

# EUROPE

## *SECULAR Christianity or SECRET Christianity?*

Compiled by: Mike Burnard



Western Europe, birthplace of Protestant Christianity and home to the Catholic Church, has become known as the world's only secular continent on earth. What was once the stronghold, defender and proclaimer of faith has gradually drifted away from religion and adopted self-sustaining and self-sufficient societies where government has replaced God, secular institutions the Church, and politics religion.

**Or has it?** Is this a truth, an assumption or a misconception? Is Europe SECULAR Christian or SECRETLY Christian?

On 29 May 2018, **The Pew Research Centre** study<sup>1</sup> – which involved more than 24,000 telephone interviews with randomly selected adults, including nearly 12,000 non-practising Christians – found that Christian identity remains a meaningful marker in Western Europe, even among those who seldom go to church.

An earlier study by the **Nova Research Centre**<sup>2</sup>, Redcliffe College, Gloucester, identified similar trends when they measured the status of secularity across Europe during 2010. The research involved between 1,000 to 2,000 people for each of the 47 countries surveyed. The scope of the questions provided a high level of confidence that this can be considered a comprehensive study of secularity across Europe. A summary version of these responses enabled the NRC to construct a 'Nova Index of Secularity in Europe' (or NISE!).

The findings by both these research centres points to generational trends that hold the key in understanding missiology in Europe and the road ahead. Penetrating the hearts of those who declare themselves irreligious does not happen by presenting a new form of the same religion. In this regard, as Rev Dr Darrell Jackson, Senior Lecturer in Missiology, Morling College, Sydney, points out in the NRC report, it is critical to distinguish between the way that we use various closely related terms. Dr Jackson describes it as follows: *“We should distinguish between the philosophy or ideology (secularism), its associated socio-cultural phenomenon (secularity) and the social conditions (secularisation) that are the result of constant and consistent secular policies and politics.”*

## THE ORIGIN OF EUROPE'S SECULARISATION

Christians often refer to 'secular' Europe as being a grand scheme of the enemy to rob the continent of its Christian heritage. Sadly, the Church should be held as much responsible as modern politicians.

European secularisation - the socio-cultural phenomenon in Europe - can be traced as far back as the French Revolution. There was a strong movement during the revolution to do away with the clergy altogether. There is no doubt that the Church was mainly responsible for its own demise and even though the attack was aimed at the Church, it was never aimed at Christianity per se. The role of the French Revolution in the “Dechristianisation of France” is described in *Wikipedia* as follows<sup>3</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/?utm\\_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm\\_campaign=88a23bc4c7-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2018\\_05\\_31\\_03\\_46&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_3e953b9b70-88a23bc4c7-400038353](http://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=88a23bc4c7-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_05_31_03_46&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-88a23bc4c7-400038353)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2013/02/is-europe-secular-or-christian>

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dechristianization\\_of\\_France\\_during\\_the\\_French\\_Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dechristianization_of_France_during_the_French_Revolution)

“The goal of the campaign between 1793 and 1794 ranged from the public reclamation of the massive amounts of land, power, and money held by the Catholic Church in France, to the termination of Catholic religious practice and of the religion itself.

The French Revolution initially began with attacks on church corruption and the wealth of the higher clergy, an action with which even many Christians could identify with. During a two-year period known as the Reign of Terror, the episodes of anti-clericalism grew more violent than any in modern European history. The new revolutionary authorities suppressed the church; abolished the Catholic monarchy; nationalised church property; exiled 30,000 priests and killed hundreds more. In October 1793 the Christian calendar was replaced with one reckoning from the date of the Revolution, and Festivals of Liberty, Reason and the Supreme Being were scheduled. New forms of moral religion emerged, including the deistic Cult of the Supreme Being and the atheistic Cult of Reason, with the revolutionary government briefly mandating observance of the former in April 1794.

By Easter 1794, few of France's forty thousand churches remained open; many had been closed, sold, destroyed, or converted to other uses.”

Then came Napoleon Bonaparte<sup>4</sup>:

“The French statesman and military leader who rose to prominence during the French Revolution and led several successful campaigns during the French Revolutionary Wars. Napoleon was Emperor of the French from 1804 until 1814, and again briefly in 1815 during the ‘Hundred Days’. Napoleon dominated European and global affairs for more than a decade while leading France against a series of coalitions in the Napoleonic Wars. He won most of these wars and the vast majority of his battles, building a large empire that ruled over continental Europe before its final collapse in 1815.”

According to RM Schwartz<sup>5</sup>: “Though he himself was not a religious man Napoleon understood the power of the Church amongst the people and his own need for allies. He had no respect for the new cults that had become popular during and after the Revolution and chose instead to bring religion back, but with a strict separation between church and state. A model which was widely adopted across the continent.”

The nation came more into focus than faith. And gradually societies developed away from the traditional situation where the church controlled most of life. Then other ideologies also had their influence. Communism, socialism, fascism were areligious. With science and technology evolving, the European outlook became more rational, materialistic and pragmatic, not to say cynical. Two world wars did their part in dampening naive belief in salvation and right and wrong.

The gradual move across Europe shifted from the philosophy or ideology of Christianity towards a more socio-cultural awareness. The Church never became irrelevant in modern Europe, but it lost a lot of the genuine power and influence it had before.

## THE FINDINGS

Missionary engagement in the context of a secular society remains the biggest challenge of Christians in Europe. Restoring the witness of a divine Christ in a society that historically was confronted with a corrupt religion will demand strategy, insight and wisdom. Answers to these challenges will be found in the following results of the two respective research reports.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Napoleon>

<sup>5</sup> <https://rmschwartz.wordpress.com/ideas-and-beliefs/christianity-in-19th-century-france/religion-as-part-of-life/return-to-religion/>

## 1. STILL THE BIGGEST GROUP

The main finding in both reports indicated that even though Europe might be regarded as secular in ideology, non-practising Christians still outnumber the religiously unaffiliated population (people who identify as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular,” sometimes called the ‘nones’) in most of the countries surveyed. And, even after a recent surge in immigration from the Middle East and North Africa, there are many more non-practising Christians in Western Europe than people of all other religions combined (Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, etc.).

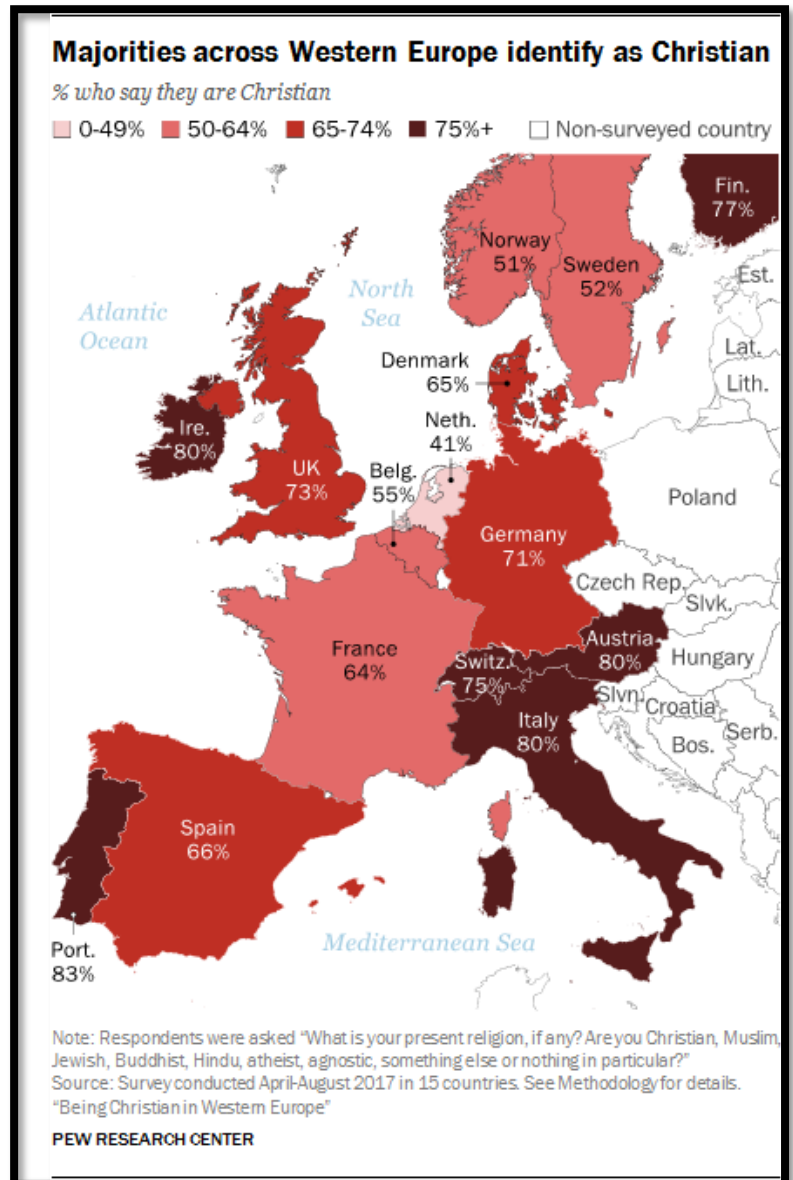
## 2. FROM RELIGIOSITY TOWARDS SPIRITUALITY

The ‘NISE’ report points to a “developing post-Christendom identity”, characteristic of people who have previously been, or who remain, 'Christian', but who presently have no institutional affiliation (or a very diluted form of it). This is a shift from religiosity towards spirituality, not a shift from non-religiosity towards spirituality. The newly 'spiritual' are not on a journey towards faith but are more likely to be on a journey away from church affiliation.

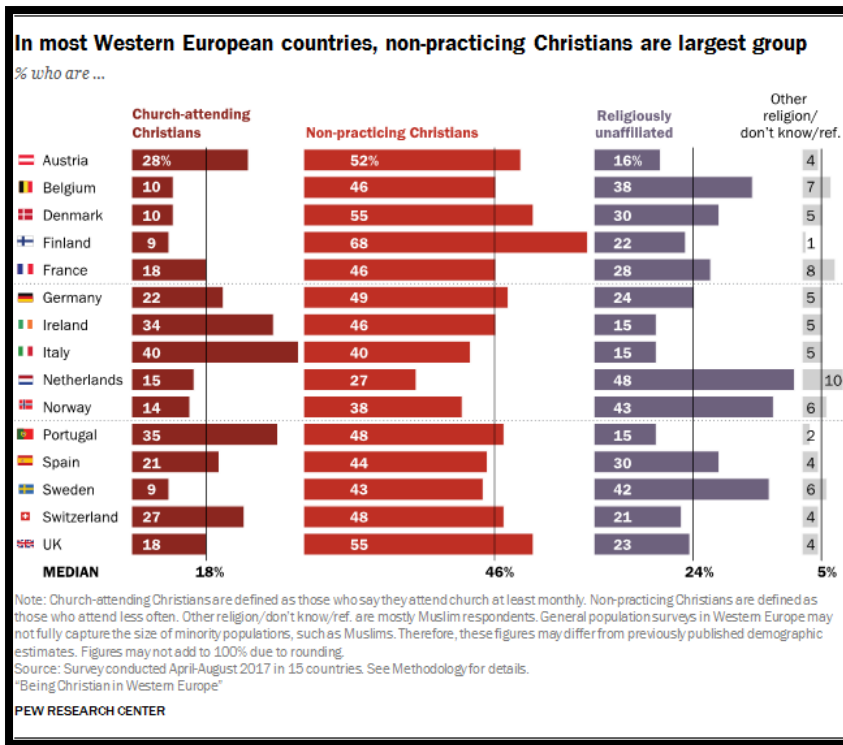
THE PEW Foundation report found that “Most non-practising Christians in Europe believe in God. But their concept of God differs considerably from the way that churchgoing Christians tend to conceive God. While most church-attending Christians say they believe in God ‘as described in the Bible,’ non-practising Christians are more apt to say that they do not believe in the biblical depiction of God, but that they believe in some other higher power or spiritual force in the universe. For instance, in Catholic-majority Spain, only about one-in-five non-practising Christians (21%) believe in God ‘as described in the Bible,’ while six-in-ten say they believe in some other higher power or spiritual force.”

## 3. FROM PRACTISING TO NON-PRACTISING

The PEW Foundation found that, “Most adults surveyed still do consider themselves Christians, even if they seldom go to church. Indeed, the survey shows that non-practising Christians (defined, for the purposes of this report, as people who identify as Christians, but attend church services no more than a few times per year) make up the biggest share of the population across the region. In every country except Italy, they are more numerous than church-attending Christians (those who go to religious services at least once a month). In the United Kingdom, for example, there are roughly three times as many non-practising Christians (55%) as there are church-attending Christians (18%) defined this way.”



## 4. FROM HOSTILE TO INDIFERENT



The 'NISE' report also identified "A markedly irreligious generation of 50-69 year olds, best characterised as 'ideologically hostile' to religiosity. This generation is now beginning to retire from influential roles in the media, politics, education, and the arts. The havoc that this 'lost generation' has wreaked – in constructing a narrative of hard secularism – may finally be waning. In contrast there is some evidence to suggest that the current generation of 20-29 year olds is less hostile to religion and religiosity, a generation that is best characterised as 'benignly indifferent'. This more 'open generation' may prove to be more amenable to creating the

space necessary for a discussion of religion and religiosity within the media, politics, education, and the arts."

## 5. FROM INCLUSIVE TO EXCLUSIVE

The PEW Foundation found that, "Christian identity in Western Europe is associated with higher levels of negative sentiment toward immigrants and religious minorities. On balance, self-identified Christians – whether they attend church or not – are more likely than religiously unaffiliated people to express negative views of immigrants, as well as of Muslims and Jews."

## 6. FROM BIBLICAL TO LIBERAL

The PEW report also states: "The vast majority of non-practising Christians, like the vast majority of the unaffiliated in Western Europe, favour legal abortion and same-sex marriage. Church-attending Christians are more conservative on these issues, though even among churchgoing Christians, there is substantial support – and in several countries, majority support – for legal abortion and same-sex marriage."

## 7. FROM CONVICTION TO TRADITION

According to the PEW report: "Nearly all churchgoing Christians who are parents or guardians of minor children (those under 18) say they are raising those children in the Christian faith. Among non-practising Christians, somewhat fewer – though still the overwhelming majority – say they are bringing up their children as Christians. By contrast, religiously unaffiliated parents generally are raising their children with no religion."

## 8. FROM CHURCH TO GOVERNMENT

It was also reported by PEW: "Generally speaking, Western Europeans do not look favourably on entanglements between their governments and religion. Indeed, the predominant view in all 15 countries surveyed is that religion should be kept separate from government policies (median of 60%), as opposed to the position that government policies should support religious values and beliefs in their country (36%)."

Non-practising Christians tend to say religion should be kept out of government policy. Still, substantial minorities (median of 35%) of non-practising Christians think the government should support religious values and beliefs in their

country – and they are much more likely than religiously unaffiliated adults to take this position. For example, in the United Kingdom, 40% of non-practising Christians say the government should support religious values and beliefs, compared with 18% of ‘nones’.

In every country surveyed, church-attending Christians are much more likely than non-practising Christians to favour government support for religious values. In Austria, for example, a majority (64%) of churchgoing Christians take this position, compared with 38% of non-practising Christians.”

## **9. FROM GLOBAL TO NATIONALIST**

Overall, the PEW study shows: “A strong association between Christian identity and nationalist attitudes. Non-practising Christians are also less likely than church-attending Christians to express nationalist views. Still, they are more likely than ‘nones’ to say that their culture is superior to others and that it is necessary to have the country’s ancestry to share the national identity (e.g., one must have Spanish family background to be truly Spanish).”

## **10. FROM PRE- TO POST-**

The ‘NISE’ report indicates that “It’s probably accurate to describe contemporary Europe as simultaneously experiencing ‘pre-secularity’, secularity, and ‘post-secularity’.” Those that seek a revival in Europe should therefore take heart that there are faith platforms in place to build on. ‘Secular’ Europe is probably more ‘secretive’ Europe as originally thought and reaching the continent with the Gospel will require a faith process of *renovating* faith and not necessarily *establishing* faith from scratch again. But there is also the stark reality that the traditional face of institutional Christianity needs to be adapted in a post-secular society. Not the message, but the method.

## **CONCLUSION**

While Europe as a whole may be seen as increasingly secular, there are a surprising number of mentions of God, the church and religion in the constitutions of individual countries. Denmark, Greece, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Malta all have constitutional state churches, while others such as Sweden, Finland or Spain have formally separated (or are in the process of doing so) although some recognition of the relationship remains. France, Kosovo, and Serbia and Montenegro define themselves as a ‘secular states’ whereas some countries compromise – for example, while Albania has no “official religion”, it references “faith in God and/or other universal values”. Ireland, the Ukraine and Poland have the most overtly ‘Christian’ preambles to their constitutions, with mentions of the Trinity (Ireland), and “Our culture rooted in the Christian heritage” (Poland).

The good news is that both non-practising Christians and church-attending Christians share similar beliefs and attitudes toward religious institutions. Most non-practising Christians say they believe in God or some higher power, and many think that churches and other religious organisations make positive contributions to society. In these respects, their perspective is similar to that of churchgoing Christians and should be included in strategic efforts to share the Gospel.

## SOURCES

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[www.incontextinternational.org](http://www.incontextinternational.org)  
[mike@incontextministries.org](mailto:mike@incontextministries.org)