



EUREL Conference **Religion and territory**
25-26 Oct. 2012, Manchester (United Kingdom)

David Voas and Ingrid Storm,
“Religious and secular morality across Europe”,
in Anne-Laure Zwillling (ed.), *Proceedings of the EUREL Conference ‘Religion and territory’*, 25-26 Oct. 2012, Manchester (United Kingdom), Eurel, 2013.

The online version of this article can be found at
<http://www.eurel.info/IMG/pdf/voas-storm.pdf>

published on behalf of Eurel for



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“Religious and secular morality across Europe” David Voas and Ingrid Storm¹

The decline of religion in European social life over the past century is to our knowledge unparalleled and unprecedented in the world. People in Europe are now much less likely to believe in God, attend church, or report that they belong to a religion than they were mere decades before. Is this rapid religious change accompanied by a decline in commitment to moral values and prosocial behaviour? Or are Europeans developing a new form of secular morality?

It seems plausible that religion and the maintenance of moral values are linked. Religious codes and religious education clarify expected standards and prohibit certain behaviours deemed damaging. Religious teachings promote altruism, self-denial and deferred gratification, and people who represent these ideals are celebrated. Secular society appears to be at a comparative disadvantage: punishment following transgression depends on being caught rather than divine justice; altruism, self-sacrifice and service to others appear relatively unrewarded. Alternatively, secularity may be associated with new forms of morality and respect for individual autonomy and diversity.

John Marston, MBE funded a three-year research programme into religious and secular morality across Europe based at the University of Manchester. The programme aims to assess how religiosity relates to morality for individuals, for regions, and for countries, holding confounding variables such as age, gender, education and socio-economic factors constant. It will examine how religiosity and morality have changed over time, and between generations; the causes of these associations; and national differences. This text summarises exploratory analysis of the European Values Studies of 1981, 1990, 1999 and 2008 (when it covered 46 countries).

Theoretical background

Three bodies of literature form the basic theoretical framework for this study. Haidt and Graham (2007) identify five basic moral foundations:

- Harm / care (Avoidance of harm and relief of suffering)
- Fairness/ reciprocity (Human rights and protection from injustice)
- In-group loyalty (Loyalty to the group and defense against external threats)
- Authority / respect (Order, discipline and appropriate behaviour within existing hierarchy)
- Purity / sanctity (Avoidance of physical and mental pollution)

Depending on cultural norms and ideological preferences, people assign different priorities to these foundations. Generally the two first foundations are by far most

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important in the western liberalism, whereas Eastern morality, and conservative Western morality relies on all five foundations. If European society is undergoing moral change, we would expect large value differences within each society between younger and older people.

Inglehart and Welzel (2005) use the World Values Survey to examine global trends. Material change- Existential security, allows for growth of knowledge society and spread of secular rational values. This secularisation leads to further value change in the post industrial phase – which again leads to political change and the growth of democratic institutions. Both these moves are associated with declining religious influence in society generally, and for the individual citizen respectively.

Self expression values are especially relevant for morality and means that the moral foundations of Authority, loyalty and purity are no longer as important. What is protected is individual autonomy and the individual's protection from harm and injustice (the first two of Haidt's foundations). This literature, represents invaluable source of knowledge on value systems, but one thing that is lacking is a proper understanding of whether secularisation is primarily a cause or a consequence or simply another symptom of value change.

Finally, we use the literature on religion and social capital. Putnam and Campbell (2010), like many others, find that religion is associated with civic participation, generosity and trust. But they also find that the relationship be almost entirely explained by social networks. We are interested in whether secular social networks are equally effective in promoting prosocial behaviour and civic engagement.

Analysis

All the waves of the EVS asked the question “*Please tell me for each of the following whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between*” We did a Factor analysis (Principal Axis Factoring with oblimin rotation) on the items which were repeated in all the waves. Two very clear factors came out. 1) *Autonomy vs. purity* (which included sexual morality and sanctity of life). 2) *Self interest vs. social norms* (which included breaking laws and rules, stealing, cheating and lying). Two variables straddled the two factors: *Adultery* is both a breach on sexual morality, but also implies lying and cheating and more general breach of contract. *Taking soft drugs* similarly is both potentially harmful to the body and a crime in most countries. We discounted these and added the others together into two scales. The results of bivariate analysis of these scales by geography are summarised below.

Autonomy - purity

Countries in Western Europe generally score higher than countries in Eastern Europe on the autonomy- scale, but there are exceptions such as Ireland and Italy which have more traditional moralities on average. The more religious the population of a country, the less people justify divorce, euthanasia, homosexuality and so on. However, there may be other explanations for the geographic difference besides religion. As Inglehart and Welzel's (2005) studies have show, development and security are related to self-expression values in a linear way. When we plot the mean country score on the autonomy-purity scale against the human development index (HDI), we find that and the higher the HDI the more people condone the behaviours on this scale . The same goes for the quality of governance. The Worldwide

Governance Indicator (WGI) of rule of law is a measure which reflects perceptions of the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, and in particular the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi 2011). The more people can trust the law, the more they can afford to justify personal and private behaviours that to the extent they are seen as transgressions at all, are moral rather than legal ones.

Self-interest - social norms

There is much less national variation on the self – interest scale, but there is some and it is not quite clear why we see this variation. Religiosity does not appear to account for it, nor does the human development index (HDI). Even the WGI (Law) does not have any association with this variable, even though justifying cheating would make more sense in places where crime and corruption is widespread, or where the legal authorities cannot be trusted. So why do we not see a relationship? One thing to note is that one can oppose this sort of self-interest on either traditional grounds (they defy legitimate authority) or liberal grounds (they undermine the general good). This helps to explain why the levels of approval or disapproval are so similar cross-nationally.

Individual level associations

In addition to country differences, there are also some association between religiosity and the “justify”-scales at the individual level. Religious service attendance and how important God is in the respondent’s life seems to matter a great deal, but much more to justifying autonomy than to justifying self-interest. Is this because religion offers clear guidelines for deciding what is right and wrong, or “good and evil”? Thinking that there are no clear guidelines, does not make you much more likely to justify crime and cheating. When it comes to justifying autonomy on the other hand there is a difference. Most likely, clear guidelines about good and evil is measuring the same moral orientation towards authority and sanctity that makes people less likely to justify the items in the first factor. And because the items in the second factor are usually protected by law, most would not condone them even if their justification was made on a legal basis rather than a moral one.

There appears to be an interaction effect between personal religiosity and country religiosity on the autonomy scale. There is a clear split between the religious and secular halves of Europe in how much people are willing to justify abortion, homosexuality etc. The effect of religiosity is strongest in the most religious countries. There is not much difference between religious and secular countries on the self-interest scale, but religious individuals are less likely to justify crime in all countries, and this individual level effect is most pronounced in the most religious countries. These results are the same when controlling for age.

Change over time

The religious have changed less over time than the nonreligious, but on average there is an increase in justifying autonomy across the board. Analysing this using the cohorts from three waves of the EVS, it seems to be a combination of an cohort and

period effect, that is: each birth cohort is more likely to condone these behaviours than the previous cohorts and there has been an additional increase in liberal attitudes which has affected all age groups in Western Europe since the 80s.

For justify self-interest there is a slightly wider gap between religious and nonreligious in the younger cohorts, but more worryingly, younger people are considerably more likely to justify crime and cheating. Looking at the cohorts from all three waves, and estimating their age, however, the change over time on the self-interest dimension looks to be almost entirely an age effect. Older respondents are less likely they are to justify crime and cheating, regardless of when they were born.

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