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Non-Religious Perceptions of Religion and Church-State Relations in Europe: A Cross-Cultural Qualitative Study in Flanders, Greece and Norway

Introduction

Despite the significant presence of individuals identifying as non-religious in contemporary society,[1] and the increasing popularity of the study of non-religion within academia,[2] the population without religious affiliation remains largely invisible within theology and religious studies in a European context. The lack of attention on how non-religion manifests and functions within Europe is very often noticed by the 'cliché' trope of the 'secular' Europe as opposed to the 'religious' United States;[3] a theme often repeated within academic literature in theology and religious studies alike. While the comparison between Europe and other religious landscapes can provide much valuable information about (non-)religion and secularity, it can also lead to the nuances that exist between the different cultural, social and political contexts that constitute Europe being overlooked.

The current chapter discusses the dynamics between religion, non-religion and secularity in different European contexts by presenting part of the results from a qualitative, cross-cultural doctoral research study conducted between 2018 and 2022.[4] The research contained 64 in-depth interviews with non-religious mil-

1 See Christopher Cotter, *The Critical Study of Nonreligion: Discourse, Identification and Locality,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 25–27; Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 3–17; Phil Zuckerman, Luke Galen, and Frank Pasquale, *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4–6.

2 See Stephen Bullivant, "Explaining the Rise of 'Nonreligion Studies': Subfield Formation and Institutionalization Within the Sociology of Religion," *Social Compass* 67, no. 1 (2020): 92–94; Jesse Smith and Ryan Cragun, "Mapping Religion's Other: A Review of the Study of Nonreligion and Secularity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58, no. 2 (2019): 319–335; Stephen Bullivant and Lois Lee, "Interdisciplinary Studies of Non-religion and Secularity: The State of the Union," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, no. 1 (2012): 19–27.

3 Peter Berger, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 9.

4 See Sofia Nikitaki, "Living a nonreligious life: a qualitative empirical exploration of nonreligion in Belgium, Greece, and Norway" (PhD dissertation, KULeuven, 2023).

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lennials[5] defining themselves as 'non-religious' or 'not religious' and having undertaken their primary and secondary education in Belgium (Flanders),[6] Greece and Norway.[7] The primary objective of the study was to acquire a comprehensive understanding of how (young) European non-religious adults perceive and negotiate (non-)religion, (non-)religious views, and their personal experiences related to (non-)religion within the cultural, social, and political contexts of their respective countries. To achieve an in-depth understanding of the topic, a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach with semi-structured individual interviews was followed.[8] The interviews were conducted and analysed in two separate waves of research (one taking place in 2019 and one in 2020) using thematic analysis in the NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software.

5 The specific birth years that constitute the Millennial generation are subject to variation. For this research, the age cohort of individuals born between 1981 and 1998 was used. See Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *Religion, Spirituality and Secularity among Millennials: The Generation Shaping American and Canadian Trends* (Oxford: Routledge, 2022), 2–5; Michael Dimock (Pew Research), "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," 17 January 2019, accessed 13 December 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/; Timothy Carter, "Millennial Expectations and Constructivist Methodologies: Their Corresponding Characteristics and Alignment," *Action in Teacher Education* 30, no. 3 (2008): 3; Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 3–4.

6 It should be noted that the decision to not include the French-speaking part of Belgium in this study was because Wallonia and Flanders have some important linguistic and cultural differences that would significantly complicate the cross-cultural analysis of the results. See Marc Blainey, "Groundwork for the Anthropology of Belgium: An Overlooked Microcosm of Europe," *Ethnos* 81, no. 3 (2016): 478–507.

7 The selection of countries for this study was based on various considerations. Being a Greek national and long-term resident of Flanders, selecting these two contexts allowed for their nuanced understanding as well as the use of a variety of social connections for facilitating research sampling. In turn, Norway was chosen as a third context also due to personal connections that could facilitate sampling, but also due to its prominence in secularisation and non-religion studies, ensuring a wealth of academic sources to enhance the research analysis. Furthermore, both Norway and Belgium are consistently ranked by the EF English Proficiency Index as countries with a very high English proficiency; something that was crucial for being able to interact with research participants in a language other than their native tongue. See https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/.

8 As an inductive approach that aims to understand the topic at hand in depth, CGT advocates getting close to the phenomenon studied and maintaining continuous engagement with the research participants, data and analysis throughout the period in which the research is conducted. See Kathy Charmaz and Anthony Bryant, "Constructing Grounded Theory Analyses," in *Qualitative Research*, edited by David Silverman (London: Sage, 2016), 347–362; Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory," in *Qualitative Psychology*, edited by Jonathan Smith, (London: Sage, 2015), 53–84; Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2014).

During the interviews, the participants were asked about a wide variety of topics related to (non-)religion including – but not limited to – issues of self-definition, their past and present relationships with (non-)religion, and their attitudes towards (non-)religion, spirituality, and the concepts of 'god' and 'higher power'. Additionally, this research paid special attention to the sociocultural and political factors that may influence the formation of non-religious views in the contexts explored, examining the ways in which such contextual aspects may shape non-religion. This particular chapter focuses on this cross-cultural aspect of the research by presenting the participants' opinions regarding the church and state relationships within the contexts of Belgium, Greece and Norway.

Religion: The Personal and the Institutional

Before delving into the interviewees' opinions of religious institutions in their contexts, however, it is vital to clarify how the term 'religion' was understood by the participants. It is important to note that what was meant by 'religion' was purposefully left unspecified throughout the interviews in order to allow the participants to define and make clarifications about the term without having a specific understanding in mind beforehand. Leaving what is meant by the term open to interpretation led to various nuances regarding religion during the course of the conversations.

Throughout both waves of research, the majority of participants from all contexts alike made a clear distinction between religion as a personal belief or belonging (1), and organised or institutional religion (2). For instance, the Greek participant, Maria, distinguished between religion "in the organised religion/organised religions sense" and "religion as the need for a religious feeling",[9] whereas Mark – a Belgian interviewee – said that he understood "the people who need the stories" and the "make-believe" aspect of religion but simultaneously stated that "we would be better without the priests" and that the existence of religious institutions is "about money and power".[10] Similarly, the Norwegian participant, Selja, distinguished between the

9 "Religion in the organised religion/organised religions sense – I think that yes, it results to harm. By that I mean that it's another excuse to divide people, it's another excuse for various people to step in to exploit their fellow human beings, it's another excuse for the situation that exists on the planet – with the wars, with the exploitation, with the 1 per cent [of the population] 'screwing' everyone else over. [. . .] But if we understand religion as the need for a religious feeling, I can understand that for a very big number of people it is necessary and needed" (Maria, Greece, 10.07.2019).

10 "I mean, if I put it in simple language then yes, it's [religion] bad. We would be better off without it. Or no, we would be better without the priests. [. . .] But, I mean, the people who need

kind of religion that "supports you and helps you" and the "scary part of religion", which she connected to the control by religious leaders over their faithful and the fear of judgement in the afterlife.[11]

Religion as a Personal Belief and/or Belonging

When understood in the sense of a personal belief in god or as belonging to a religious community, religion was often described as a meaning system that provides comfort, purpose and safety, as well as a sense of belonging, social support and group identity. In addition, a number of participants mentioned the potential of religion to act as a positive force by providing moral guidance, even though many of them simultaneously made clear that they do not personally view following religious ethics as a necessity for being a good or moral person.[12] Moreover, a few participants talked about the contribution of religion to culture, tradition and science throughout history, while another few were positive about the sense of comfort secured by believing that an external force is regulating one's life.

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the stories – if they want the 'make-believe,' let them have the 'make-believe'! But let's not give them the means to propagate it and convince more people and everything. Because, in the end, it's about money and power. Otherwise, you don't need a church. Because if – in all honesty – if religion was a thing that followed like the 'communist-Jesus' social action, then nice! Let them come! But it's not. It's all about institutions, power, careers" (Mark, Belgium, 26.10.2019).

11 "I don't think religion is the problem. I don't think the personal choice of believing or not believing is the problem. [. . .] So, religion, and the idea of it, isn't harmful. The execution, and the control you have as leader, a religious leader for instance, over your faithful is a problem. And even the church when they moralize over whether you should have sex, or whether you should marry someone, or whether you should divorce someone or what you should spend your money on, and how you should live your life. And the reasoning that because something after you're dead will judge you, is nonsense to me. [. . .] I think religion, when it supports you and helps you, it can be a good thing for the person that's religious. And it's harmful and when you have to choose something that's not your way of life, or the way you feel like you could live your life and be a happy person and a good person. But when you choose the scary part of religion, that's a problem" (Selja, Norway, 28.07.2020).

12 Similar remarks have also been pointed out by Sumerau and Cragun in their study of nonreligious moral identities, where they note that their participants "often suggested religion, while not necessary for their morality, might be useful for others". See Jason Sumerau and Ryan Cragun, "'I Think Some People Need Religion': The Social Construction of Nonreligious Moral Identities," *Sociology of Religion* 77, no. 4 (2016): 399. Also see Thiessen and Laflamme, *None of the Above,* 75–77, 92–118.

The idea of relying on something other than oneself was not mentioned only in a positive sense, however. Most interviewees criticised religion and belief in god as having the potential to lead to an avoidance of or ignoring one's sense of personal responsibility, contributing to a loss or 'quitting' of personal agency and individual choice, and connected to a lack of critical thinking. In many cases, this view was accompanied by criticisms of religion as something that is imposed or learned since childhood, with a significant number of participants viewing the religious training of children as something exclusively negative. Furthermore, a number of participants mentioned religion and belief as inducing feelings of anxiety and/or guilt, as well as creating a mindset of following religious authority unquestioningly, thus limiting the ability of the individual to engage in critical reflection about their own beliefs, values and other moral issues.

Religion as an Institution

The emphasis on personal agency, choice and critical thinking was also often apparent when the participants discussed organised religion. The vast majority of interviewees, regardless of context, expressed negative views of religious institutions, perceiving them as exploiting the need for religion as a means to gain power and control over the population. A very significant number of the interviewees expressed criticism of the strict teachings and moralising of religious institutions and figures, which were seen as inhibiting followers from expressing or discovering themselves due to fear of divine punishment. Furthermore, some participants mentioned the potential of organised religion to lead into fanaticism, dogmatism and intolerance, while a significant number voiced criticisms regarding the creation and reinforcement of a divisive and close-minded mentality, the exclusion and oppression of specific groups due to religious beliefs, rules and regulations, and the history of religion-induced violence, segregation, and abuse.

Many participants from all contexts explored demonstrated a sort of tension, however, when discussing the topic of organised religion. On the one hand, religion was viewed as oppressive and controlling, whereas, on the other, following a religious tradition was viewed as an individual choice that should be respected. This tension was mentioned often by participants when the effect that following an organised religion has on the individual person and the dynamics between religious institutions and religious individuals arose during the conversation, especially when the topic of public expressions of religion came up. While the participants were largely in favour of individuals having the freedom to publicly express their religion through their behaviour, lifestyle choices, and clothing, they also had some

difficulty in determining whether this is indeed a personal choice or an imposed one and often relativised their answers to fit the scenario they were discussing.[13]

Religion, Church and State

While the understandings of the term 'religion' among the participants were remarkably similar regardless of the cultural context, this was not the case with their perceptions regarding the majority churches and their views on church and state relations in their own countries. The discussion regarding the visibility and influence of religion and the church revealed a very pronounced difference between, on the one hand, the descriptions of the Greek participants and, on the other, the views expressed by the participants from Belgium and Norway. This difference was very clear throughout both waves of research, making the topic of the societal and political influence of the majority church in a national context one of the most pronounced and consistent results of this study.

While the Orthodox Church of Greece was described by the vast majority of Greek interviewees as a very visible entity that greatly affects public opinion and state politics, that was far from being the case with the Catholic Church in Belgium and the Lutheran Church in Norway. In addition, even while the opinions about religious institutions were negative in all contexts, the interviewees demonstrated a noticeable difference when it came to expressions of anger and disappointment towards the church and its relationship to the state, with the Greek participants being visibly more frustrated and disappointed in the Orthodox Church and church/state relations in Greece than the Belgian and Norwegian interviewees with the Catholic and Lutheran Churches and their relationship with the Belgian and Norwegian states, respectively.

Belgium and Norway

In both Belgium and Norway, the majority churches were largely viewed as organisations that provide life-cycle rituals. The majority of interviewees in both contexts described the church as invisible in society and not really influential

13 That was particularly prominent when it comes to Muslim veiling practices, with a very significant number of interviewees saying they had no issue with women wearing a *hijab* if it is their own choice but also simultaneously expressing doubts on whether this is indeed the case.

when it comes to public opinion or state politics. For example, the Belgian participant, Elisa, who claimed that she feels "like church is not even a part of our society", described the effect of the Catholic Church in Belgian society and politics as "really minimal" and connected the church to the performance of life-cycle rituals.[14] Similarly, the Norwegian participant, Carl, connected the Church of Norway to life-cycle rituals in addition to remarking that "the church has kind of died in the Norwegian context", and that Norwegians, "don't care what the church thinks".[15]

The only exception to this perception of state and church as separate entities were the Christian democratic parties that exist in both contexts. These political parties were mentioned by a number of participants, with many making negative remarks about these parties' conservative views. Most of the interviewees noted, however, that the influence of these political parties is minimal. The Norwegian participant, Svan, for example, claimed that, even though "they still have some influence through the Christian Democratic Party", the Norwegian Church "is not very powerful".[16] Similarly, the Belgian interviewee, Silvia, pointed out that the

14 "The only thing that people would discuss is if they get married, whether they would want to do it in the church or not. Like, that's the only part in life where religion still plays a role about, either marriage or a funeral. [. . .] I think that the church got a really big hit with the scandals in Belgium. Up until then, it was actually still quite present, but, yeah, it really shocked many people. [. . .] And now I feel like church is not even a part of our society. [. . .] I mean, the only time I remember the church being in the news is if there are any scandals. If there is something about a scandal it's there. In general, I believe that the whole scandals created quite an aversion to it" (Elisa, Belgium, 30.09.2019).

15 "It's not that much in the news when it comes to Norwegian Church, it might be if there's been something happening. But the church has kind of died in the Norwegian context. [. . .] Yeah, they've become very small, so it's very little. But still, most Norwegians are still members. So, most people just take for granted that they will be buried and have a funeral at the church. Most people, even the non-religious, go to church to get married even if you don't have to go to church to get married. [. . .] No, not really, we don't care what the church thinks. Unless they say something, like they don't like gay marriage, for instance, most of the media and most people would say 'Damn your church!' Yeah, it's the people who are scaring the church in Norway, rather the other way around" (Carl, Norway, 23.07.2020).

16 "Well, the church – even though I've never been interested and I've never been into it – is not very powerful. Except that it's a state thing – like, I mean, they get money from the state, and we have one political party that is Christian, and it was even government at some point. So, of course, I can see that they have still have some kind of power and have – how do you say that – they still have some influence through the Christian Democratic Party. So, they are still a part of society, and they still have something to say, even though they have less and less power, I guess. At least compared to what they had, like, 50 years ago, they don't have that much influence anymore. [. . .] And, for example, they are always the most conservative. For example, I don't like the fact that they are so much against abortion" (Svan, Norway, 11.11.2019).

Catholic Church "still has a bit of an influence" through the Christian Democrats but also stated that "nobody gives a damn if you're Catholic or not" in the Belgian context.[17] Overall, both the Belgian and the Norwegian participants had very similar reactions to the majority religious institutions in their countries: they were not positive about their existence but, at the same time, they did not seem worried about their influence in society or politics either.

While the perception of the majority churches as being invisible and uninfluential in society was the greatest similarity between Belgium and Norway, the participants also highlighted some context-dependent topics. In the case of Belgium, there was much negativity towards the Catholic Church, with around half of the interviewees bringing up the 2010 sexual abuse scandals.[18] This can also be seen in the quote from Elisa above, where she explains that "the church got a really big hit with the scandals in Belgium" and states that these stories "created quite an aversion" towards the church in the Belgian context. In the case of Norway, church membership constituted a distinct topic, with more than half of the participants mentioning issues related to the controversies over church membership in Norway and the financial support that religious institutions receive from the state.[19] In addition, there were also a few positive remarks about the open-mindedness of the Lutheran Church. The Norwegian interviewee Till, for exam-

17 "This is Belgium, it's pretty free when it comes to religion. Nobody gives a damn if you're Catholic or not. [. . .] It [the church] still has a bit of an influence because we have a political party that's Christian. And, like, there's been negotiations about the federal government and then one of the guys from CDMV said like, 'Oh, yeah. If we vote the new abortion law in the chamber or something,' I can't really remember the specifics, but if the abortion law would have been voted in the chamber of Parliament, then he would not cooperate in the negotiations for the federal government anymore. So, again and again, it's religion. And, again, it's religion selling women" (Silvia, Belgium, 09.07.2020).

18 See Peter Adriaenssens, "Verslag activiteiten Commissie voor de behandeling van klachten wegens seksueel misbruik in een pastorale relatie," last modifie September 10, 2010, https://www.bishop-accountability.org/reports/2010_09_10_Adriaenssens_Verslag_activiteiten_Commissie.pdf; Ian Traynor, "Belgian child abuse report exposes Catholic clergy," last modified 10 September 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/10/belgium-child-abuse-catholic-church.

19 The controversy primarily stems from the Norwegian Church having access to the national registry and the right to automatically register children when at least one parent is a church member; however, that changed in 2018. Furthermore, and as described also by participants in this study, there have been numerous cases of individuals having to deregister from the church multiple times due to the church not removing them from or adding them back to the registry. See Human-Etisk Forbund, "119.000 barn kan være ulovlig registrert," last modified 7 August 2020, https://www.human.no/aktuelt/kirkens-tilh%C3%B8rigregister-119-000-barn-kan-vaere-ulovlig-registrert; "Den utrolige historien om kirkens medlems-register," last modified 7 August 2019, https://human.no/nyheter/2019/august/den-utrolige-historien-om-kirkens-medlemsregister/.

ple, described how he attempted to end his membership in the Norwegian Church more than once; however, he simultaneously positively remarked that the Norwegian Church has "a liberal way of approaching religion, it's very inclusive, and they always assist the people who need them" and declared that he is "sympathetic to that part of the church".[20]

Like Till, the Norwegian interviewee, Gert, mentioned the social initiatives of the Church of Norway in a positive light; even though, like the vast majority of participants from Belgium and Norway, he also described it as "an institution for marriages, baptisms and funerals" that "really does not play a role" in society. Due to having both a Norwegian and a Greek background, however, Gert was also asked for a comparison with his experience of the Greek Orthodox Church, which he described as "a store with customers" and as having "a lot of power in Greece" and "a very big difference" from the church in the Norwegian context:

> To be honest, I think it's [the church in Norway] really outside society. I think that the most people I know, they have really no relationship with the church at all. But you do see some actions from the church, as in the way I mentioned earlier, like they are giving food to people and collecting clothes, and there are some initiatives from the church in order to help people. So, that's a positive thing. But, yeah, it's an institution for marriages, baptisms, and funerals. That's the relationship people have with the church here, so it's more of a social relationship. I mean, it's not like having full political power, I wouldn't say that at all; no, not at all. It really does not play a role here, I think, the state and the church are two different things. [. . .] Oh, well, that's [comparing it to the church in Greece] interesting. Because, yeah, you have I think, um . . . There, it has more effect on people, more people are involved because in every area there is a church. And it's a social thing, it's more of a social thing in Greece. You meet the people from the village in the church, it has a more important position. It has a more important position, in general, in Greece. So, it's like, you know, it's like a store with customers! You understand? But, to be honest, there are some things about the church there that disgust me. Like when someone kisses the hand of the priest, that's something I would never do, and that really disgusts me. They really have a lot of power in Greece, the church and the priests, it is really a very big difference from here. I cannot imagine anyone in Norway kissing the hand of a priest! (Gert, Norway, 15.11.2019)

20 "And I also see that some people find comfort [in the church] and everything. [. . .] And, I mean, we have like gay priests here, we have a lot of female priests, and we have a lot of social-oriented priests. We actually have what I would consider a liberal way of approaching religion, it's very inclusive, and they always take part with the people who need them. And so, I am sympathetic to that part of the church. [. . .] I did end my membership. I tried actually. First, I tried to end it and I thought I had nothing to do with them but then someone made me aware of that they had done something with their member list, and I checked myself and I saw that I was still a member. So, I sent them a somewhat upset email and then I was removed" (Till, Norway, 15.06.2020).

Greece

Gert's view of the Orthodox Church aligned very well with the opinions expressed by the Greek participants in this study. Although – unlike Belgium and Norway – no explicit affiliation between the majority church and a particular political party was mentioned, the Orthodox Church was described by the vast majority of interviewees as having no real separation from the Greek state, being heavily involved with politics, holding a monopoly on religious matters, and exerting a great deal of influence in Greek society. These factors, in turn, were always perceived as negative and described as making the Greek Church a very strong force within the political scene of the country by giving it the ability to form the opinions of its audience.

In addition, some participants mentioned the connection between Orthodoxy and the Greek national identity in a negative light and described the Greek Church as reproducing and being ideologically connected to (far) right-wing politics and views. The Greek participant Martha, for instance, described the Metropolitan as "a political figure" and noted that the Orthodox Church in Greece "is regarded as a political force that acts according to the tendencies that exist within it, which range from the right to the far right" and "is tied to both national identity and to the reproduction of certain views".[21] According to Martha, "the state-church relationships have not yet been broken" in the Greek context as they exist on the "economic", "ideological" and "political" levels.

The difference in descriptions of church-state relationships was not the only issue that was very apparent in the participant quotes, however, as the level of frustration, anger, and disappointment expressed also differed significantly from Greece to Belgium or Norway. Other than the strong verbal expressions that indicate an increased level of frustration towards the Greek Orthodox Church and the situation in Greece overall, the Greek participants also demonstrated a general antipathy towards priests who were often described as power-hungry and intolerant individuals. Such a case was Eleni, who described the church as "a cancer, which is stage five and it's incurable" and priests as individuals who "as soon as they put on the robes, they get hungry for power".[22] Another participant, Leoni-

21 "I think that it [the church] is regarded as a political force that acts according to the tendencies that exist within it, which range from the right to the far right. [. . .] The Metropolitan is a political figure. He casually produces, and reproduces, opinions. [. . .] So, the church is tied to both national identity and to the reproduction of certain views. It cannot escape that. That's what makes it strong, it feeds on that. Also, the state-church relations have not yet been broken. That is, they are economic, they are ideological, they are political" (Martha, Greece, 29.06.2019).

22 "It's [the church] a cancer, which is stage 5 and it's incurable. And every time morale in society gets a little bit lower, it feeds and it grows and it swallows other new generations along with

das, described his image of the Greek Orthodox Church and clergy as something that "completely repulses" him and has made him "negative towards religion in general," as well as "biased towards anything religious".[23]

Unlike the participants from Belgium and Norway – who connected a negative image of the majority churches with very specific topics, specifically sexual abuse (Belgium) and church membership issues (Norway) – the Greek participants brought up a much wider array of examples to illustrate their views. The examples that the Greek interviewees brought up were related to a variety of instances where the Orthodox Church has been part of the everyday reality or intermingled with politics in Greece; with many of the second-wave research participants explicitly criticising, the Orthodox Church's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, among other issues. Such an example can be seen in the quote from Eleni given earlier, who brought up the reaction of the Orthodox Church regarding the transmission of Covid-19 through holy communion,[24] describing this issue as a "classic Greek Church" situation.

it. The church in Greece has too much power, even in political matters. [. . .] I've heard of priests, for example, who don't bash gays, who are like 'We're all god's people and we'll all be forgiven,' but it's a very small portion of people who are priests and are also people at the same time. I mean, as soon as they put on the robes, they get thirsty for power. [. . .] To give you an example, the Metropolitan of New York, who dared to turn around and say 'We're going to use plastic spoons for communion and we have to watch out for the coronavirus' and all the Christian-Taliban [Greek expression used to describe Christian extremists] in Greece wanted to excommunicate him and remove him as a Metropolitan because he said that you can get coronavirus with holy communion! While holy communion only gives you Christ! Classic Greek Church" (Eleni, Greece, 06.06.2020).

23 "It's [the church] doing a lot of harm to Greece as well, I think. That is, you go into the church, and you are told, let's say, Christianity talks about humble living and you see the church full of gold, the priests are dripping in gold, chandeliers, things like that [. . .]. I think clearly, in my case, it's the church and how it's structured here in Greece. And the priests, and so on. The fact that the church here is an institution that is totally backward, totally conservative. Where, even if you want to dig into what you believe it doesn't work; for me at least, the image I have of the church completely repulses me. It has made me negative on religion in general, it makes me biased towards anything religious. Because that's what I've come to know as religious, and that's what I reject, so [. . .] how different from that can everything else be?" (Leonidas, Greece, 22.07.2020).

24 See Elena Becatoros and Costas Kantouris, "Communion unchanged in Greek Orthodox Church despite virus," last modified 29 May 2020, https://apnews.com/article/lifestyle-athens-religion-europe-thessaloniki-42165e482f3fbb126a38e39fdf5c94f2; Gregory Pappas, "A Seismic Shift in the Orthodox Church? Archbishop Elpidophoros OKs Single Use Spoons," last modified 26 May 2020, https://pappaspost.com/a-seismic-shift-in-the-orthodox-church-archbishop-elpidophoros-oks-single-use-spoons/.

The Non-Religious in Europe: Similarities and Contextual Differences

As seen throughout the research results, the participants from all contexts alike understood and reacted to the term 'religion' in a very similar way, with the majority differentiating between the personal and institutional aspects of religion and placing much emphasis on themes of personal agency, individual choice, and critical thinking. When understood as personal belief or belonging, religion was often positively described as a meaning system that provides comfort, purpose, ethical guidelines and community; however, it was also criticised for promoting a mindset of dependency and avoiding personal responsibility. When understood in terms of organised religion, the vast majority of participants expressed negative views, often describing religious institutions as exploiting religious belief for the purpose of gaining power and control in society. There were also concerns about religious institutions exerting strict teachings and moralising, leading to fear, fanaticism and intolerance. Moreover, there was a very clear tension between viewing religion as oppressive and controlling, while also recognising it as an individual choice to be respected.

The similarities among research participants are not surprising, as the highlighting of personal agency, individual choice and critical thinking has also been pointed out in various studies[25] on the values and morality of non-religious populations,[26] as

25 As Zuckerman et al. point out, non-religious individuals tend to "be strongly desirous of autonomy and independence" and attach greater emphasis to "making one's own choices in many aspects of life, including worldview formation, social relationships, and group or institutional involvement". See Zuckerman, Galen and Pasquale, *The Nonreligious*, 225. Also see pages 125–112, 151–152, 190–196; Thiessen and Laflamme, *None of the Above*, 174–178; Christel Manning, *Losing Our Religion*: *How Unaffiliated Parents are Raising their Children* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 138–161.

26 It is important to note that, while highlighted within studies in non-religion, the emphasis on personal agency, choice, and critical thinking is not necessarily to be understood as limited to non-religious cohorts but might encompass broader (believing and non-believing) Western populations. For example, scholars such as Thomas Luckmann, Grace Davie, Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead have underscored a distinction between personally chosen/individualised beliefs and institutionalised religious entities which, in turn, is often connected to the decline of institutionalised religion in Western societies. See Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Paul Heelas, Scott Lash, and Paul Morris, *Detraditionalization: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox,* 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

well as in research on non-religious parenting values, where the importance of personal agency, choice, and critical thinking are emphasised, and the imposition of a specific (non-)religious worldview on children is discouraged.[27] This highlighting of personal agency and choice brings to mind the work of Christel Manning, who notes that "the choice narrative has become the dominant ethos of our time" and is "so deeply embedded in our culture that we take it for granted; we rarely question it, and we look with suspicion at those who do".[28] In line with Manning's claims, the participants in this research seemed to regard choice as axiomatically positive – something that became very apparent from their answers to questions about religion and the tensions that surfaced between rejecting religion as imposed and accepting it as a personal choice.

Similarly, the opinions relating to religion that surfaced during research are very similar to the findings of Lorna Mumford's study of non-religious individuals in London, in which she points to a distinction between religion as individual belief and religion as something that "extends beyond the private realm and exerts influence on society and politics". As Mumford notes, while almost all her participants expressed "no objection to individuals holding private religious beliefs" and claimed "that they fully support their right to do so", they also expressed concern about the impact of religious ideas and practices on people's lives, showing that "their opposition to religion stems more from their perception that some religious beliefs and practices violate the sacred values they hold dear; rather than an outright objection to all forms of religious belief per se".[29] These "sacred values" that Mumford's participants expressed were – as in this present study – the belief that "every individual must be free to determine, and pursue, their own conception of what constitutes a good life, as long as it does not detrimentally impact the lives of others", a "commitment to human rights, justice, tolerance, and equality for all", and an understanding of "individual autonomy and personal freedom as essential for leading a fulfilled and happy life".[30] This emphasis on the inherent value of autonomy and choice seems to result in the tension displayed by the participants between the understanding of religion as a choice and religion as imposed.

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27 See Thiessen and Laflamme, *None of the Above*, 31–32, 37–40; Vern Bengtson, David Hayward, Phil Zuckerman and Merril Silverstein, "Bringing Up Nones: Intergenerational Influences and Cohort Trends," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 2 (2018): 258–275; Joel Thiessen, "Kids, You Make the Choice: Religious and Secular Socialization among Marginal Affiliates and Nonreligious Individuals," *Secularism & Nonreligion* 5, no. 1 (2016), https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.60; Manning, *Losing Our Religion*, 138–166.

28 Manning, *Losing Our Religion,* 149.

29 Lorna Mumford, "Living Non-religious Identity in London," in *Atheist Identities – Spaces and Social Contexts*, edited by Lori Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Cham: Springer, 2014), 166.

30 Mumford, "Living Non-religious Identity in London," 164–165.

Despite the contextual similarities, however, this research also showcased that – in the words of Christopher Cotter – speaking "of those with 'no religion' as a coherent group is a fool's errand".[31] The cultural background made a considerable difference in how the participants described the church within their own contexts, with a very pronounced difference laying between the opinions of the Belgian and Norwegian participants, on the one hand, and the opinions of the Greek participants on the other. While the former described the majority churches in their contexts as institutions that are rather invisible in society and barely have any influence within the Belgian and Norwegian states, the latter described the Church of Greece as a highly visible institution with a significant impact in society and state politics. In addition, the Greek participants were visibly more frustrated and disappointed with the Orthodox Church and its relationship with the Greek state, compared to Belgian and Norwegian participants with the respective majority churches in their contexts.

The differences in descriptions and opinions regarding the majority churches, as well as church-state relations, were the most pronounced and consistent aspect of this research right from the very beginning. The importance and presence of religion and the church in the public sphere – including society, everyday reality, and state politics – seemed to hold a crucial role in this outcome, with the Greek interviewees standing out due to their intense expressions of disappointment with the Orthodox Church and its influence on the Greek society and state. While the Belgian and Norwegian participants were similarly not positive toward the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church, respectively, they did not describe the majority churches as having an important effect or influence in their contexts. Overall, the participants from Belgium and Norway seemed to feel less personally affected by the majority churches of their countries than the Greek participants, leading to less intense expressions of disappointment and disapproval.

The descriptions by the Greek participants align with a number of studies that highlight the prevalence of religion in Greece as opposed to the more secular contexts of Belgium and Norway,[32] including the strong relationship between the Greek state and the Orthodox Church, as well as the connection between the Greek na-

31 Cotter, *The Critical Study of Nonreligion*, 28.

32 See Pew Research, "Being Christian in Western Europe," last modified 29 May 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/; "Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues," last modified 29 October 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/; "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe," last modified 10 May 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/.

tional identity and orthodox christianity.[33] This dissimilarity, in turn, confirms the conclusion by Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale that secularity is "hardly proceeding at the same pace, or to the same degrees, everywhere throughout Europe".[34]

Furthermore, and again in contrast to Belgium and Norway,[35] orthodoxy in Greece is constitutionally recognised as the 'prevailing religion' of the country and therefore "guarantees the church the monopoly on cooperation with the state and provides it with a standard clientele", as well as with "significant political and economic influence" and "a powerful voice in policy-making and the organisation of society".[36] As Alexandros Sakellariou notes, despite a number of secular developments occurring since the beginning of the new millennium, "there are many steps to be taken before the Greek state could be considered religiously neutral or secular".[37] The influence and visibility of the Orthodox Church is something that the Greek interviewees acknowledged and reacted to, thus demonstrating that the importance and visibility of religion within a specific context does appear to greatly affect how the non-religious view and react to the majority church within that context.

While this result cannot be generalised due to the limited sample, it does indicate a straightforward relationship between the prominence of religion in the public sphere and the perceptions, reactions and attitudes of the non-religious population when it comes to the majority religious institutions in a specific con-

33 See Periklis Polyzoidis, "Church–State Relations in Today's Crisis-Beset Greece: A Delicate Balance Within a Frantic Society," in *Faith-Based Organizations and Social Welfare,* edited by Paul Christopher Manuel and Miguel Glatzer (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 138–140, 148–151.

34 Zuckerman, Galen and Pasquale, *The Nonreligious,* 60.

35 While Belgium historically has a constitutional principle of separation between church alongside actively supporting freedom of religion, the case of the Norwegian church-state relations is a subject of recent change. Norway underwent a significant shift in its church-state relationship in May 2012, with a constitutional amendment leading to the separation of the Church of Norway from the state with the law taking effect in January 2017. Although no longer a state church, the constitution designates the Church of Norway as the "Norway's people's church" (*Norges Folkekirke*), with the church receiving financial support from the government alongside other religious communities and worldview organisations. See Leni Franken, "State Support for Religion in Belgium: A Critical Evaluation," *A Journal of Church and State* 59, no. 1 (2017): 66–67; Anne Hege Grung, "The Two Pluralisms in Norway," *Society (New Brunswick)* 54, no. 5 (2017): 432–434.

36 Polyzoidis, "Church–State Relations in Today's Crisis-Beset Greece," 150–151. Also see Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis, Nikos Antonopoulos and Theodora Saridou, "A Case Study in News Articles, Users Comments and a Facebook Group for Article 3 of the Greek Constitution," *KOME – An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (2019): 39–42.

37 See Alexandros Sakellariou, "Greek Society in Transition: Trajectories from Orthodox Christianity to Atheism," in *Nonreligion in Late Modern Societies: Institutional and Legal Perspectives,* edited by Anne-Laure Zwilling and Helge Årsheim (Cham: Springer, 2022), 133–138.

text. Similar remarks on the effect that the visibility of religion seems to have on non-religious views and expressions have been made by Zuckerman in his comparative study between non-religious individuals in Scandinavia and the US. He notes a difference between his Scandinavian participants – who had "an indifferent or even mildly positive opinion of religion" – and individuals from the US, who had "a decidedly negative, critical opinion of religion".[38] Following these results, Zuckerman concludes that "secularity can have a reactive manifestation as well as a non-reactive or passive manifestation"; he attributes this difference to the greater visibility and influence of religion in the US than in Scandinavia, pointing out that "when religion is pervasive in a given culture, [. . .] those who are not religious are apt to be more defensive, and hence more judgmental and critical – whereas if religion is marginal, [. . .] then those who are not religious can ignore it".[39] A similar conclusion has also been drawn by Petra Klug, who remarks that "the personal experience of religion was the main factor in the sense that indifferent people start disapproving of religion or criticising it when they feel an infringement or pressure from religion on their own lives and/or on the lives of others".[40]

While some similarities and common patterns do exist when it comes to the views of non-religious individuals, the findings of the present study highlight the importance of considering the contextual factors in the investigation of non-religious identities and lived experiences. This consideration is not limited to small-scale qualitative research, like the study presented in this chapter, but also extends to larger-scale questionnaires and surveys that address topics related to (non-)religion and secularity. Moreover, although this study sheds some light on the European context and highlights that there is no such thing as a monolithic 'European secularity' or 'secular Europe', there are still numerous other contexts, both within and outside of Europe, that warrant further exploration and comparison. For instance, how would the non-religious participants from Greece compare to those in other countries that have a strong connection between national identity and religion, such as Romania or Poland? Similarly, what would non-religion in Belgium look like in comparison to other European countries with a stronger Catholic presence in society, such as Spain, Croatia, or Italy? And what

38 Phil Zuckerman, "Contrasting Irreligious Orientation: Atheism and Secularity in the USA and Scandinavia," *Approaching Religion* 2, no. 1 (2012): 12.

39 Zuckerman, "Contrasting Irreligious Orientation," 19.

40 Petra Klug, "Varieties of Nonreligion: Why Some People Criticize Religion, While Others Just Don't Care," in *Religious Indifference: New Perspectives from Studies on Secularization and Nonreligion,* edited by Johannes Quack and Cora Schuh (Cham: Springer, 2017): 232.

would the differences – if any – be between non-religious individuals who have been brought up in Scandinavian countries, such as Norway, Denmark and Sweden, and individuals coming from other largely non-religious contexts such as Japan and China? As the field of non-religion continues to develop in the European academic landscape and beyond, these questions remain to be answered.