

# Book Review: The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe edited by Grace Davie and Lucian N. Leustean

*In The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe, Grace Davie and Lucian N. Leustean bring together contributors to examine the role of religious ideas, structures and institutions in the making of Europe, attending to the centrality of Christian heritage and the significance of other world religions to Europe's cultural identity. Reflecting on this intelligently designed collection, reviewer Simon Glendinning explores the book's particular engagement with Europe's secular modernity.*

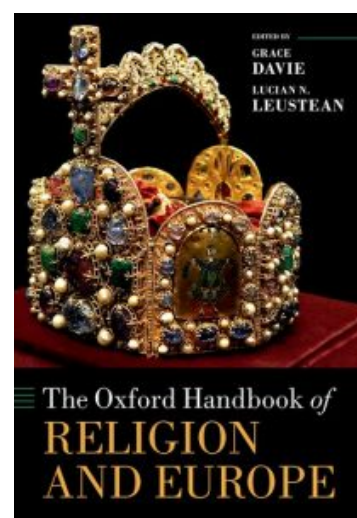
**The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe.** Grace Davie and Lucian N. Leustean (eds). Oxford University Press. 2021.

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The title of this [Oxford Handbook](#) speaks to two great themes in the social sciences – and their connections. Each might be taken up on its own, but the collection's editors, Grace Davie and Lucian N. Leustean, are keen to read the 'and' in their title as already called for if one wants to do justice to religion or Europe: each has fundamentally 'shaped' the other (1).

Although the *Handbook* wants to articulate religion and Europe together, the two themes are manifestly not of the same type – it is not like a comparative study of, say, religion *and* magic, or Europe *and* Asia. Nevertheless, there is a crossing point of the two in a third theme that is homogenous with both: culture.

If one accepts that religion has been 'the primary creator of culture' in most societies (9), then when Europe's created culture becomes the focus of social scientific interest, a quite specific cultural creator comes into view as historically fundamental: the Christian religion, or 'xpictiana religio', as we find it named on a coin produced around 800 CE to mark Charlemagne's inauguration as 'Emperor of the Romans' (2). The *Handbook's* editors invite us to consider this coin as a kind of European 'portrait' (1), whose overall inscription is written, significantly, 'partly in Greek' (2). As T.S. Eliot put it in his classic essay [Notes Towards the Definition of Culture](#), it is 'Christianity that has made Europe what it is', with that predominantly Christian cultural creation drawing into itself lasting legacies of (at least) Athens, Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem and Mecca (122).



Those other legacies are given full and thorough treatment in this intelligently designed collection, with particularly well-considered essays exploring the Orthodox church of Eastern Europe, Islam and Judaism in relation to both pre-modern Europe (in the volume's first half) and modern Europe (in the volume's second half). 'Latin' Europe, Catholic Europe and Protestant Europe are appropriately presented as Europe's historically dominant religious cultures, and appropriately presented too as sometimes 'largely absent' in modern Europe's official self-portraits (3). The fact that the *Handbook* does not shy away from acknowledging the central significance of Europe's Christian heritage is welcome. On the other hand, the sustained interest and attention given to the ways in which religious diversity belongs to Europe's cultural identity, past and present, is equally admirable.

What the editors refer to as 'the entity known as Europe' (1) would simply not be what it is had Christianity not spread out or enlarged spatially, territorially, in a cultural place-producing way – and hence also had it not both opposed and absorbed other religions and traditions in the process. As the editors put it, 'religion and religious ideas have shaped and continue to shape the idea of Europe, the lives of Europeans, the geographical boundaries of the European continent, and the art and culture contained within them' (1).



Image Credit: Crop of [‘The imperial crown of the Holy Roman Empire, displayed in the Imperial Treasury at the Hofburg, Vienna, Austria’](#) by [Bede735c](#) licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

Art and culture are represented here as two items on the list of things that are to be found in some place, contained by the borders of, in this case, ‘the European continent’. But this continent is not an art-and-culture-containing space that might be (even roughly) drawn up independently of the spatial reach of a certain ‘xpictiana religio’. With respect to evocative portraits of Europe, it is hard not to be impressed by maps, old or new, depicting ‘our continent’ from about 1000 years ago. There we see it: Western Christendom spread out over almost exactly the same ground as today’s enlarged European Union.

In Christian prophetic history, this is the part of the world that would belong to Noah’s son Japheth as, according to God’s will, he expands in the dispersion after the flood. Indeed, Japheth literally means ‘spread out’ or ‘enlarge’. And the descendants of Japheth (the Christians) reside in the part of the world that the Greeks had called by the name of a young princess, Europa.

Europa, the European world, is Japheth’s world spreading out, and it would not have come to be what it has become without that Christian culture. And yet for just that reason Europe’s *modern* condition stands as a particularly paradoxical interpretive challenge for the social sciences. Indeed, a central puzzle for this *Handbook* is that the European space shaped so profoundly by Christianity has become ‘one of the most secular parts of the world’ (6). How could Europe, a space so fundamentally defined by its enduring Christian religious heritage and its continuing religious diversity, become so strikingly secular?

With this question we are in the vicinity of a familiar story of Europe’s becoming modern that the *Handbook* wants to complicate. The editors want to hold on to ‘nuances’ that are lost in the too-simple story of inexorable ‘disenchantment’ and the end of religion that belongs to the standard secularisation thesis (6). The basic nuance the *Handbook* affirms is unquestionably important: namely, that there is no inevitability to the decline of religion, even in an increasingly secular Europe – and that is because this increasingly secular continent, like everywhere else, also remains stubbornly religious.

That's a nice nuance. However, what is not even considered here is that *Europe remains stubbornly religious precisely in its preference for secularity*. For reasons I will try to explain, this possible alternative to the standard secularisation thesis – conceiving secularity as a socio-political preference *internal* to a specifically Christian religious position – is not represented in the *Handbook* at all. The only connection between the religious and the secular that is considered is *external*: 'the waning of Christianity' in Europe is simply the unavoidable flipside of its 'growing secularization' (10).

Significantly, however, this social science approach itself belongs to the history of secularisation in Europe that it wants to understand: it is one of the 'key' developments that takes place in the historical unfolding of European secularisation (272). The 'upheavals' in European culture that were initially produced by '*philosophical*' developments in the eighteenth century have made a fundamental 'impact' on 'the ways of thinking about human living' in the following centuries, developing 'exponentially in the second half of the twentieth century' and eventually giving rise to the formation of the 'European *social sciences*' themselves (272).

And those social sciences are not neutral with respect to the history they are part of: social sciences emerge at the back-end of this history of 'religion and Europe' as a 'profoundly secular enterprise' (272). An enterprise that sees everywhere nothing but 'data' for book-keeping: 'less Christian, more secular' (270), with the 'more secular' side of things unambiguously affirmed as the preferred one, the cultural 'trend' that we should want to keep to.



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This structural shaping of social science approaches is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Chapter 15 of the *Handbook*, the very chapter that relates the brief history of European culture becoming secular that I have just run through. That chapter is also a hinge for the volume as a whole, segueing the two halves mentioned above: it brings the part largely dedicated to religion in pre-modern Europe 'to a close' and 'at the same time, it establishes the context for the material that follows' on modern Europe, including the EU, and its predominantly secular formation (9).

The chapter is by Davie, one of the editors of the *Handbook*, and it gives the *Handbook* overall a Davie stamp that is both brilliant and troubling. Brilliant because Davie's work has been as intellectually groundbreaking as anyone's in this field and fully deserves to be centre-staged in this volume; troubling because Davie's incipient awareness of the religious roots of secularisation in Europe never finds properly developed expression.

Davie is best known for three distinctive phenomena that she identifies in her influential interpretations of the data on belief and non-belief in Europe. All three are important reference points for many of the essays in the second half of this collection. First, the phenomenon she calls 'believing without belonging' – people in Europe maintaining a belief in God or spiritual beliefs in general but with declining participation in church activities (658). Second, the phenomenon she calls 'vicarious religion' – where the historically dominant religious tradition in Europe (Christian worship) is now performed only by a minority but where that very performance is still approved of by the majority (658). The third is highlighted in Davie's own contribution, where she explores the phenomenon she calls 'exceptionalism' – modern Europe's secular culture explained not by its becoming modern, but by its being European (282).

It is with respect to the third phenomenon that one might see a sort of internal limit marking Davie's own social scientific approach to 'religion and Europe'. The 'trend' in Europe is, Davie suggests, 'clear' to all social scientists: 'this is a part of the world that by and large has become less Christian, more secular and more religiously diverse as the decades pass' (270). Davie herself rejects the early and still-too-teleological sociological thesis that secularisation is 'in any way an inevitable pathway' for any society undergoing modernisation (270). In other parts of the world, modernisation takes place without significant secularisation. Nevertheless, secularisation *does* significantly accompany modernisation in Europe. Why is Europe an exception in this respect?

Davie can see the context but struggles to make good sense of it. Accounting for European exceptionalism, she returns to the 'continuing' and 'enduring' role of Christianity in Europe, and of Christianity 'determining the most basic categories of human existence' for Europeans (277). And she affirms this continuing role as significant '*despite* growing evidence of secularization' (277, my emphasis). Everything is right here – apart from the 'despite'. Davie affirms that Europe is different, and this difference should explain why Europe is an 'exceptional case' rather than a 'global prototype' with respect to secularisation in conditions of modernisation (282). I think she is right about that. Moreover, I think she is also right to suppose that 'the paradigms of social science' that have hitherto governed our thinking about religion and modernisation worldwide misunderstand global conditions because their findings emerge from investigations only of 'the European case' (282). That leads to confusion because the European case really is like no other. But why is it like no other?

At this crucial point Davie's own argument simply peters out: modern Europe's culture is not secular because it is modern but 'because it is European' (282). But what is the difference of Europe? Might further book-keeping exercises by social science one day provide an answer to this question? I do not think so. On the other hand, tracking back to the specifically philosophical upheavals of the eighteenth century that paved the way for the profoundly secular social sciences does promise something more substantive. For there we would learn that those philosophical upheavals did not *oppose* Christian faith to secular reason. On the contrary, the emphatic insistence we find placed on the latter was conceived as a central *consequence* of the revealed teachings of the former: more secular *because* more faithfully Christian.

In an essay entitled '[Faith and Knowledge](#)', the Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida outlines just such a reading of Enlightenment developments. He shows how the preference for secularity in European affairs – a preference that is also massively evident in the 'profoundly secular social sciences' that dominate our understanding of those affairs today – is essentially connected to the way morality and religion came to be conceived in the eighteenth century, most conspicuously in Kant's thought. There is, Derrida argues, a thesis in Kant on the connection between what it means to conduct oneself morally as a human being and what it means to be authentically religious that will make the distinctively *European* public space at once *both* increasingly secular *and* enduringly Christian.

The Kantian thesis could not be simpler. If we follow Kant, we will have to accept that 'Christian revelation teaches us something essential about the very idea of morality': namely, that 'in order to conduct oneself in a moral manner, one must act as though God did not exist or no longer concerned himself with our salvation' (11). The relevant Kantian point here is the claim that deliberations and decisions on right conduct have to be made exclusively with the resources of our (inherent) rationality, and entirely without claiming to know that we are doing God's will. The very teachings of a certain 'xpictiana religio' thus make the authentically faithful Christian someone who, as Derrida puts it, 'no longer turns towards God at the moment of acting in good faith' (11). In short, by remaining faithful Christians, they become radically secular citizens.

This kind of internal linking of religious and secular Europe is illuminated by Davie only in flashes, in those moments when, beyond anything discernible in ‘sources of data relating to religion – and thus to secularization – across Europe’ (269), her considerations open onto less empirical, more philosophical reflections. For example, it is visible when Davie and Leustean wonder whether Europe is ‘not only a geographical entity but more importantly a “universe” shaped by profound and enduring ideas’ (3); or when it is no longer so clear to Davie that ‘the constituency’ in Europe ‘which checks the box “Christian” [...] mean “Christian” as opposed to “secular”’ (269); or when she states that the space-time ‘legacies’ of the Christian religious history of Europe (‘parishes’, ‘Christmas’) are not merely relic remains in its now thoroughly secular formation but ‘deeply embedded’ in its ‘physical and cultural environment’ (277).

In moments such as these, Davie comes tantalisingly close to seeing another striking ‘religion and Europe’ connection: namely, that the ‘secularization’ that has become ‘central to the self-understanding of modern Europe’ (282), and hence central to her own self-understanding as a social scientist too, is strictly inseparable from the fact that the ‘universe’ of that self-understanding *remains* profoundly Christian.

The essays in this *Handbook* attend helpfully to both the centrality of the Christian heritage and the significance of other world religions to Europe’s cultural identity. And it is equally strong in its coverage of Europe’s secular modernity and its characteristically national shaping. It will be an excellent resource for students and scholars of both religion and Europe as well as ‘religion and Europe’. The point of view that Davie has championed seems thoroughly vindicated too: Europe’s modern culture is not secular because it is modern, but because it is European. But here I do want to enter an objection to the general pattern of the *Handbook*’s social science argumentation: it is European because of the continuing and enduring role of a distinctive Christian heritage – *still* Christian, even today, *because* and not *despite* the fact that it is so secular.

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