

hardly any idea of the relationship between weather and food and only pray to have enough money to feed their teenage children. We can easily add many examples to this list.

It is hard to argue with the authority version of secularization in highly developed societies. Everywhere in Europe and America, the authority of churches over the way society is run, and their ability to influence their members, has diminished over time. Stores are open on Sundays. Religious people often don't go to their church, temple, or mosque. Catholic women use birth control. Most Jews are not kosher. Evangelical Christians have high divorce rates and get abortions.

European Irreligion

14.5.1 Describe the religiosity in Europe.

Even if one asks simply whether people are religious or not, one can easily make the case that native-born people in Europe, especially Northern and Western Europe, have become very secular indeed. On any given Sunday only about 10 percent of Europeans go to church. Fewer than half of the people of Scandinavia, Holland, Germany, France, Britain, or Belgium, or of many countries that were previously part of communist Europe, say they believe in god, compared to more than 80 percent of Americans (European Commission 2005:8).

Surveys tend to show that although Europeans are not opposed to religion for other people, they just want the religious to keep their beliefs private. They do not want religion in their politics (even though many European countries have large parties, usually known as Christian Democratic, which have roots in religion). Many Europeans tend to be put off by very religious people, so for example they are more suspicious of what they see as the excessive religiosity of some Muslim immigrants than they are of the fact they are Muslims. When asked, most Europeans say that religion—of any sort—is simply is not very important in their own lives and should not be public in any way.

How can this be? Don't Western Europeans "need" traditional religion for moral order or for some vision of life after death? We don't know exactly why, but somehow they manage without. Lacking society-wide religious commitments does not seem to preclude moral and orderly behavior. For example, Europeans have less than 25 percent of the homicide rate in the United States—for irreligious Norway it is close to 15 percent (Geneva Declaration Secretariat 2008). The poor in Europe are given a relatively generous safety net and need neither starve nor die without medical care. If "do unto others" is the essence of Christian morality, Europeans do not seem particularly immoral.

So in many countries in Europe, the classical sociological prediction that secularization would spread seems to be confirmed. But the sharply declining rates of religious

participation and religious belief in Europe are not found in most other countries around the world, and as the proportion of foreign-born people (especially Muslims) rises in many European countries, these trends may not continue.

American Exceptionalism

14.5.2 Compare and contrast religiosity in the United States to other developed countries of the world.

Among the developed countries of the world (Australia, Canada, Japan, and Israel also look a lot like Europe regarding religion), it is the United States that is considered the exception that needs to be explained. Modern as any Western European country, the United States retains a level of conventional religiosity far above almost all of the other developed countries of the world. As noted above, at least twice as many Americans as Europeans say they attend church regularly. Remarkably, two-thirds of Americans say they would not vote for an irreligious person to be president (of course, the United States has had many relatively irreligious presidents—Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt, among others; even Ronald Reagan, who often used religious language in his speeches and favored introducing prayer into public schools, did not attend church regularly). And social issues of importance to many religious leaders, such as abortion, homosexuality, public support for religious education, whether evolutionary biology should be taught as established science or simply a theory of human evolution, and requiring prayer in public schools are often central issues in American politics. Many non-Americans view us as having a very strong religious component to public life.



The struggle over abortion in America is an example of how religious views are often injected into political debates. Anti-abortion activists often invoke religious themes into their arguments against allowing women the right to choose to have an abortion.