

“NEVER WAS THERE A TALE OF MORE WOE . . . ”?<sup>1</sup>  
THE CHURCH IN WESTERN EUROPE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST  
CENTURY

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The causal casual observer could be forgiven for endorsing the sentiment expressed by William Shakespeare about his famous star-crossed lovers as a description of the situation of Christianity and the church in Western Europe in the early twenty-first century. The statistical evidence of the numerical decline in church memberships and those describing themselves as “Christian” across the Western half of the European continent is consistent across multiple differing national censuses and numerous polls from highly regarded survey companies such as Pew Research, IpsosMori, Eurobarometer, YouGov, and Gallup.<sup>2</sup>

This narrative of Christian decline is not confined to the government or research companies but is manifested within churches across the continent. Research units within the Catholic and Protestant churches, and Christian NGOs, such as Tearfund, and Christian media outlets, such as Premier Christian Media, have all commissioned research whose findings endorse the decline narra-

1. Shakespeare (1593) *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 5, Scene 3.

2. YouGov, *Brits’ Belief about God*; D. G. Justice and Consumers, *Discrimination in the European Union*. That being said, it should be noted that getting accurate pictures of religious affiliation across Western Europe is almost impossible as a number of states in Western Europe, including Spain, France, Belgium, and Italy deliberately omit questions of religious affiliation from their censuses. There is a very helpful analysis of the reasons why religion is left out of official censuses in Europe and across the globe in Thorvaldsen, “Religion in the Census.” The findings from Pew Research and the other polling companies cited above will be analyzed in more detail in the following section and so will be referenced then.

tive.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, amongst evangelical Christians, including those coming from the Majority World to Europe for Christian mission, the “decline narrative” has become an important trope for exhorting congregations across the continent to “awake” and respond to the challenge.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, it could be argued that the narrative of European Christian decline is a valuable tool in seeking to forward a missional agenda.

Despite this overwhelming narrative of decline and the wealth of evidence that appears to back it up, in 2007, Adrian Wooldridge and John Micklethwait noted in their seminal book, *God is Back*, that even in what they termed as “the highly secular culture” of Western Europe, there were signs that religion (including Christianity) was starting to revive.<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly, their findings caused much chagrin amongst the proponents of the various secularization theses. Yet, Micklethwait and Wooldridge’s cautious proposals about possible signals of church growth in Europe appeared to be vindicated in Eric Kaufmann’s book, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?* published three years after *God is Back*.

Kaufmann applied the models of the “Second Demographic Transition” theory first proposed by two Dutch researchers, Ron Lesthaeghe and Dirk van de Kaa in 1986. Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa’s model was focused on the effects of industrialization on birth rates and the specific hypothesis that as material factors become less significant and contraception becomes more easily available, “values” become increasingly significant in determining family size. It is within this broad conception of “values” that Kaufmann focussed upon the impact of the fact that religious couples have more children than non-religious couples, on reli-

3. See, for example, Ashworth and Farthing, *Churchgoing in the UK*; Reese, “Why is the Church Failing,” n.p.; *Evangelical Focus*, “Belgium, Norway, and Netherlands Lead the Decline,” n.p.; Pope, “The Decline of the Church in Europe,” n.p.; McLeod and Ustorf, eds., *The Decline of Christendom*.

4. Catto, “Accurate Diagnosis?” 31–45; Brown, “The Shift of the Centre of Gravity,” 86–90.

5. Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God is Back*, 134–39. See also Jenkins, *God’s Continent*.

giosity in Britain and mainland Europe.<sup>6</sup> This has led Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk to hypothesize that “a combination of higher religious fertility, immigration and slowing rates of religious apostasy will eventually produce a reversal in the decline of the religious population of Western Europe.”<sup>7</sup> Two things are important to note about Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk’s prediction; firstly, they are talking about religion generally rather than Christianity specifically, but Christianity is included amongst the broader religious growth that they are arguing for. Secondly, they are not expecting to see a revival of religious numbers for at least a few decades more due to increasing religious birth rates eventually catching up to, and passing, rates of demographic decline in the general population of Western Europe.<sup>8</sup>

The work of Kaufmann, Kaufmann, Goujon, Skirbekk, Micklethwait, and Wooldridge, therefore, poses a counter-narrative to the generally accepted narrative of inexorable religious decline in Western Europe. How can two such different arguments arise from the same sets of data and cultural milieu? Are they simply wrong?

This article will assess the status of Christianity in Western Europe from two interconnected perspectives: firstly, demographic. As it has now been more than a decade since the article that included Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk’s prediction was published, and with the religious data from the “England and Wales” portion of the United Kingdom’s 2021 Census showing that less than half of the English and Welsh (46 percent) self-identified as “Christian,” this article will examine the data and the arguments surrounding religious decline or growth in Western Europe.

Secondly, the influence of Christianity in Western Europe will be assessed in relation to policy and cultural spheres. It will assess the impact of the work of churches (ecumenically defined) in well-

6. Kaufmann, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?*; Kaufmann, “London,” n.p.; Kaufmann et al., *The End of Secularisation in Europe?* 69–91.

7. Kaufmann et al., *The End of Secularisation in Europe?* 73.

8. Kaufmann et al., *The End of Secularisation in Europe?* 85–86. See also Peri-Rotem, “Religion and Fertility in Western Europe,” 231–65.

ness, social, and healthcare programs and explore the concept of what has been labelled the “Default Argument.”

These two facets of the analysis will form the basis for the conclusions which propose that Christianity will remain the *Leitkultur* in Western Europe independent of its short to medium-term demographic decline and its eventual demographic increase. That assertion will be dovetailed with Micklethwait and Wooldridge’s arguments in *God is Back* to form the basis for an assessment of the possible status of Christianity in Western Europe in 2050. This year has been chosen because the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Future’s Project (whose data will be included in this analysis) makes predictions about religious demographics in Europe up to that year.

### *Christianity in Western Europe*

#### Analyzing the Data

In 2019, the highly regarded American think tank Pew Research, published data on Christian decline across the continent of Europe based upon surveys they had conducted between 2015-2017. The survey covered thirty-four countries and came within the context of an analysis of differences between Eastern and Western European attitudes to religion, minorities, and what they termed “key social issues” (which included attitudes to same-sex relationships, abortion, and national language).<sup>9</sup> It highlighted the sharp declines in self-described Christian affiliation across the Western Europe, with Belgium (83 percent to 55 percent), Norway (79 percent to 51 percent), Spain (92 percent to 66 percent), and the Netherlands (67 percent to 41 percent) showing the sharpest declines of all.<sup>10</sup>

9. Pew Research Center, “Large Drops in Christian Affiliation,” n.p.

10. It is interesting to note that the Pew survey’s figures for decline of Christian affiliation in the UK were 79 percent to 73 percent. This is fascinating because, as noted in the Introduction, census polls going back to 2011 had shown a far lower number for Christian affiliation (59 percent) which was consistent with the findings of other British surveys done over the same period. Why the Pew numbers were so much higher (even though they were also showing a decline) would be worthwhile analyzing. On British numbers, see Voas and Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance*, and analysis of French numbers can

These findings echoed the findings of Eurobarometer 508 (Eurobarometer is the polling arm of the European Commission), which found that over the twenty-seven member states of the European Union (EU), thirty-two percent of Europeans rated their faith (Christian and Non-Christian) as “strongly important to their identity.”<sup>11</sup> Combining the “Strongly Identify” with the “Tend to Identify” responses brings the percentage with some adherence to “religion” in Europe to just over half, with a further twenty percent who are undecided.

These results show that religious affiliation is certainly down from the seventy percent in the 1990s when a similar question was also asked, but it certainly does not suggest that Europe is, in societal terms, a “religion-free” region. Again, the numbers for individual member states showed very clearly the East-West divide in the strength of religious affiliation on the continent, whether Christian or another faith.

Pew Research findings are broadly similar to those above. In the survey conducted jointly by the Pew Research and the Templeton Foundation published in 2015. It found that eighty percent of Europeans claimed some form of religious affiliation (72 percent Christian, 7 percent Muslim, and 1 percent other religions) but that Western Europe was certainly less religious than the Eastern half.<sup>12</sup>

This 2015 survey was nuanced and evidenced in a Pew survey on Western European Christianity published in 2018 entitled “Being Christian in Western Europe.” In Pew’s presentation of the data, it was clear that there were a large proportion of Western European Christians who identified as such but did not attend church. Average numbers of those identifying as “Currently Christian” across Western Europe were approximately seventy-one percent

be found in Tallet and Atkin, eds., *Religion, Society and Politics in France Since 1789*.

11. Joint Research Centre, “Values and Identities of EU Citizens,” n.p. See also “Special Eurobarometer 493,” n.p. whose focus was on discrimination, but which also included a question on religious belief.

12. Pew-Templeton, “Global Religious Futures,” n.p. See also the helpful analysis found in van de Poll, “Surveying Religious Belief and Practice in Europe,” n.p.

of the total population, although only an average of twenty-two percent of the population of Western Europe said that they “Attend services monthly or more.”<sup>13</sup> These averages covered wide variations across Western Europe. For example, in Finland, just nine percent of Christians described themselves as “Church Attending Christians,” while sixty-eight percent described themselves as “Non-Practicing Christians.” Whereas, in Italy, forty percent described themselves as “Church Attending Christians,” with a further forty percent describing themselves as “Non-Practicing Christians.” The median across Western Europe for those describing themselves as “Church attending Christians” was eighteen percent (which was the figure for the UK as well), and the median figure for those describing themselves as “Non-Practicing Christians” was forty-six percent (which was the figure given for Ireland’s “Non-Practicing Christians” as well).

However, on closer examination of the data from the 2018 Pew Research survey, it could be that the description of “Non-Practicing Christian” might be a category error in as much as, according to the Pew Research analysis itself, “many non-practicing Christians say they do not believe in God ‘as described in the Bible,’ they do tend to believe in some other higher power or spiritual force.”<sup>14</sup> This statement strongly suggests that “Non-Practicing Christians” might better be absorbed into the “nones” or “spiritual but not religious” categories as found in other surveys on religious attitudes and affiliations which would cover various forms of agnosticism and interest in mysticism. Yet, to make that judgement could be considered too hasty for it is important to note the results of a survey done by the London-based think tank Theos which found that approximately twenty percent of those identifying as “non-religious” in Britain believed in life after death and seventeen percent believed in the power of prayer.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, what might be true for “nones” in the UK might very well not be so for other parts of Western Europe, but the Theos data is, at the very

13. Pew Research Center, “Being Christian in Western Europe,” n.p.

14. Pew Research Center, “Being Christian in Western Europe,” n.p.

15. See Sherwood, “Non-Religious are Hardline,” n.p.

least, a reminder that our survey tools are still relatively blunt instruments and extremely patchy.

Once again, it is clear that the majority of member states with the most atheist or agnostic affiliations were in Western, rather than Eastern, Europe. That being said, even within Western Europe, there was considerable diversity in the figures, and it is noticeable that member states with Catholic backgrounds, particularly on the Iberian Peninsula, Ireland, and Italy, had generally lower rates of atheism/agnosticism than those with Protestant backgrounds. The only exception to that was Spain, where the rate of atheism/agnosticism was very similar (39 percent) to Protestant background member states.

Further evidence of the decline in Christianity demographically in Western Europe can be found in Paul Tromp, Anna Pless, and Dick Houtman, whose journal article used European Values Survey data between 1981–2017 to track the decline of Christian religiosity and religiosity more broadly. They argued that not even the increase of New Religious Movements and New Ageism over the past three decades, nor the growing fundamentalist elements of Christianity (and other faiths) on the continent were enough to reverse the decline in religiosity in the long term.<sup>16</sup> They noted also, as was noted earlier, that current survey questions were inadequate tools for understanding the nature of religiosity on the continent and called for better questions tailored to understanding types of Christian religiosity which deviated from traditional Christian models.

The results of this survey data are underlined by Grace Davie and Lucien Lustean, who paint an even more marked picture of religious decline in Europe based upon the numbers of young people across Western Europe identifying with “No Religion” in numerous surveys done over the past decade.<sup>17</sup> Davie and Lustean’s work strongly suggests that the speed of the decline in religiosity is likely to increase in the coming decades based upon the data for young people and religiosity which they cite.

16. Tromp, et al., *A Smaller Pie with a Different Taste*, 127–44.

17. Davie and Leustean, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion in Europe*.

The work of Davie and Lustean, Pew, Tromp Pless and Hartman, and Eurobarometer all point in the same direction: that of Christian decline. What is more, these studies are a sample of literature, that includes also important work by Heelas and Woodhead (on the United Kingdom specifically), Pippa Norris, and Ronald Inglehart.<sup>18</sup> It seems, therefore, that the demographic argument for the decline of Christianity in Western Europe is incontestable, even though, below the headline figures, there is so much which is vague and contestable (including the methodologies of the surveys themselves) as to render the results, on some level, almost meaningless. However, the pattern of decline has been affirmed by so many surveys independent of one another over a period of nearly three decades that there can be little doubt that it could be safely said that declining formal Christian institutional affiliation does appear to be a reality in Western Europe.

While this data is consistent across a number of sources, perhaps one area which has not been given enough attention in demographic analysis is the role of “conversion,” or “religious switching” as it is often referred to. It is an important piece of the narrative about Christian demographics (indeed, religious demographics more broadly), but it is almost impossible to analyze because convertees will often hide their identity, particularly if they are coming from another faith. Some anecdotal evidence of conversion to Christianity in Europe does exist, for example, in Hamburg, Germany Pastor Gottfried Martens held mass baptisms for converts from Islam in 2016.<sup>19</sup> The numbers cited for conversions to Christianity vary hugely dependent upon the source, but it would seem reasonable to suggest that the numbers converting to Christianity are not enough to keep pace with those leaving it. However, if nothing else, it is useful to know that acknowledging

18. Professor Woodhead has many publications, but her recent public lecture at St Bride’s Church, Fleet Street for the Religion Media Centre in September 2022 captures key elements of her arguments. Woodhead, “Considering the Further of Religion in Britain.” See also Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*.

19. Sherwood and Oltermann, “European Churches say Growing Flock of Muslim Refugees are Converting,” n.p. See also Keri and Sleiman, “Religious Conversion to Christianity,” 283–94.



the overall decline of Christianity demographically in Western Europe is not to say that “religious switching” to Christianity is not happening. Moreover, given the number of migrants into the UK who are Christian (less so for the European mainland), for which estimates also vary but for which official sources put at around fifty percent of all annual immigrants, it would be reasonable to suggest that the number of Christians in Europe, in some countries (particularly the UK) are being propped up by Christian immigrant numbers.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, studies of Christian demographic decline in the UK carried out by Heelas and Woodhead reinforce this analysis as their most high-profile study which evidenced Christian demographic decline was carried out in rural Cumbria, a highly mono-ethnic White region of the country.<sup>21</sup> Whereas, the studies that evidenced Christian demographic growth that were carried out by Eric Kaufmann were focussed upon the highly diverse city of London.<sup>22</sup>

But the data, however it is interpreted, does not tell the whole story of the status of Christianity in Western Europe.

### *Cultural Influence*<sup>23</sup>

The “status” of Christianity in Western Europe outside of the specific focus upon demographic projections and debates over the implications of terms such as “spiritual but not religious” is highly contested. Yet, the case for the ongoing impact of Christianity in

20. See Goodhew, *Church Growth in Britain*, 107–208; Paas, “Post Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe,” 3–25.

21. See Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*.

22. See Kaufmann, “London,” n.p.

23. “Culture” clearly encapsulates art, music, and literature as well as on welfare, wellness, and healthcare which are the focus on this section. Unfortunately, there is simply not the space to analyze the more artistic or creative side of Christian cultural impact in Western Europe, especially in the context of comparison with other faiths or worldviews. Any book-length discussion of this question of the “status of Christianity” in Western Europe should certainly engage with these creative aspects, and anecdotal evidence in the work of high-profile music artists such as Billy Eilish and Stormzy suggest that Christian referencing in what will later be described as “the Default Argument” is strongly present.

the ethical assumptions and values upon which Western Europe bases itself upon is perhaps easier to make. This is important because even though Western Europe is without doubt ethnically and morally pluralistic, the very space within that pluralism is accepted, even welcomed, must come from a set of ethical assumptions which, themselves, must be derived from a set of values considered legitimate enough to be broadly agreed upon other than at the political and social margins.

Policymakers, think tanks, NGOs, and academics who have participated in the debates around what Simon Coleman describes as the Christian Heritage of Western Europe do not debate whether Christianity has been an influence in the region, but rather, the extent of its ongoing influence and its influence *vis a vis* other religious and cultural influences.<sup>24</sup> For some historians such as Niall Ferguson and (even more) Tom Holland, Christianity, and the nature of the Christianity which historically developed on the continent, is the vital cultural ingredient which identifies the culture of Western Europe and, as argued particularly by Holland, continues to exert the primary ethical influence in the region.<sup>25</sup>

In drawing their conclusions, Coleman, Holland, and Ferguson echo the argument made back in the early 1970s (when sociologists were already tracking signs of Christian decline in Western Europe), by the philosopher Michael Walzer. He argued that “religion” still worked upon culture generally even though what he termed “religious ideas” had “lost their grip” on Europe.<sup>26</sup> By “lost their grip” Walzer was talking about the institutional decline as well as the demographic decline of Christianity across the continent and this theme of institutional decay lies at the heart of Annette Schnabel and Florian Grotzsch’s argument that whilst religion still has relevance and currency in Europe, the specific nature of church-state relationships across the continent plays a signifi-

24. Coleman, “Christianity in Western Europe,” 488–99.

25. Ferguson, *Civilization*; Holland, *Dominion*.

26. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints*.

cant role in mediating the status of faith across the continent as a whole.<sup>27</sup>

A similar, although slightly different argument is made by Larry Siedentop in his seminal book about the roots of Western liberal democracy in which he traces the Christian assumptions which lead to the development of Liberalism within a European context.<sup>28</sup> The Siedentop-Holland-Fergusson argument about Christianity's influence in (Western) Europe, and Christianity's (and religion broadly) influence is further evidenced and nuanced by Seymour Martin Lipset and Gabriel Lenz who argue that religion is still an important component of culture, even in an increasingly irreligious context. They propose that, even in the context of declining religious demographics, the lasting imprint of Christian values and assumptions remains. Lipset and Lenz's argument finds echoes in the work of Henry van Til who proposes that the essential nature of humans is religious and so, by definition, cultures (generally, including Western Europe), will be religious simply by virtue of the fact that cultures and societies are composed of human beings.<sup>29</sup> Van Til's argument is particularly interesting in the context of the arguments of sociologists of religion such as Charles Taylor, who note that "disenchantment," "secularism," and even Marxism find their origins in streams of Protestant theology.<sup>30</sup> Even Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, who fiercely defend the core theses of the secularization arguments, acknowledge that, even though "religious ideas" (particularly Christianity) have lost their grip over Europe, religious culture still has an ongoing impact.<sup>31</sup>

In the political realm, perhaps nowhere can the evidence for Schnabel and Grotzsch, Norris and Inglehart, and Michael Walzer's observations about the ongoing influence of Christianity be seen more clearly than in the post-War development of the

27. Schnabel and Grotzsch, "The Religious Argument in Europe."

28. Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*.

29. Lipset and Lenz, "Corruption, Culture, and Markets.>"; Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*.

30. Taylor, *A Secular Age*. See also Spencer, *The Evolution of the West*.

31. Norris and Inglehart, *The Sacred and the Secular*.

multilateral institution that is now known as the European Union. R. C. Mowat notes that Robert Schuman (for example), in a speech on “Moral Re-Armament” in Caux in 1950 argued for a specifically “Christian-inspired transformation of the continent.”<sup>32</sup> Mowat is very clear that the foundation for the drive by Schuman, Adenaur, and de Gasperi towards a European Union came from their Christian Democrat ideology. Not only that, but Udi Greenberg cites the drive towards the European Project not only as a desire to re-establish a “Christian peace” in Europe after the horrors of Nazism but, more widely, helped the continent to move away from its colonialist mindset.<sup>33</sup> Greenberg’s conclusions are bolder perhaps than Mowat’s but further evidence of the centrality of Christian thinking and influence at the very foundation of the European Project is found in the work of Mudrov and Wilton. Wilton evidences the centrality of Christian values in the wording of the *Schuman Declaration* along with the prayer meetings held by the “founding fathers” of the EU before their meetings.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, that Christian influence, it seems, was not confined merely to the founding principles of the EU but can also be found in its ongoing political life. Brent Nelsen and James Guth’s book *Religion and the Struggle for the European Union* note the importance of the Catholic-Protestant divide on the continent and the extent to which that influences perceptions of the European Union.<sup>35</sup>

Nelsen and Guth are by no means the first academics to note this. Blandine Chellini Pont shows that successive Popes had been amongst the most vociferous supporters of what they described as the European Project.<sup>36</sup> This support of the Popes for the European project is contrasted quite sharply with the broad perspective of Protestant-background states about the EU. For, despite the Pew Forum survey of 2017 which showed that, for most European

32. Mowat, *Creating the European Community*.

33. Greenberg, “Protestants, Decolonization, and European Integration,” 314–54.

34. Mudrov, “Religion in the Treaty of Lisbon,” 1–16; Wilton, “Christianity at the Founding,” 151–74.

35. Nelsen and Guth, *Religion and the Struggle*.

36. Chellini-Pont, “Papal thought on Europe,” 131–46.

Christians, the Catholic-Protestant divide was eroding, the religious background of the different member states did have an impact on attitudes to the EU.<sup>37</sup> Brent Nelsen and James Guth show through data analysis that, going right back to the 1970s, Catholics have been generally more in favour of European integration than Protestants are and, while the trend is less pronounced now than in the past, the demarcation between the two is still visible.<sup>38</sup> They argue,

Protestant confessional culture helps us to understand why Protestant and the Protestant-majority EU member states lack enthusiasm for the European project that has been embraced by most continental elites. Their national identities were forged in the fires of the Reformation. Their national struggles were fought to protect a special, even chosen people against the universalist “other” in the form of Catholic Christendom. European identity is difficult enough to hold alongside a French, German or Polish national identity; but it is even more tenuous when historic national identity centres on a fear of domination from core Europe.<sup>39</sup>

Even within the European Commission itself, a number of research projects have been commissioned that have sought to understand the collective identity of Europe. They have also noted the importance of Christianity in European identity, although their focus has tended to note the historical, rather than any current influence.<sup>40</sup>

In European politics, Europe’s religious history has been weaponized in arguments that have referenced (in negative terms) the impact of mass immigration on loosely defined “national” or “European” culture. Efe Peker has noted that the rise of populist parties in Western (and Northern) Europe has frequently been closely linked to their referencing of the Christian heritage of Western Europe.<sup>41</sup> Peker analyzes documents from populist parties from around Western and Northern Europe, finding that, al-

37. Sahgal, “Five Centuries after Reformation,” n.p.

38. Nelsen and Guth, *Religion and the Struggle*.

39. Nelsen and Guth, *Religion and the Struggle*, 341.

40. Chopin, “Europe and the Identity challenge,” 1–6.

41. Peker, “Finding Religion,” 158–78.

though frequent references are made to Europe's Christian civilizational heritage, no reference to Christian beliefs or practice is made and that, furthermore, Christianity itself is framed as inherently secular.

It seems, therefore, that the ongoing influence of Christianity in the policy sphere is impossible to deny. But what about Western European culture outside of the political realms?

Quantifying the ongoing impact of the church and Christianity in the wider cultural sphere of Western Europe and the daily lives of Western Europeans is complex, indeed, near impossible, yet there is some data that suggests a continuing ongoing impact for the Church (Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox) in Western Europe. Perhaps one of the most telling headline figures is based on analysis by the National Churches Trust, which, in 2021, used British Treasury analysis techniques to research what monetary figure might be given the "value added" of British churches to British society. They found that the different local, regional, and national programs (from food banks to counselling services to parent-toddler services to education) were worth £55bn in the United Kingdom. Sir Philip Rutnam (Chairman of the National Churches Trust and former Permanent Secretary of the Home Office) is quoted in a Religion Media Centre Briefing saying that "the value of volunteering to the life of the country is huge. When you look at these different types of benefit and use the government's standard measures of wellbeing, and how much is that worth . . . I would say that the 55 billion figure is almost certainly an underestimate."<sup>42</sup> But is Britain an outlier in terms of the services which churches provide nationally in Western Europe?

The data is very patchy, but that which is available does more than suggest that the British data is likely to be echoed around the rest of Western Europe. For there can be little doubt that in Education, Healthcare, and Welfare, Christians and Church Institutions (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or unaffiliated) continue to make a significant impact across Western Europe. An impact which is disproportionate to the number of adherents. For example, in the realm of education, approximately thirty percent of European chil-

42. Dawson, "A 'Triple win,'" n.p.

dren are still educated in 9,341 Secondary and 15,739 Primary schools that the Catholic Church (excluding Catholic religious orders such as Hospitallers and the Order of Malta) run across Europe.<sup>43</sup> Michael Merry observes that, despite the growth of secularism in Europe over the past century, the number of Christian schools has remained relatively constant and, indeed, has even increased.<sup>44</sup> This could be due to the fact that, outside of the United Kingdom, most Christian schools in Western Europe are state-funded, which, in practice, means that, even though Christian affiliation exists in the schools, and religious education is a core element of the curriculums, that it is the state, rather than the church, that has the final say on curriculum content. Nevertheless, even in the United Kingdom, demand for church (particularly Church of England) funded education remains high. Many reasons are given for this, but Merry cites the research of Avram and Dronkers, along with two publications jointly by Merry with Driessen, which evidence the quality of educational attainment achieved by pupils in Church schools as an important motivating factor in school choice (where it is possible).<sup>45</sup> It should therefore be noted that it is not religious affiliation that appears to be a decisive factor in choosing religious schools but the quality of the education that is delivered. (This is interesting in and of itself given the supposed relationship between religion and ignorance peddled by some atheists and secularists.)

Turning to healthcare; the Catholic church in Europe currently runs 1,014 hospitals, 2,313 dispensaries, 8,031 homes for the elderly, disabled, or chronically ill along with 5,504 marriage counselling centers.<sup>46</sup> Other denominations (Protestant and Orthodox) also run a considerable number of healthcare facilities across the continent, but published data appears to be impossible to find. As to welfare, the demand for and ongoing work of, long established

43. Bottone, “Funding of Church Schools,” n.p. See also “Vatican-Catholic Church Statistics.” It is important to note that this data is for Europe as a whole and is not specific to Western Europe.

44. Merry, “The Conundrum of Religious Schools.”

45. Merry, “The Conundrum of Religious Schools,” 140.

46. *Fides*, “Vatican—Catholic Church Statistics.” It is important to note that this data is Europe-wide and is not specific to Western Europe.

Protestant and Catholic charities such as the Salvation Army and Bennardo's, along with countless foodbanks, homeless shelters, and counselling services, such as the Samaritans, strongly suggest that the church in Europe continues to play an important, though rarely visible, role in the lives of the marginalized especially, in both the West and Eastern sides of Europe. Most recently, the role of Christians in taking-in refugees from Syria and later from Ukraine following the Russian invasion has been publicly acknowledged.<sup>47</sup>

Given the data above, therefore, and despite its patchy nature, these numbers strongly point to churches in Western Europe having an ongoing and significant part in the "wellness" of Western Europe that is out of proportion to its adherents. It is also worth noting that while the healthcare, welfare, and educational services are being funded by churches and individual Christians, the staff who work in these services are not necessarily Christians, nor does there appear to be an "occupational requirement" for these services to be staffed by Christians. Indeed, snippets of information from multiple sources suggest that many staff members across these services are either unaffiliated religiously or adherents of other faiths, particularly Islam and Hinduism.<sup>48</sup> It is likely, therefore, that outside of the governance boards of these service institutions, the vast majority of staff are unlikely to know that the service is being run by Christians and/or church bodies.

Aside from these pragmatic services in Western Europe by both Catholic and Protestant Christians, another, more subtle cultural influence remains that has been labelled "Christianity as European Default Religion."<sup>49</sup> This label encapsulates the idea that Christian rites remain the default of Europeans, including Western Europeans, seeking to mark occasions. Perhaps the clearest example of this dynamic is the number of couples choosing to get married in a church building who have no other relationship with the Parish at all. In the same bracket can be put funerals and baptisms.

47. See, for example, WCC, "German Interior Minister Underlines Churches," n.p.

48. Stock, "Weekly column from Germany," n.p.

49. See Van de Poll, *Europe and the Gospel*.



Data on this is almost impossible to measure, even though both the Catholic and Protestant churches maintain records of all of these events because it would require parish-level analysis of church memberships against the numbers of people from the local area choosing to get married (for example) in the church building. The “Christianity as Europe’s Default Religion” label highlights the fact that Europeans will access a church for such events (unless they want a “Humanist” service) rather than a Mosque, Synagogue, or Gurdwara. So, while the concept of “Christianity as Default European Religion” is presently unproven (and likely only provable through a substantial, Western European-wide project), anecdotal evidence suggests that the label can reasonably be applied for the moment in Western Europe.

#### *Conclusions and Predictions*

What, then, can be concluded about the status of Christianity in Western Europe as we move through the second decade of the twenty-first century?

It seems that the move towards “secularization” or “disenchantment” in demographic terms appears, for the next decade at least, to be inexorable. Norris and Inglehart propose that what happens to the church in individual European states will be largely due to “where they start out.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, the historical “religious settlements” of each state, which developed over centuries, will largely shape the future of the church(es) in Western Europe. By implication therefore, Norris and Inglehart are arguing that there are no discernible region-wide dynamics which explains the religious decline across the western half of Europe other than the broad narrative of secularization that connects industrialization and urbanization to religious decline.

Yet, “secularization” as a theoretical construct itself has come under increasingly vociferous criticism as predictions about the long-term death of religion under the pressure of scientific rationalism and growing urbanization have been increasingly called into fundamental question. Indeed, Rodney Stark and Robert

50. Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, 85.

Finke boldly assert that “After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophecies . . . it seems time to carry the secularisation doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper, ‘*requiescat in pace*’.”<sup>51</sup> At the same time as Stark and Finke were making their assertion, the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas proposed that Europe (and the West more broadly) was entering a “Post-Secular” era.<sup>52</sup> An era in which science and religion needed to dialogue for the mutual benefit of society, but based upon the premise that religion would continue to be ever-present. This is not to say that Habermas was asserting a Christian revival, but rather that he argued for the ongoing presence of faith, even in “modernist, reason-based” societies. This might take the form of the growing presence of non-Christian religions, particularly Islam, but also encapsulate New Religious Movements, whose presence and growth over the past century have, themselves, been a challenge to the “secularization narrative.”

Furthermore, as noted above in the section on “demographics,” Eric Kaufmann has maintained that the future will be increasingly religious, rather than less so in Western Europe due to his religion-specific interpretation of Lesthaeghe and Kaa’s “Second Demographic Transition Theory.” Indeed, he specifies that it is not some loose religious affiliation that will remain but that it will be the fundamentalist forms of any given faith that will grow as it is these forms of faith (forms which have deliberately isolated themselves from the wider world) which have been growing, both through conversion and increasing birth-rates.<sup>53</sup> What is more, Kaufmann is not a lone voice in advocating this argument: back in 2004, Philip Longman had made the same argument (which Kaufmann acknowledges).<sup>54</sup>

Demographically, predictions on the Pew-Templeton “Global Religious Futures” website have Christianity as the overwhelmingly largest single spiritual affiliation in Europe in 2050 (62.5

51. Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 79.

52. Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society,” 17–29. See also Calhoun et al., eds., *Habermas and Religion*; Calhoun et al., *Rethinking Secularism*.

53. Kaufmann, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?* 21.

54. Longman, *The Empty Cradle*.

percent).<sup>55</sup> This represents a drop of 11 percent from 2010. Looking at the data on Western European countries specifically, some of the numbers projected for Christian affiliation projected by Pew-Templeton for 2050 have already been reached (e.g., Netherlands, Italy, and Germany), which strongly suggests that for many Western European countries, the Pew-Templeton predictions are likely to have been optimistic. That being the case, the overall Christian affiliation in Western Europe by 2050 is likely to be closer to fifty percent, rather than the 62.5 percent projected for the continent as a whole. Indeed, if it was not for the Catholic-background countries in Western Europe, particularly Italy, Portugal, and Ireland there is a strong chance that the affiliation would be well below fifty percent, possibly even hovering around the forty percent mark. Demographically, therefore, there is good reason to believe that by 2050, Christians will be a minority in Western Europe. However, as noted in the discussion on birth rates in relation to Kaufmann, it could be that in the long-term that 2050 might represent a low point before a gentle increase might become visible.

In the conclusion to her seminal study of the status of religion in Europe published in 2000, the sociologist Grace Davie argues that even as religious knowledge declines, religious sensibility continues in new and often innovative ways. This process she characterizes as "the memory mutating."<sup>56</sup> For Davie, these innovations are reinventions and signify the adaption of an "organism," in this case "religion," to changing circumstances. She concludes with: "It is to everyone's advantage to find appropriate forms of religious life for the new millennium, in other words to affirm healthy mutations in Europe's religious heritage and discourage others. The understanding of religion as a form of collective memory should be considered in this light; it is, however, but one contribution to an urgent and very much wider task."<sup>57</sup> Therefore, perhaps the primary observation that one can make about the current status of Christianity in Western Europe is that it is the

55. Pew-Templeton, "Global Religious Futures Project," n.p.

56. Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe*, 176–77.

57. Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe*, 194.

embodiment of *Leitkultur*, the primacy of one culture within a multicultural context.<sup>58</sup> Christianity is still highly influential in political culture, “wellness services” and in cultural assumptions, such as the equal value of all human life, not just within the assumptions which underpin policymaking in fields as diverse as human rights and economics.<sup>59</sup> There are still enough people claiming affiliation to Christianity (“nominal, cultural or practicing”) to say that Christian perceptions, organizations, and individuals make and will certainly continue to make in the short and medium-term, an impact in the day-to-day lives of people living in Western Europe. Therefore, as we return to the observations of Micklethwait and Woolbridge that were cited in the introduction, what should we say in response to them in the light of the evidence offered here?

Firstly, that *God is Back* appears to be, in demographic terms, premature, but in the long term, it might be true once the effects of the Second Demographic Transition become manifest. That being said, with the growth of Islam on the continent, and the birth-rates of Muslim background people being higher than every other group, including Christians, Christianity might remain a religious minority on the continent even when its numbers begin to rise after 2050.

Secondly, Christianity’s influence on Western Europe culturally is likely to remain far higher than its demographic decline would imply. This is partly because the Church’s (Catholic and Protestant) influence on the political sphere is likely to remain strong and Christian assumptions in relation to the value of human life and equality particularly are unlikely to change in the short to medium term. Perhaps, by 2050 when Christianity is likely to be at its lowest number, its very lack of numbers will have had an impact on its influence in the culture of Europe. What is more likely, though, is that the continuing presence of the church in health-care, welfare, and (especially) education will continue to cement

58. Van de Poll, *Europe and the Gospel*, 284. For an in-depth discussion of the concept of *Leitkultur* see Bein, “How is Collective Identity Possible in Democracies?” 1–23.

59. Holland, *Dominion*.

Christianity's status as the *Leitkultur* in the Western half of the continent. However, all of these proposals are subject to a large number of variables, any one of which could radically change the status of Christianity.

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