The 2017-2020 EVS data suggests that secularisation in Europe is continuing and it is occurring most rapidly in the Netherlands, Portugal and Italy.

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However, when we take a closer look at the six different secularisation measures, we get a more nuanced picture. On that basis, the most rapid secularisation is taking place in Britain (NIS1 – belief in God), Netherlands (NIS2 – importance of religion), Ukraine (NIS3-self-identification as religious), Portugal (NIS4-attendance), Turkey (NIS5-confidence in church) and Portugal again (NIS6-prayer).

The German data raises a lot of questions and should perhaps be handled cautiously. Though some of the uptick in religiosity may be due to the arrival of significant numbers of migrants during 2015/16, closer inspection suggests that Muslims were under-represented in the sample in both 2008 and 2017. It is unclear how much of the apparent increase in religious belief and practice in Germany is due to a higher number of practicing Muslims being included in 2017 relative to 2008.

In conclusion, the data suggests that secularisation in Europe is continuing but that each country may well have its own trajectory. The most secularised countries are not necessarily the most atheist, suggesting that indifference to

religion is the end result of secularisation rather than atheism.

Secularity and irreligiosity are not the same thing and this has significant consequences for Christian mission. Apologetics that is targeted on atheism is only reaching a tiny proportion of Europe's population. The much greater challenge is reaching the huge number of unbelieving Europeans who are indifferent to Christianity and consider religion an irrelevance in modern life.

*Jim Memory*

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## REFLECTIONS ON EVS: INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR DAVID VOAS

### Jo Appleton

*Professor David Voas is Professor of Social Science at the University College London Institute for Social Research, where much of his work concerns religious change in contemporary societies. He was Chair of the European Values Survey Theory Group, who are responsible for developing the questionnaires, and a member of their Executive Committee. Until recently he was also EVS's National Programme Director for Great Britain.*

We spoke to Prof. Voas about his work with EVS and asked him to reflect on our analysis of the 2017-2020 data.

*JA: Over the past ten years there have been a lot of changes in Europe, such as the migrant crisis and Brexit. In your opinion, how have these changes influenced secularisation and religious practice?*

*DV: The factors at work are very similar to those that have been operating for several decades. There's continuing growth in competition for people's time and attention from secular sources, but of course things like social media have*

*really taken off to tremendous extent. There is increasing cultural diversity that works against the maintenance of the traditional beliefs and practices; the continuing growth of individualism and personal freedom as well as decline in traditional authority.*



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Alongside this, I think there's been a continuing shift towards goals, objectives or arguably values that seem secular rather than religious, so the church is perceived by some people as being out of date on gender equality, sexual orientation and reproductive freedom. It's been ineffective, in some people's view, on priorities like protecting the environment or promoting social justice. Pronouncements on morality are unwelcome generally and the church lacks legitimacy because of scandals of various kinds. All of these things have tended to work in the secularising direction.

It's helpful to note that secularisation is essentially a generational process, so it's not about people in adult life deciding that they are no longer interested in going to church, although that does happen. The critical factor is the extent to which religious involvement is transmitted to the younger generation. There is a very slow but somewhat inexorable process of generational replacement where the older more Christian segments of the population die off and are replaced by younger, less religious people.

Although it's interesting and important to look at the recent past, this is a very long-term trend, reflecting how society has changed during time spans measured literally in generations.

*JA: Thinking about this longitudinal aspect are there any trends within that the new data that has surprised you?*

DV: Overall, I'd say it's very much as I would have expected. I like the way that you've distinguished 'frequent attendance' from 'ever attending' and pointed out that in the Nordic countries there is the phenomenon of very high levels of affiliation with national churches, and people see belonging to the national churches being almost part of being Danish or Swedish or Norwegian or Finnish but they really not very religious. By contrast countries like Britain, France, Czech Republic have a larger kernel of frequent church goers but also majorities who never attend at all.

*JA: We used six specific EVS questions in our index. Are there any different or additional questions it would have been good to include within EVS data to help capture changes in secularity?*

DV: You'll be aware that with these repeated cross-sectional surveys we are more or less obliged to repeat the questions which were there last time because we want to look at the trends. It's not so much that I'd like to see completely new or different questions: it's more that in some cases I'd like to see slightly better versions of the questions we do have.

For example, I don't think a yes/no answer for 'do you believe in God?' captures the complexity of people's theistic

leanings. The International Social Survey Programme has a much better question, with six possible responses ranging from 'I don't believe in God' through to 'I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it' with various points in between, so that's a direction that I would ideally like to go in. With regard to the self-described religiosity question which asks 'do you consider yourself to be a religious person, not a religious person, or a convinced atheist?', often no one's really quite sure what the difference between 'not a religious person' and 'a convinced atheist' actually is and a lot comes down to the cultural acceptability of claiming the atheist label. In France this is high because people are happy enough to see themselves as atheists, but it can be very low elsewhere as even quite unreligious people shy away from an atheist label that seems very unyielding.

***"I don't think a yes/no answer for 'do you believe in God?' captures the complexity of people's theistic leanings".***

The most common survey question about religion is 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to a religious group and if so which?'. You don't include that, and I think that's the right decision, as the answers are subject to quite considerable cross-national differences in history and culture. As we indicate above, in Scandinavia a huge proportion of people say 'yes absolutely, we belong to the church' but that's not the same thing as believing or practice. In other countries people are increasingly happy to say 'I have no religion now' but that's not to say they are less religiously or spiritually inclined; it just means that it is easier to say that you have no affiliation.

*JA: What influence do you think that migration has had on the statistics in regard to religious belief and practice?*

DV: I think first of all, although we now have substantial Muslim minorities in Western Europe which have offset the decline in average religiosity to some extent, we are still talking about a relatively modest proportion of the adult population, in the region of five to ten per cent. Moreover, immigrants and minorities tend to be undercounted in social surveys so if you look at unweighted data, their share is even lower in surveys.

An example of the impact of the migratory population is seen with a question within the International Social Survey Programme question around belief in God. Muslims now are significant share of those identifying in the most religious or theistic group. So in countries like Britain, they account for something like 1/4 of those very firmly theistic people even though they are a small portion of the population. Having

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said that, even if they are indeed very different, they are not going to swing the overall average very far.

In addition, because governments are concerned now with social cohesion and religious accommodation, the existence of this important minority has I think pushed religion to the fore in a way that otherwise wouldn't have been the case.

Second and subsequent generation of Muslims are more or less the same in terms of average religiosity as their parents, but there appears to be much more dispersion of belief and practice than with their parents. To grossly simplify, in a sense their parents brought with them the practices and worldviews of their countries of origin, which were all fairly standard. Following settlement, the next generation shows much more diversity, with some being highly secular and acting just like their peers but others who become very devout and so go to the other extreme. Over quite a long time I would expect them to be subject to the same secularising forces as everybody else, but of course it remains to be seen.

*JA And I suppose sometimes the experience of being in a minority makes people more likely to hold onto their faith?*

DV: Absolutely, there is definitely some kind of ethno-religious defence mechanism where precisely because of the salience of that religious identity they are perhaps pushed to assert and even practise as a way of defending their identity and the group that they belong to. How long that sort of phenomenon will be apparent remains to be seen but it depends largely on what the wider society does in assimilating or integrating these groups.

*JA: You mention that immigrants and minorities tend to be undercounted in surveys?*

DV: In social survey terms, as a result of disadvantage many religious minorities typically are hard to reach for several reasons. They may not be on various lists that you would use as sampling frames or they may not be so available or willing to be surveyed. In many cases there can be a language barrier. Social survey agencies are very aware of this and typically the data collected are weighted so that they become the appropriate share of population. But we shouldn't overlook the fact of course that the Muslims for example you do manage to include in your survey may not be representative of the whole community, so weighting isn't a panacea.

*JA: We also picked up that Germany in particular seemed to be a bit of an outlier, do you have any thoughts on that?*

DV: Yes, I do, though I'm not sure they will be very satisfactory! Our impression from other sources is that the trends in the former West Germany are very similar to those seen elsewhere in Western Europe. The former East Germany was possibly the least religious country in the world. While religious involvement there has increased a little, I doubt that it's by enough to push up the average for the whole country significantly. Your secularity league table for the previous EVS wave placed Germany at number two, which does seem surprising to me. The latest ranking of ninth seems more in line with what I'd expect, so if it's a matter of survey error I believe it's the earliest survey that exaggerated the secularity rather than the current one over-estimating religiosity.

The biennial European Social Survey asks about self-assessed religiosity. In Germany this has gone up and down over the past two decades and as it happens, the value for the most recent survey in 2018 is actually the lowest it's ever been in Germany, though not by a huge amount. There's really no evidence in the ESS that religiosity is gone up in the past decade, so I think on the face of it we probably seeing some kind of error in the EVS results.

*JA: You said most of the data was collected between 2017 and 2019. Obviously in 2020 everything changed and the world went upside down. What do you think the impact of Covid will be on people's values?*

DV: With regard to values, people have been forced to reflect on what's important. You could argue that this will lead to a burst of hedonism as everyone goes off and tries to make up for lost time in travelling, carousing and enjoying themselves in all of the ways they haven't been able to over last year. Of course, many people have also been faced with acute losses of contact with family and friends and community generally. It may be that they will in a sense rediscover the importance of family and community.

If one were cynical, you might say there's always a tendency in these extreme moments to think 'life will never be the same, and I'll make sure that I do X,Y and Z as soon as I'm able to', but six months down the line we are back just sitting in front of the television. I think it is an interesting and important question and while I think that there will be some long-term impacts, it's very hard to predict what those might be.

Jo Appleton

Many thanks to Professor Voas for making the time to talk to us! A recording of the full interview will shortly be available on the Vista website [europeanmission.redcliffe.ac.uk](http://europeanmission.redcliffe.ac.uk)

# SURVEYING RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND PRACTICE IN EUROPE

Evert Van de Poll

The Nova Index of Secularity presented in this issue of *Vista*, is based on the European Values Study (EVS) which seeks to understand (among other dimensions) religious belief and practice in Europe. There are however many factors affecting the outcomes of these and similar surveys such as the European Social Studies (ESS) and the Pew Forum Research Reports. We should be aware of these to understand the nuances of the religious landscape in Europe. In this article we shall look at some of these factors. Moreover, we shall combine the outcomes of these surveys with demographic trends that have a bearing on religious developments.

## One-step v two-step strategy

The first factor is that surveys use different methods of asking about religious identity which prompt respondents to give different answers. In many surveys, there is a single question, 'what religion do you belong to?' Usually, a number of options are added that respondents can choose from, including the indefinite option 'other'. Other surveys, especially in Europe, take a two-step approach: first a filtering question such as 'are you religious?' or 'do you belong to a religion' and then, if the response is positive, 'what religion do you belong to?' (giving some options to choose from) and further questions about religious beliefs and practice.

***"two-step questions seem to filter out respondents who do not consider themselves as having a significant level of religious belonging"***

Pew researcher Conrad Hackett points out that surveys using this twostep measurement strategy tend to find considerably more people reporting no religious affiliation than in surveys with a one-step direct measure of religious identity. For example, in Austria the 2002 ESS found that 28 percent of respondents claimed to be nonreligious; this was more than double the 12 percent of respondents in this category in the 2001 Austrian census, which included a simple prompt for religious affiliation (*Religionsbekenntnis*), with a series of response categories including 'no religious affiliation' as well as a write-in response box. In many cases, says Hackett, 'two-step questions seem to filter out respondents who might otherwise claim a religious affiliation but who do not consider themselves as having a significant level of religious belonging. In some countries where

religion is measured with a one-step question, this produces higher estimates of the religiously affiliated share of the country.'<sup>1</sup>

Based on the single-question approach, the the 2018 Pew Research report, *Being Christian in Western Europe*, says that 71% of the population of western and northern Europe claim Christian identity, and that 22% are regular church attenders (at least once a month). These percentages are higher than the overall picture emerging from EVS and ESS surveys, that use a multiple question strategy.

## What does 'being religious' mean?

A second factor to take in account is that the answer to the question 'are you religious' or 'do you belong to a religion' depends on what the respondents understand by being 'religious.' It means different things to different people and the meaning can vary even among adherents of the same religion. For some, it means holding religious beliefs. For instance, French people usually say they are 'a believer' or 'religious', meaning that they believe in God. For others, being religious rather means practicing certain rites and prescriptions of religious institutions.

Having said this, the two-step approach does enable us to go beyond the binary picture of a population divided in a religious and a nonreligious part. Some people say they are religious, or indicate that they believe in God, pray more or less regularly, and are interested in religious topics, but do not claim to belong to a particular religion. Social scientists are puzzled by this category, that has been dubbed "believing without belonging" or "behaving without belonging". David Voas has introduced the term 'fuzzy fidelity'. A comparison of different surveys shows that this is a considerable part of the population, especially in Western Europe. What exactly do these people believe? Why do they hold to certain religious practices? What is their relation to the Christian (or Muslim) religion?

Inversely, some claim a religious identity while indicating that they are not religious in terms of beliefs and/or practice. They belong to the so-called nominal, cultural or sociological Christians, Muslims or Jews. In Evangelicals it is commonplace to distinguish between 'religion' and a 'faith relation with God 'true faith'. Many are inclined to say that they are 'not religious', while definitely identifying as Christians.



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## Decline v regain

A third factor to reckon with is that each survey presents a static picture of the situation at a given moment in a given place, taken from a certain angle, just like a photo. But life, including religious experience and practice, is dynamic, more like a film that consists of a series of pictures that changes over time. Therefore, it is necessary to compare different surveys. And also, to repeat surveys after a certain time, using the same or at least similar questions, allowing us to see the trends. That is why this issue of Vista compares the Nova Index of Secularity based on the latest EVS data with the Index of eight years ago. In some countries there a very rapid decline over the last 10 to 20 years while other countries are more stable during the same period. It is interesting to see that France, the UK, Norway and Sweden

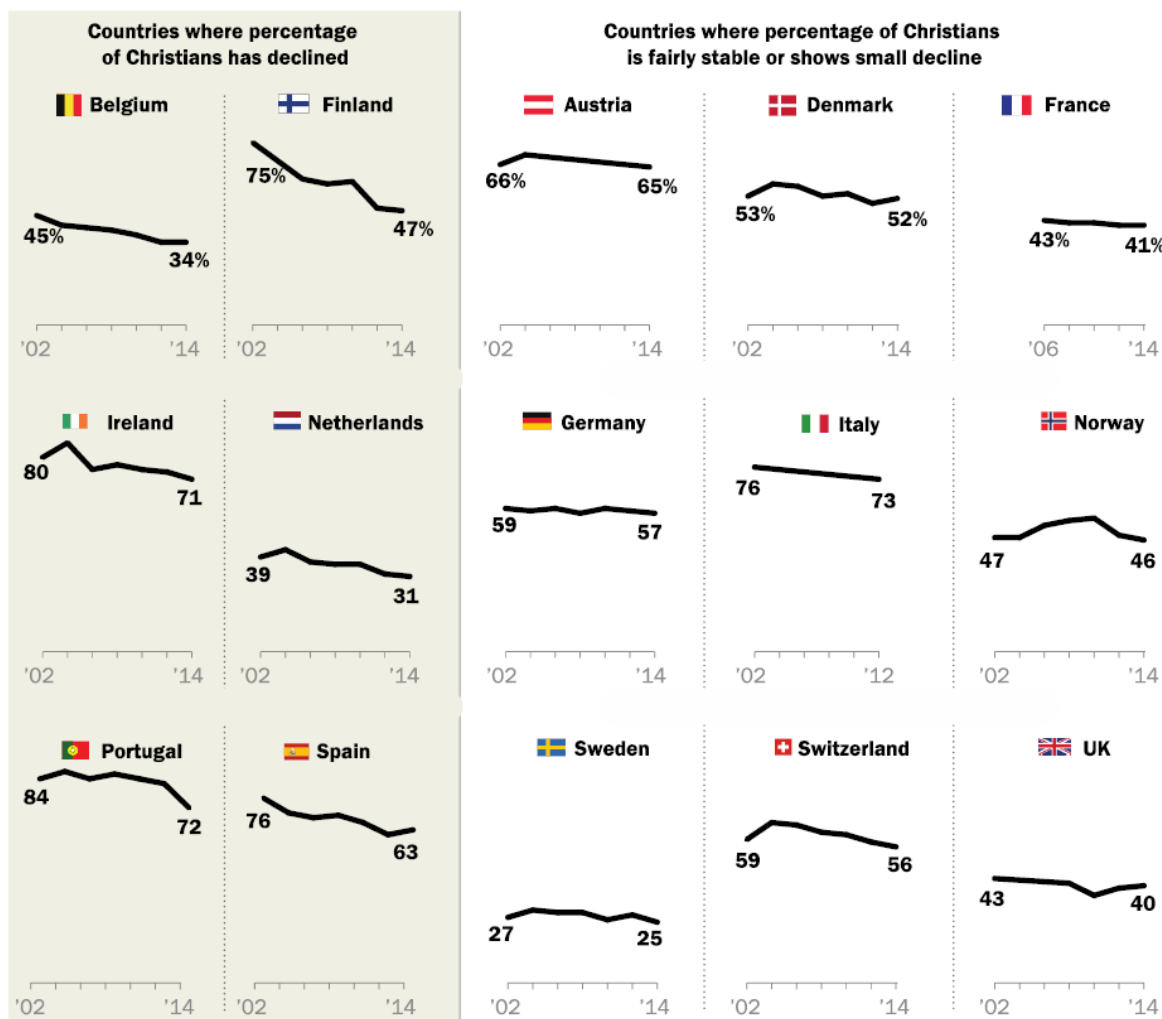
do not show much increase in secularity, nor in the Pew surveys nor in the EVS. Conversely, there is a considerable rise in secularity the Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, Spain, Switzerland, and Denmark, for example. Interestingly, some countries show a slight decrease in secularity, which in the Nova Index is noticeable in Germany but also in Hungary and Bulgaria.

The chart below from the 2018 Pew report 'Being Christian in Western Europe' shows the different trajectories in several European countries between 2002 and 2014, with respect to the percentage of the population claiming Christian identity. They vary from a sharp decline to a regain.<sup>2</sup>

Secularisation and the decline of the Christian religion in particular has gone on since for a long time and accelerated since the 1970s. What do these recent trajectories tell us?

### In several Western European countries, recent declines in Christian identity

*% who say they belong to a Christian denomination*



Note: 2016 European Social Survey data were not final at the time of this report's publication. Data on religious denomination are not available for 2014 in Italy.

Source: European Social Survey (ESS).  
"Being Christian in Western Europe"

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Perhaps we can tentatively conclude that the sharp decline in some countries is a matter of catching up with neighbouring countries, and that the decline will slow down and possibly come to a standstill. Perhaps countries with slow decline, like France and the UK have almost touched the bottom of the decline and are now flattening out. And finally, that decline is not an inevitable process, because in some countries we see an increase in religiosity.

This becomes even more apparent when we look at Europe as a whole. There we observe a striking different between the western and the eastern part. In another recent Pew research report the question was asked how many people who were raised Christian still identify as Christian. The difference between the two figures equals the decline of Christianity. See below for the statistics, based on surveys conducted in 2015-2017.<sup>3</sup>

You therefore cannot say 'well, Europe is becoming more and more secularised', you have to qualify it and highlight that there are different trajectories in Europe with regard to the different countries.

### Dynamics of switching

From a pastoral and evangelism point of view, it is not enough to conclude that the nonreligious percentage has increased or decreased so much. We need more refined surveys asking whether people have moved from unbelief to belief, or vice versa, and at what stage in their life. That brings to light the dynamics of switching (giving up religion, changing religion, converting from being nonreligious to a religion). In public discussions, religious identity is treated as a stable trait. However, research shows that religious identity (and commitment) fluctuates over the course of life and over time. From the two Pew research reports we have referenced, we learn that a considerable number of Europeans convert from nonreligion to Christianity, but that relatively few indigenous Europeans convert to Islam. Switching also takes place within a religion, e.g., from being nominal or non-practicing to being a committed and practicing believer – or vice versa.

### Why do (Western) Europeans 'switch out' of religious affiliation?

Many people make a religious switch during their life, but this is not always definite. Some people are religiously liminal, saying one year that they are nonreligious and the following year that they are religious or belong to a certain religion. Others switch from religious to nonreligious.

Why are they no longer affiliated to the religion in which they were raised? This was one of the questions asked in the aforementioned Pew Research *Being Christian in Western Europe* (2018)<sup>4</sup>. Here are median percentages of unaffiliated people who cite one of the following important reasons why they left the religion in which they were raised.

- 68% Gradually drifting away from religion / the church
- 58% Disagreeing with their positions on social issues (here we should certainly include questions of sexuality, marriage and gender)
- 54% No longer believing in the teaching of the religion / the church
- 53% Unhappy about scandals involving religious institutions and leaders
- 26% Spiritual needs not being met
- 21% Religion / the church failing them in time of need
- 8% Marrying someone outside their religion / church

### Large drops in Christian affiliation in Belgium, Norway, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden

% who were/are ...

	Raised Christian	Currently Christian	Change		Raised Christian	Currently Christian	Change
<i>Christian share has declined</i>				<i>Christian share relatively stable</i>			
Belgium	83%	55%	-28	Lithuania	95%	93%	-2
Norway	79	51	-28	Croatia	92	91	-1
Netherlands	67	41	-26	Bosnia	44	44	0
Spain	92	66	-26	Moldova	98	98	0
Sweden	74	52	-22	Romania	98	98	0
Denmark	80	65	-15	Estonia	50	51	+1
France	75	64	-11	Hungary	75	76	+1
Portugal	94	83	-11	Serbia	92	93	+1
Slovakia	84	73	-11	Bulgaria	78	80	+2
Czech Rep.	34	26	-8	Georgia	87	90	+3
Finland	85	77	-8	Latvia	73	77	+4
Germany	79	71	-8	<i>Christian share has increased</i>			
Ireland	88	80	-8	Armenia	95	97	+2
Italy	88	80	-8	Russia	65	73	+8
Austria	86	80	-6	Belarus	83	94	+11
Switzerland	81	75	-6	Ukraine	81	93	+12
UK	79	73	-6				
Poland	96	92	-4				
Greece	96	93	-3				

Note: Orange labels are Central and Eastern European countries. Blue labels are Western European countries. Statistically significant changes are highlighted in bold.

Source: Surveys conducted 2015-2017 in 34 countries. See Methodology for details.

"Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

In all Western European countries, the number of people who have retained their Christian identity is down, from 6 percent in the UK to 28 percent in Belgium, Norway and the Netherlands. In Central Europe, Christianity is more or less stable, except in Czechia, Slovakia, while in Eastern Europe it shows an increase, even a considerable one, in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

## SURVEYING RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND PRACTICE ctd

This brings me to an important point for pastors, youth workers and other church leaders to notice: what are the factors that lead nominal or even practicing Christians to adopting a non-religious lifestyle and worldview? It is often thought that the major challenge in evangelism is reaching out to non-believers or unchurched people outside the Christian constituency. Statistics of growing numbers of 'nones' tend to strengthen this focus.

Far from denying the importance of this focus, I suspect that the church-leavers constitute an even greater challenge. For one, it proves to be quite difficult to arouse an interest in God, Jesus, and the Gospel among people who have already left the church. In many cases this is too late, they have made up their mind. But what we can and should do is identifying the causes for people to 'switch out' and think of the potential leavers in our churches, not only among the young people but in all age categories. As we study these reasons, and the individual stories of people who have 'left the fold', they can become a resource for preaching, teaching and pastoral care. Do we take into account the factors that have led others to switch out? Are we aware that people within our church constituency might well do the same in the time ahead of us for the same reasons? Do we realise that some

are already in this process, quietly and privately, while we do not see it yet? How can we better notice this? Do we address the issues that cause people to leave? How can we meet the underlying needs, answer the underlying questions, and thereby prevent a process of definite religious distancing to take place in their lives?

By asking these questions our reflection on surveys and statistics can become profitable for pastoral and evangelism practice.

*Evert Van de Poll*

### End notes

- i. Conrad Hackett, 'Seven things to consider when measuring religious identity'. *Religion*, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2014.903647>, p. 5.
- ii. Pew Forum, *Being Christian in Western Europe* (2018), p. 37. <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>
- iii. Pew Forum, *Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues* (2018), p. 19. <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>
- iv. Pew, *Being Christian in Western Europe*, p. 41 <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>

## Lausanne Europe 20/21 Conversation and Gathering *Dynamic Gospel – New Europe*

Vista are partnering with Lausanne Europe through being one of the key resources to facilitate a conversation about mission across Europe and beyond

While the physical Gathering has now been postponed to November 2021, the Conversation has already begun. For the last few months, Lausanne Europe delegates and other church leaders and influencers have been meeting across Europe in what are called Impact Groups. The idea is that each of the 800 selected delegates form an Impact Group of 10-12 people to reflect on the key issues for mission in Europe today, on Scripture, discipleship, mobilisation, and prayer. The hope is that, by the time the delegates meet up in Wisla, Poland in November 2021, as many as 10,000 evangelical leaders might be part of the Lausanne Europe Conversation.

The Conversation is open to all and more information on how to start an Impact Group can be found on the website.

[www.lausanneeurope.org/conversation](http://www.lausanneeurope.org/conversation)



**DYNAMIC GOSPEL  
NEW EUROPE**  
CONVERSATION  
AND GATHERING

# MORE RELIGIOUS OR MORE SECULAR?

## Migrant religiosity encountering European secularity

Darrell Jackson

Are migrants in Europe likely to be more secular or more religious than European-born nationals? That question recurs frequently and has become a central research focus for a growing number of smaller scale research projects with migrants and refugees. Most studies tend to suggest that migrants are generally more religious than national-born Europeans and that for some at least, the fact of relocating to, or being resettled in, a new country can be a catalyst in a change of religious affiliation and identity. This is most obviously seen in the anecdotal evidence of migrants and refugees from Islamic nations of the middle-east who have arrived in Europe and undergone conversion to Christian faith, commonly of a Pentecostal or evangelical form.

Frustratingly, there is relatively little data that reliably informs a pan-European picture of migrant faith or religious identity, affiliation, and practice. Happily, the 2017 versions of the *European Values Survey (EVS)* and the *World Values Survey (WVS)* allow some tentative comparisons to be made between migrants and non-migrants. Moreover, these two surveys capture responses from 34 countries of Europe. Across the sample of interviewees, 6.2% reported that they were an immigrant and not born in the country. Out of the 127,118 Europeans surveyed for the EVS and the WVS together, 7,839 declared themselves to be born outside the country. Whilst this sample size is small and certainly under-representative of the migrant populations of the countries in question, it is possible to point to religious affiliation, practice, and identity, even down to the level of migrants and denominational belonging.

This latter fact is likely to be given close attention over the next few years as the EVS and WVS data undergoes further analysis. Our initial analysis here points to the potential within EVS-WVS data for further careful exploration and use by the churches and mission agencies of Europe. In addition

to reporting the denominational belonging, we also attempt to compare migrant and non-migrant practices such as religious service attendance, and personal prayer. Furthermore, it is also possible to compare the professed beliefs of migrants with those of non-migrants.

The presentation here is limited to a pan-European overview; at national level the under-representation of migrants surveyed and the consequently small sample sizes for migrants' religious practices and beliefs makes national analysis problematic in the absence of supporting data from other sources. Nevertheless, this is a promising start and bodes well for the future.<sup>1</sup>

Another note of caution in interpreting these survey results is that they are 'raw' numbers. Survey researchers often 'weigh' their raw data to adjust for under-representation of certain type of people (including migrants who might be less inclined to respond, less easily located, or who struggle to communicate in the language of the research team). For this reason, where we compare the responses of migrants and non-migrants, we show our data as a percentage of each of these two categories of respondents. Where we report that 26.6% of non-migrants say they do not belong to any religious denomination, the figure of 26.6% is telling us that just over a quarter of all non-migrants who answered this question do not belong to a religious denomination.

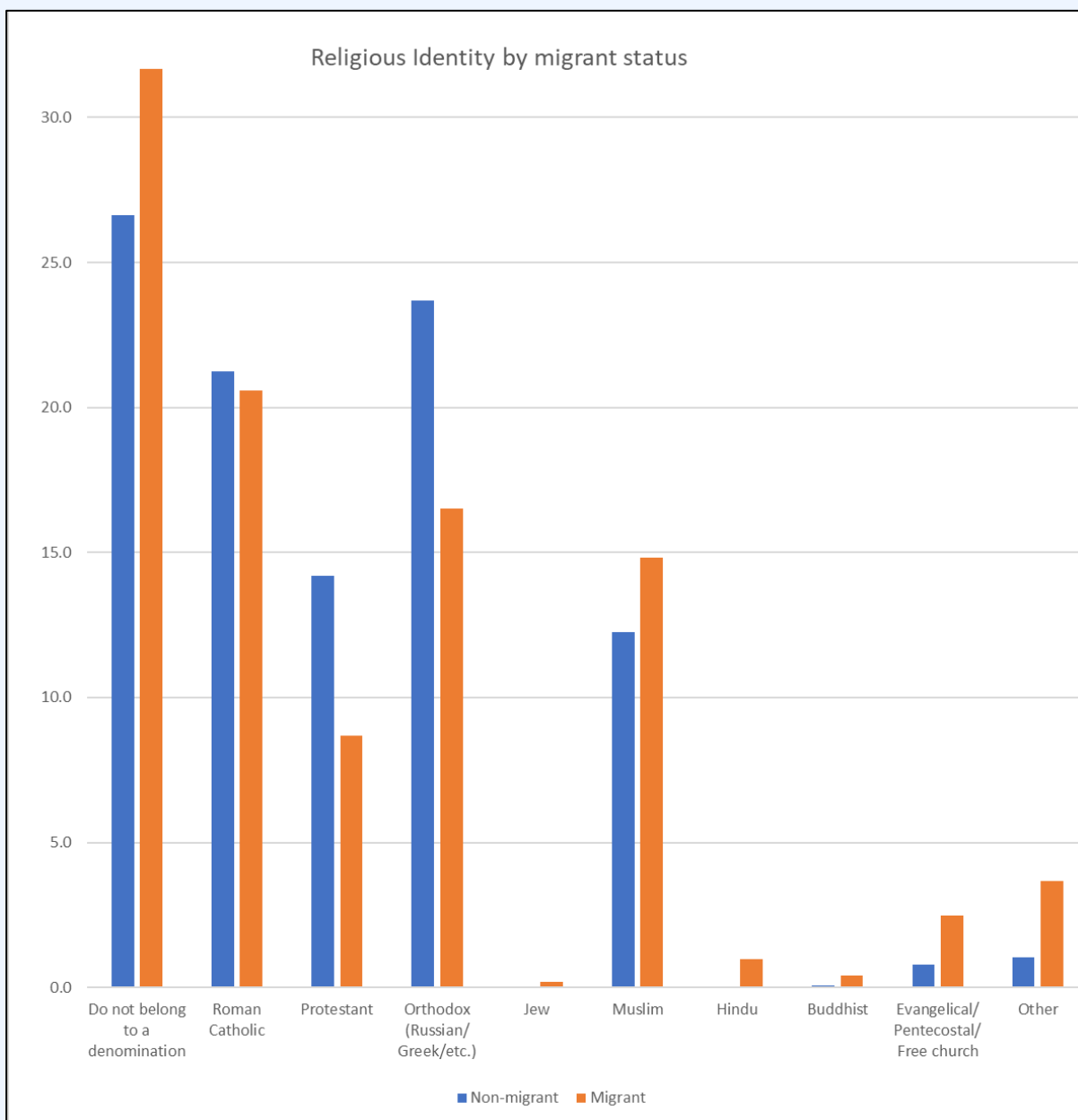
The EVS/WVS 2017 Survey asked respondents to indicate whether they 'belonged' to a religious denomination or tradition. If they indicated they did 'belong', they were asked to indicate which one this was. In some countries, there were options to indicate Sunni or Shia Muslim, for example. The data is collated by EVS into broad denominational streams – the streaming used is highly likely to match the interest to readers of VISTA.

	Do not belong to a denomination	Roman Catholic	Protestant	Eastern Orthodox	Jew	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Evangelical/Pentecostal/Free church	Other
% of non-migrants	26.6%	21.2	14.2	23.7	0.0	12.3	0.0	0.1	0.8	1.1
% of migrants	31.7	20.6	8.7	16.5	0.2	14.8	1.0	0.4	2.5	3.7

% of respondents who belong to a religious denomination

## MORE RELIGIOUS OR SECULAR ctd

We can present this data graphically, as follows:



Of course, saying that you 'belong' to a denomination is not necessarily a guarantee of regular attendance nor is it evidence of personal faith. However, what is of particular interest is that religious belonging is expressed by slightly fewer migrants (68.3%) than it is by non-migrants (73.4%). However, migrants are more likely to belong to either a Muslim community or to be evangelical/Pentecostal/Free church than are the non-migrants who were surveyed. This points to the ongoing need for evangelical churches across Europe to continue wrestling with the realities of migrant Christian faith and taking careful stock of what it means to minister to Muslim migrants in the name of Jesus and with compassion.

When attendance at a religious service is measured, over and above a sense of 'belonging' to a religious denomination or tradition, the following table begins to show some very interesting patterns. Whilst claims to 'belong' to a denomination might be made less frequently by migrants than by non-migrants, the likelihood is that migrants are more likely than non-migrants to be regular attenders at weekly, or more than weekly, services. This suggests that claims of religious belonging are a way of non-migrants saying something about their cultural identity that does not necessarily translate into regular service attendance.

## MORE RELIGIOUS OR SECULAR ctd

Of course, we need to be cautious about regular service attendance being a sign of genuine personal faith. Migrants might attend a church service or Friday prayers because they appreciate the community, relationship, hospitality, and the support that these are at a merely human level. These, of course, are not uncommonly offered by churches across Europe as an expression of Christian mission, of a love for God and neighbour.

What evidence might we draw from survey responses to questions about the practice of private prayer. EVS has asked a variety of questions about personal religious practices over the past few decades and the practice of private prayer continues to offer some of the strongest evidence for a personal, or owned, religious identity. What the table opposite shows is that migrants are more likely to pray privately on a daily basis and slightly less likely to say that they never pray.

When the practice of private prayer is correlated with religious belonging, migrants who belong to the Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Free church/ Pentecostal/ Evangelical churches are more likely to pray every day than do non-migrants who belong to these denominations or traditions. Interestingly the same is also true for Muslim migrants than it is for Muslim non-migrants. This data is presented below:

How often do you attend religious services?	% of non-migrants	% of migrants
more than once week	3.3	4.7
once a week	10.3	11.2
once a month	10.3	9
only on specific holy days	23	18.6
once a year	8	8.8
less often	11.8	12.8
never, practically never	33.3	34.8

% of respondents attending religious services

How often do you pray outside religious services	% of non-migrants	% of migrants
every day	23.6	28.7
more than once week	9.9	9.3
once a week	6.3	5.6
at least once a month	7	6.2
several times a year	8.1	8.3
less often	13	13.3
never	32.1	28.6

% of respondents praying outside of religious services

How often do you pray outside religious services?		every day	more than once week	once a week	at least once a month	several times a year	less often	never
% of non-migrants	Roman catholic	29.8	13.3	10.1	9.1	9.7	13.2	14.9
	Protestant	16.1	7.9	4.3	6.9	10.9	20.9	32.9
	Free church/ Pentecostal/ Evangelical	46.0	12.9	7.5	6.8	7.2	8.6	11.0
	Jew	35.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	10.0	5.0	35
	Muslim	50.2	17.5	7.1	6.3	4.0	5.7	9.2
	Hindu	52.9	5.9	23.5	-	11.8	5.9	-
	Buddhist	37.5	21.9	3.1	3.1	-	-	34.4
	Orthodox	36.1	14.5	9.4	10.4	9.8	11.6	8.1
% of migrants	Other	42.4	8.8	7.2	4.9	4.9	11.3	20.5
	Roman catholic	34.4	15.4	7.4	8.5	10.8	13.1	10.5
	Protestant	24.8	9.0	5.8	8.0	11.5	18.8	22.1
	Free church/ Pentecostal/ Evangelical	53.4	14.6	3.9	5.8	6.8	7.8	7.8
	Jew	30.0	10.0	10.0	-	10.0	-	40.0
	Muslim	56.0	8.5	5.3	3.6	5.1	9.7	11.8
	Hindu	40.0	17.8	13.3	13.3	6.7	4.4	4.4
	Buddhist	26.3	10.5	5.3	-	15.8	31.6	10.5
Orthodox	31.1	12.8	8.3	9.9	12.6	12.2	13	
Other	53.9	8.4	9.1	6.5	6.5	5.8	9.7	

% of people who pray outside a religious service by denomination

## MORE RELIGIOUS OR SECULAR ctd

Finally, we present here the EVS data that asks the very simple question about personal belief in God. On this measure, migrants are more convinced of the existence of God than are non-migrants.

Do you believe in God?	% of non-migrants	% of migrants
yes	72.6	75.7
no	27.4	24.3

**% of respondents who believe in God**

Our initial presentation of data from the 2017 round of the EVS and WVS surveys suggests that migrants are generally more regular and more fervent in their religious affiliation, religious practice, and religious beliefs than are their non-migrant co-religionists. Of course, the EVS data is far from

perfect and there are many careful qualifications that must be made in order to offer a more sophisticated picture of the trends regarding migrant religiosity. Nevertheless, readers of VISTA can be grateful that across Europe, the EVS data shines a light upon the presence and practices of migrants in Europe's places of worship and houses of prayer.

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### End notes

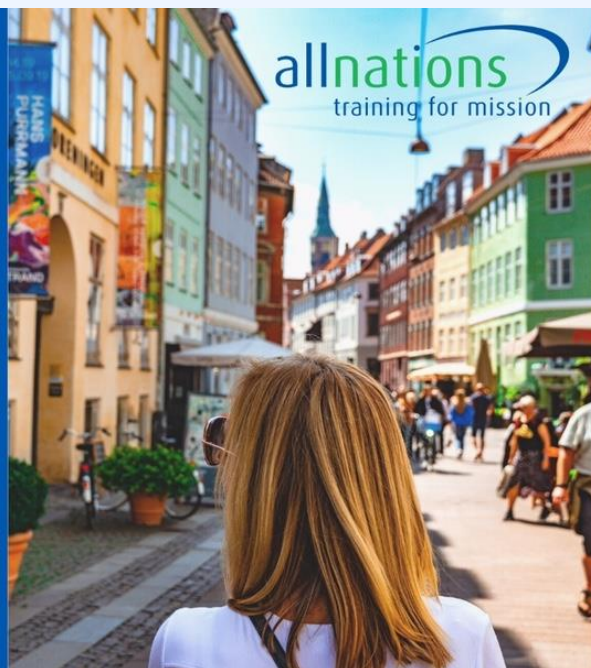
- i. Readers interested in exploring data at national level, along with other relevant migrant data, are invited to consider purchasing a copy of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mapping Migration in Europe, Mapping Churches' responses: Being Church Together (2020) written by Darrell Jackson and Alessia Passarelli. Almost 100 pages of infographics present their migration data in new and fascinating ways.

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