Introduction

Religion, Law, and COVID-19 in Europe: A Comparative Analysis

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Introduction[1]

On 11 March, 2020, the social world seemed to be upturned. This date marked the formal declaration by the World Health Organization of COVID-19[2] as a pandemic, which by then was diffusing across the world from its initial outbreak in China in December 2019.[3] What became apparent very early on was that this experience – like most pandemics before it[4] – took humanity by surprise and reached into virtually every single corner of society. From health care to education, from travel to sport, from dating to shopping, from politics to religion, all human life was affected. The sudden recovery of collective memories of largely overlooked past pandemics – such as an earlier 1918 Spanish flu – provided perhaps one of the few cultural guideposts for interpreting it (Vinitzky-Seroussi and Maraschin 2021), notwithstanding important differences between the two pandemics (Chandra, Christensen, and Likhtman 2020).

Faced with this challenge, governments across the world mobilised to respond. This reaction took many different forms, from national lockdowns and widespread testing to vaccine development and 'herd immunity' (Cascini et al. 2022; Greer et al. 2021), 'social engineering' efforts (Thunder 2021) reflecting different logics about the nature and trajectory of a virus that was (then) still poorly understood. One of the most contested aspects was national lockdowns, which imposed government-mandated restrictions on day-to-day social and economic life, though they varied quite considerably in their harshness from one country to another (Kriesi and Oana 2022), amid different levels of cushioning from public policy supports (Greer et al. 2021). Unsurprisingly, these met with variable compliance from ordinary people and businesses, as they struggled to make sense of their uprooted social worlds. In some European countries, restrictions even prompted protests against national governments despite the then unfavourable context for street politics (Kriesi and Oana 2022).

Thus, it is difficult to make broad generalisations about the COVID-19 pandemic experience. This is particularly true when considering Europe, where, especially in early 2020, the incidence, hospitalisation, and death rates all varied significantly cross-nationally and at the sub-national level as well (Czypionka and Reiss 2021; Plümper and Neumayer 2022). In February 2020, Europe even became one of the global focal points of the pandemic. Who will forget the images from Bergamo, a city in northern Italy, of the dead being brought in military trucks to crematoriums in other cities?[5] Or the images of Bergamo hospital staff in personal protective equipment (PPE) struggling to provide care amid the overwhelming of health service capacities?[6] Or the images of lines of coffins in a Bergamo church being blessed by a Catholic priest?[7] Yet, as the virus fanned out across this world region, it showed there were Bergamos in places other than Italy, sparking a public health crisis of a kind not experienced in a century. This was the case regarding the outbreak itself but also with respect to restrictions brought in by state authorities (Czypionka and Reiss 2021; Kriesi and Oana 2022; Plümper and Neumayer 2022),[8] including ones impacting religions and religious freedom, in the legal and sociological understandings of the term.

This large-scale disruption, in turn, prompted a sudden wave of research on different aspects of COVID-19's societal impact, enabling social scientists to better understand its consequences from the

beginning (e.g. Grasso et al. 2021; Greer et al. 2021). An early thought-piece during the pandemic invited sociologists to better understand its relevance specifically for religion, setting out a number of interesting lines of inquiry (Baker et al. 2020). Even so, within this body of research relatively little work has investigated COVID-19's influences on religion, especially in comparative terms and within specific world regions such as Europe. Also, it is clear that, while the pandemic had diverging influences across different world regions and elements of global social life, zooming in on a single world region (i.e. Europe) and element of society (i.e. religion) helps us to see the pandemic's consequences afresh.

Thus, how can the influence of COVID-19 on religion in Europe be understood? The present volume, *Religion, Law, and COVID-19 in Europe: A Comparative Analysis*, seeks to describe and explain how the pandemic and the subsequent legal restrictions on collective activities influenced religious life and the exercise of religious freedom, as well as religion–state relations, in Europe. Based on 19 in-depth country case studies combining legal and sociological analyses and reflecting the diversity of Europe's religious landscape, we attempt to show how the pandemic influenced religious groups by curtailing collective aspects (e.g. the suspension of rituals and the closure of religious buildings) and how they adapted to them, especially via innovations in online forms of religion.[9] Relatedly, we seek to investigate how the severity of religion-related restrictions varied across different contexts and how religion–state interactions regarding them changed during the pandemic and, in some cases, gave rise to fraught public controversies. More broadly, this edited volume attempts to show the importance of social and legal contexts in understanding the influence of critical incidents on religion and society in the modern world.

In this volume, we view religion both as a dependent variable and as an independent variable. In other words, we are interested in how the pandemic influenced religion (outcome variable) (e.g. whether or not religious groups changed their ritual behaviours) and in how religion influenced the pandemic (predictor variable) (e.g. whether religious groups provided legitimacy or not for government restrictions, which, in turn, impacted the course of the pandemic). Within a given societal context, this legitimacy question is not simple or straightforward. For example, some religious groups may have supported the restrictions while others did not. Also, ordinary adherents may have diverged from

the cues of religious leaders regarding restrictions. In the chapters, we pay most attention to religion as a dependent variable, while recognising the need to take account of the role of national contextual factors.

As mentioned, over the past four years or so, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a large volume of social science research, which continues to grow. Within the field of religion, a number of insightful works relate to the influence of the pandemic on religiosity.

Past book-length studies on this influence fall into three basic categories. One category (e.g. Goshen-Gottstein 2020; Hampton 2021; Kaunda et al. 2021) attempts to understand the impact of the pandemic on religion from an expressly faith-based or theological perspective, as distinct from a social science one, but some have used a combination of the two (e.g. Bullivant 2020). Sometimes work within this tradition offers practical advice to religious leadership about maximising the perceived opportunities offered by the pandemic (e.g. Bullivant 2020; Campbell and Shepherd 2021).

A second body of work reflects on the influence of the pandemic on religion but focuses either on a different world region or on a single case (e.g. Djupe and Friesen 2023; Sibanda, Muyambo, and Chitando 2022). Some studies within this tradition focus on how religion intersects with other social distinctions such as race within a single national context. For example, Floyd-Thomas (2022) investigates the racialised response to the pandemic in the US, driven largely by white Christian nationalist ideology, and how this has been weaponised politically. Similarly, Djupe and Friesen's edited volume focuses on how the pandemic influenced religious groups in the US context, but also how religion acted back on the pandemic (Djupe and Friesen 2023).

A third category of studies applies a social science framework within a worldwide context but focuses more on politics than on religion. For example, based on in-depth country case studies, Greer and colleagues investigate the role of political institutions (i.e. the state, especially in its different varieties) and actors in steering responses to the pandemic across different world regions, particularly in the domains of health and social welfare (Greer et al. 2021).

Beyond these works, some important research has been undertaken on the consequences of COVID-19 on individual-level religious practice within specific religious traditions. For example, work by political scientist Kadir Yildirim and colleagues investigates COVID-19's effects on religious practice within Islam using large-scale social surveys, by

comparing it across different national settings (Baker Institute 2022; Masoud, Yildirim, and Mandaville 2021).[10] By showing how the pandemic may have helped to bolster individual-level religiosity in five Muslim-majority contexts (Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey) or to have led to changes in the way religion is expressed, this research is useful in shedding light on denomination-specific consequences. However, this work pays less attention to macro-scale dynamics.

Additionally, although some past work on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on European societies has considered religion (e.g. Amati, MacDiarmid, and Clerx 2022; Grasso et al. 2021), this has tended to focus on capsule summaries of select cases or potted accounts of individual countries rather than attempting to directly compare trends and patterns cross-nationally.

Our own long-standing involvement in a Europe-wide network of scholars of religion and law – EUREL – prompted a focus on this topic as part of this network's recent scholarly activities.[11] Three of us – Gabriel Bîrsan, Brian Conway, and Lene Kühle – led a gathering of brief country reports by academic colleagues across Europe on 'Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Europe', which were presented at a EUREL correspondents' meeting in Paris, France, in September 2022. Although these largely descriptive reports were interesting and informative, their lack of a broader conceptual and comparative framing and relative brevity, as well as the timeliness and relevance of the topic, spurred us to build on and extend them. Thus, we set about developing this edited volume.

These early country reports focused on both sociological and legal aspects, guided by a common set of orienting questions. In light of the academic exchange arising from the presentations of the reports by the contributors as well as our own reflection, we added some additional questions to help guide the writing of the country chapters. The contributors themselves reflect different scholarly backgrounds (in this case, sociology and law), each a specialist in their national context, and share a common interest in better understanding the relation between religion and the law in a wider European context.

Against this background, the present volume seeks to advance our understanding of the influence of the pandemic on the internal workings of religions and religious freedom in three significant ways. First, we showcase a range of country-level studies reflecting the diversity of

Europe, paying particular attention to the influence of COVID-19 on religion and freedom of religion at the macro level. Second, we engage in direct comparison of cases within this world region, comparing cases across select clusters of countries defined by their major religious or secular profile, as well as comparing cases within these groupings. In this regard, we compare countries, religious traditions, and legal systems that have not been frequently investigated together regarding the influence of COVID-19 on religion. Third, we attempt to explain variation in COVID-19's influence on religions and religious freedom (in its public meaning) across different contexts, focusing on the role of religion-related factors but also political histories and local–national legal cultures.

Theoretical Framing

Although we are interested in this volume in understanding whether the pandemic influenced individual-level religious practice across the various countries, we pay most attention to describing and analysing how the pandemic influenced macro-level religious dynamics. Thus, to help guide the analysis of the variety of country-level studies included in this volume, we developed an analytical framing drawing on insights from the social science (sociology, political science, law) literature. This deductively generated framing focuses on three key conditioning factors that we consider important in explaining the different influences of COVID-19 on religions and religious freedom at the macro level across the different societies under study. These contextual and institutional factors have to do with the religious landscape (Type I factor), political history (Type II factor), and legal tradition (Type III factor). For each factor, we develop one or more propositions, which provide a basis for comparing the case studies within and between the country groupings and which also attempt to explain (from a religion and religious freedom view) the logics guiding the approach to COVID-19 from its initial outbreak to the diffusion of vaccines. In the conclusion, we include some reflections on the degree of support (or not) for our propositions, bringing in some insights revealed from the case studies themselves and thus also partly applying an inductive approach.

Religious landscape: This Type I factor has to do with a number of conditioning factors. One relates to whether the society under study is characterised by a majority church or not. A majority church can rely

on its numerical strength to provide legitimacy for its public claims-making and to rally support among devotees for its stances (Grzymała-Busse 2015, 8–9; Soper and Fetzer 2018, 15), even amid differentiation between state and religious authorities.[12] Additionally, a majority church is likely to operate either in a context where the state accommodates its interests even while remaining separate from it or, alternatively, in one where the state and the church are closely intertwined (Buckley 2016). Put differently, a majority church in a society may be an official state church or one that is not but still enjoys support from the state (Fox 2018).

A second related aspect of the religious landscape that we pay attention to is church–state interactions.[13] These interactions can be characterised by cooperation, conflict, or a mix of both, depending on such things as historic ties to secular rulers, the church's social and legal influence, or the degree of secularity of the state (Buckley 2016; Keddie 1997; Kuru 2007, 2009). Within Europe, there is significant variation in church–state interactions (Barro and McCleary 2005; Davie 2000). Here, we might usefully distinguish between three different models:[14] one model (e.g. France), where the state's 'assertive secularism' (Kuru 2007, 568) crowds out religion's public presence (Ecklund, Johnson, and Lewis 2016), a second model (e.g. Denmark) where there is a state religion (Nielsen and Kühle 2011), and a third model (e.g. Italy), where there is close historic cooperation, even at the constitutional level, between a major religion (e.g. the Catholic Church) and the state, as well as between minority religions (other than Catholicism) and the state, but without a formally established state religion (Fox 2008). Thus, we expect:

> P1a: Societies with a majority religion should exhibit more consensus among adherents and/or religious leaders than societies that lack a majority religion regarding the pandemic management of religion.

> P1b: Societies with historic legal cooperative relations between church and state should exhibit more conflict-free relations during the pandemic than societies that lack a tradition of cordial legal interactions.

Another relevant aspect of the religious landscape that we focus on concerns religion–science interactions. There is a long history of scientists struggling with religious groups over the power to define what is true and known, a debate that continues to rage nowadays (Ecklund,

Johnson, and Lewis 2016; Evans and Evans 2008; Scheitle and Corcoran 2021). At the same time, important scientific discoveries have been made by religious actors (Farrell 1998), an indicator that the division between the two domains is not as wide as is often assumed (Ecklund, Johnson, and Lewis 2016; Evans and Evans 2008).

Historical experience shows that religious groups have frequently centred divine origins rather than human ones as the root cause of pandemics, but today this view is less common as religious groups move toward greater acceptance of scientific authority (Evans and Hargittai 2022; Phillips 2020). For example, this is reflected in support across different faith traditions for advances in vaccine development during the COVID-19 pandemic and generally favourable views of pandemic management by public health authorities regarding religion (Phillips 2020).[15] Thus, empirical indicators of religion–science interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic could include whether religious groups supported public health authorities and vaccination efforts, either by supporting scientific messaging around vaccines or by offering church buildings as vaccination centres, even as scientific knowledge about the virus was always developing at the time.

At the same time, there is also noteworthy variation across religious groups in their degree of support for scientific knowledge, with conservative Protestant groups historically being less supportive than other religious groups such as Catholics (Evans and Hargittai 2022). In recent times, Christian nationalist ideology in particular has fuelled negative evaluations of scientific authority, especially in the US context (Whitehead and Perry 2020). Also, past research suggests that some non-Christian groups, such as Hindus and Muslims, may be less accepting of scientific authority (Trepanowski and Drążkowski 2022). Whether religious groups oppose or support scientific authority, they will often rely on appeals to different legitimations, either religious or secular or a mix of the two (Phillips 2020).

Even so, degrees of support for scientific authority may vary depending on the topic at play, with ones more challenging to religious doctrines being less likely to be supported by adherents (Scheitle and Corcoran 2021). It is also the case that, within the world regional context of Europe, differences in church–state interactions (e.g. secular Estonia versus religious Ireland) or political systems (Rogińska 2023) could conceivably lead to variation in religion–science interactions,

as such factors can provide a favourable context for religious-based claims or not (Ecklund, Johnson, and Lewis 2016).

When comparing countries with the same religious tradition, however, religion–science interactions should be broadly similar in light of the commonality in church teaching across different contexts, even allowing for national particularities in the tailoring of teachings to specific local environments (Palacios 2007). Similarly, secular-majority countries, sharing the same secular milieu, should reflect commonalities in how they perceive and think about scientific authority.

Thus, we expect:

P1c: Societies with a secular majority should be characterised by greater acceptance of scientific authority during the pandemic compared to societies with a religious majority.

P1d: Societies with the same religious/secular majority should reflect similar degrees of support for scientific authority during the pandemic.

Political history: This Type II factor has to do with whether the society under study is characterised by a history of communism. This may be considered as an example of a period effect, where most ordinary people are impacted by some big happening (Molteni and Biolcati 2023). One area in which this mattered had to do with organisational life. During the communist era, there was an associational life in Eastern European countries, but ordinary citizens' participation was steered by the state, frequently linked to obtaining other needed goods such as jobs. Thus, civic life became a kind of performative act, which led to the erosion of trust in political institutions and, more broadly, social trust (Howard 2003).[16]

While this experience of communism's 'anti-civic' impacts took place several decades ago, social scientists acknowledge the continued imprint of this on society (Howard 2003), especially regarding people's views and opinions about the state.

In such a context, state actions – whether to do with managing a pandemic or not – are likely to be treated with a degree of scepticism by ordinary people.

A second relevant aspect of the communist experience concerns its impact on religiosity. As this period was characterised by state repression of religion, albeit to varying degrees and with different impacts in different national settings (Howard 2003; Zrinščak 2004), it resulted

in varying patterns of secularity, with religious groups enjoying less influence among adherents in some contexts afterwards and more in others (Pollack and Rosta 2017). For example, in Poland, the Catholic Church's influence in society grew after communism, whereas in other societies, such as Hungary, the influence of Catholicism waned (Pollack and Rosta 2017). In general, though, the story of individual-level religiosity in recent times in the former communist countries that are included in this volume has been more one of decline than growth, with the exception perhaps of Bulgaria and Romania (Pollack and Rosta 2017).

Taken together, these two aspects emphasise the historical legacy of communism on present-day societal dynamics (Howard 2003). Thus, we expect:

> P2a: Societies with a prior history of communism should be more likely than societies that lack this history to exhibit conflict with regard to religious restrictions.

> P2b: Societies with a prior history of communism should be more likely than societies that lack this history to exhibit weaker support among adherents for religious leadership during a pandemic.

Legal culture: One of the interesting features of the pandemic was religious groups in some countries taking cases to national court systems to advance religious freedom claims in the context of state restrictions amid a public health emergency, a new basis for advancing such claims in modern (European) societies. Across different contexts, this created a tension between religious freedom on the one hand and public health on the other (Madera 2022), with the latter often winning out as the basis of other rights (*ius existentiae*). Even so, it is worth noting that religious freedom claims related in some cases to public practices (*libertas ecclesiae*) and in others to private beliefs (*libertas fidelium*) (Colaianni 2020).[17] Thus, this Type III factor concerns whether the society under study is characterised by a history of religious groups, especially minority ones, taking cases to the courts to exercise their rights and, more broadly, of an 'openness' of the national court system to freedom of religion[18] claims.[19] This 'judicialization of religious freedom' (Mayrl 2018, 514) could be expressed, for example, via a history of case law in the area. Of course, this will be crucially shaped by national constitutions and laws, and whether these underwrite rights regarding

freedom of religion and safeguarding religious minorities (Stan and Turcescu 2011), either explicitly or not (Mayrl 2018).

According to the *Atlas of Religious or Belief Minority Rights*, the European landscape is characterised by significant variation in the degree to which legal systems enable or constrain religious minority rights, ranging between more 'facilitating' countries such as Poland and more 'limiting' ones such as France (Ferrari et al. 2024).[20] This may be partly linked to differences across countries in the organisational aspects of national courts systems such as the relative ease with which cases may be taken, with some countries allowing ordinary people to pursue cases (e.g. Ireland) and others that allow only political elites to do so (e.g. France) (Mayrl 2018). Or this may be caused by the presence or absence of other non-court spaces (e.g. civil society groups) for addressing religious freedom claims (Mayrl 2018). A perceived lack of a favourable response at national level to adjudicating contested issues sometimes prompts religious groups to look 'upward' to world regional legal avenues for resolution (e.g. the European Court of Human Rights) (Hunter-Henin 2022; Mayrl 2018), an example of 'venue shopping' (Mayrl 2018, 523), or even pursue cases at multiple levels simultaneously (Mayrl 2018). Thus, we expect:

> P3a: Societies with a legal tradition of openness to defending the rights of religious groups should be more likely than societies that lack this tradition to exhibit more religious freedom cases during the pandemic.

> P3b: Societies with a weak legal tradition of openness to defending the rights of religious groups should be more likely than societies with a strong tradition to rely on the world regional courts during the pandemic.

Although we have introduced and discussed each of these factors separately, in practice they frequently interact. For example, church–state interactions could conceivably influence religion–science interactions (Ecklund, Johnson, and Lewis 2016), by reflecting and shaping the general relationship of religion to a society, including its scientific community. Likewise, church–state interactions frequently depend on the numerical strength (or not) of a dominant religious group.

Individual security: Insofar as we look at individual-level consequences, we draw on existential security theory (Norris and Inglehart 2004),[21] which argues that people are more likely to turn to religion

when their ability to meet basic survival needs is weaker, either as a kind of stress-reducing aid or as a practical aid for meeting social needs (Molteni 2021). As a sudden exogenous event with broad and deep impacts, the pandemic likely led to a heightening of such insecurities (Molteni et al. 2020). Thus, we expect:

> P4: Individuals in societies with higher levels of insecurity should exhibit higher levels of religiosity in the wake of the pandemic than individuals in societies with lower levels of insecurity.

How does the theoretical framing advanced here relate to other extant approaches such as complexity theory? The basic insight of complexity theory, which is arguably more a way of thinking about theories than a theory per se, is that it is difficult for any one theoretical approach for understanding religious change to fully make sense of the often messy way that different religious trends and patterns unfold in different societies over time. To overcome this, complexity theory argues for the relevance of an approach that takes account of such things as levels of analysis, mutual influences, and non-linearity (Furseth 2021).

This volume's framing shares with complexity theory an emphasis on how religion is shaped by other aspects of the social world, e.g. legal and political systems. Additionally, with complexity theory the framing recognises that religious change occurs at different levels of analysis, though our focus is mostly at the macro level. At the same time, the framing diverges from complexity theory by attempting to consider the influence of short-term events (i.e. pandemic) rather than long-term social processes (e.g. secularisation) on religious change.

Methodological Approach

In light of the macro-level emphasis of the analyses, the individual country chapters draw on elite-level data such as research studies, media reports, legal texts, and public statements produced by a broad range of social actors including academics, journalists, judges, politicians, religious leaders, and the like. At the same time, we also draw on population-level data from social surveys. Together, this allows us to provide a portrait of the influence of the pandemic on religions and religious freedom from 'above' and from 'below'. Although these data are mostly already existing in each society, they were gathered together specifically for the purposes of this volume. An important

aspect of this is that contributors draw on the available country-specific research literature in their local language, thus allowing for the highlighting of national peculiarities that would be less accessible to non-local researchers.

Aside from these qualitative and quantitative data generated during the pandemic, we also rely on already existing databases put together for other non-pandemic-related purposes to help develop a picture of the profile of the various countries regarding select issues relating to the theoretical framing. For example, we draw on the *Atlas of Religious or Belief Minority Rights* (Ferrari et al. 2024; see also Baldassarre 2024) to look at the extent to which the legal systems in different countries provide support (or not) for minority religious groups. More specifically, we rely on its Promotion-index or P-index (states), a measure of the degree to which a state promotes RBM (religious or belief minority) rights on a −1 to 1 scale, with −1 indicating 'restriction of rights' and 1 indicating 'promotion of rights'. The mid-point of the scale is 0, which indicates 'respect of international standards' (Ferrari et al. 2024). The 16-country average for this index is 0.28. A shortcoming of this source is that it does not include some of the countries included in this volume (e.g. Germany, Ireland). Also, we draw on political scientist Jonathan Fox's global analysis of religion–politics interactions (Fox 2008) to characterise religious freedom in individual countries.

While this volume consists of individual case studies grouped into different categories, it also adopts a comparative approach, comparing countries across Europe. This is reflected in three aspects of the volume. First, within each country grouping, we provide an introduction that directly compares the cases, based on the analytical framing. Second, in the conclusion, we present a more detailed framing-driven comparative analysis. We chose this approach – as opposed to comparing, say, two or three countries within the same grouping – as we wanted to compare groupings *as a whole* rather than select cases. Third, as far as possible, we make cross-references within the country chapters to similar or different dynamics in other case studies included in the volume or with regard to external cases.

Regarding the country groupings, the categories are based on data about the religious identification of the majority population, drawn from the Swiss Metadatabase of Religious Affiliation in Europe (SMRE).[22] The SMRE usefully divides Europe into countries with Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Muslim and 'no religion affiliation' as

the majority affiliation (Liedhegener and Odermatt 2023). The legal aspect is based on the categories employed by the Pew Research Center (2017) to characterise the linkage between religion and the state as either (a) hostile, (b) no preferred religion, (c) preference for a religion, or (d) official or state religion.

As with any categorisation, one could argue that it sorts units of analysis (in this case, nation states) into groupings in a way that could be interpreted as too simplistic. For example, although we group the Nordic countries together, we could have included in this category other countries with a Lutheran tradition (e.g. Estonia) as a point of comparison. Also, one could argue that by 'lumping' countries together we overlook differences within each category and that 'splitting' might be more appropriate.[23] To address this, we attempt to highlight within-group heterogeneity in the introductions to each country grouping. An alternative approach would have been to compare countries based on geographical region (e.g. Southern versus Northern Europe)[24] – which would have produced broadly similar groupings – but because we were most interested in religion-secular dynamics, we opted to centre this aspect in the categorisation used.

In preparing their country chapters, we asked each contributor to respond to a set of orienting questions under legal and sociological headings, while providing scope for each to bring in material beyond these that were not envisaged by the questions. Thus, we sought to steer a middle ground between a 'straightjacket' approach and an 'open gate' approach in the researching and writing of the chapters. We chose this approach to help facilitate the comparability of the respective chapters. This means that each of the chapters in this volume follows a broadly similar structure, beginning with an orienting section about the contextual aspects of the case study, followed by a section each on the legal and sociological aspects, and then closing out with a conclusion offering the key takeaway lessons. In a couple of cases where the academic background of the contributor(s) is a legal one (i.e. Belgium, Italy) rather than a sociological one, slightly greater weight is given to this aspect than to the sociological one. To help orient the revisions of the country chapters, we also sent contributors a draft of the volume's introduction, setting out its analytical framing.

Moreover, the chapters are guided by an 'historical' and 'interpretative' mode of investigation (Alford 1998). By historical, we mean that they focus on understanding the social forces (in this case, having to

do with the religious landscape, political history and legal culture) that shaped the pandemic as an event over time. By interpretative, we mean that they also focus on how individual and collective actors made sense of the dynamics brought about by the pandemic. How did they understand the pandemic? What symbolic language did they use? What collective memories did they appeal to?

In addition, each country grouping is prefaced with a brief introduction written by the editor responsible (either in whole or in part) for the relevant grouping, which attempts to bring out the comparative aspect of the case studies. In preparing this, we sent the contributors a draft of the country grouping introductions and then invited them to participate in a Zoom meeting with the editors between August and September 2023, ranging in length from about an hour to one and a half hours. Guided by the propositions developed for this comparative study, this allowed for the identification of similarities and differences within each category, which was also generative in terms of the revision of the country case studies.

Together, the dual focus on country-level studies alongside the comparative approach allows for 'deep' analysis within cases, as well as 'wide' analysis across them.

Another aspect of the methodology that warrants attention is the case selection. In other words, why Europe and within Europe why these 19 cases and not some other ones?

We chose to focus on Europe because this is the world regional focus of EUREL's activities but also because it includes the largest number of democracies in the world (DeSilver 2019), while also reflecting countries with varying macro political experiences (Fox 2008). Also, the countries under study represent a wide range of variation in economic development levels and, more broadly, social development (Molteni 2021), from relatively prosperous societies, such as Germany and Ireland, to more economically distressed ones such as Bulgaria and Greece.

Within Europe, we chose to focus on the 19 cases because they reflect the plurality of religious/secular societies within this world region. We also wanted to include large cases (e.g. France, Germany) as well as smaller countries (e.g. Estonia, Lithuania). Thus, we attempt to understand Europe in its wider sense, including its western and eastern flanks but also its central, southern and northern regions.

At the same time, there are also some omitted countries, which meant that we were not able to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on religious dynamics in all of Europe. For example, we were unable to find contributors for some interesting larger countries (e.g. Hungary) as well as some smaller ones (e.g. Malta). While most of the countries included in the volume are European Union countries, Norway does not fall into this category. And, although we sought to include chapters on other non-EU countries such as Switzerland and the UK, we were unable to secure the cooperation of country experts from within the EUREL network (or outside it) to complete them. Even so, this does not reflect an editorial selection bias, as we sought to include as many country cases as possible.

Organisation

The book is organised into several parts. The volume begins with an introduction that reviews past research on religion and COVID-19 and describes the theoretical framing, methodological approach, and organisation of the volume.

The empirical core of the book comprises 19 country case studies and consists of five parts, ranging from three to five chapters. Each part is prefaced by an introduction, which attempts to identify the most salient similarities and differences exhibited by the country cases within it based on the points of comparison mentioned earlier. Part I: Catholic-Majority Countries (without Preferred Religion) brings together chapters from five Catholic-majority countries that lack a constitutionally or legally established religion. Three of the countries in this category are Western European countries (Austria, Belgium, and Ireland) and two are former communist societies (Croatia and Slovakia).

Part II: Catholic-Majority Countries (with Preferred Religion) contains three country cases, two from Southern Europe (Italy and Spain) and one former communist country (Lithuania). The Catholic market share is basically the same as in the countries in Part I, but we expect that the privileging by the state of the majority religious group suggests that these three countries might be usefully categorised together.

This is followed by Part III: Secular-Majority Countries, which contains four chapters, each representing a country in which no religion is the major self-identification. Alongside France, it consists of three former communist countries (Estonia, (East) Germany, and Latvia).

Part IV: Protestant-Majority Countries includes chapters from four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden).

The final part, Part V, focuses on Orthodox-majority countries and contains three chapters on Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania. In Bulgaria and Romania, both former communist countries, there is a legal preference for the majority religious group, and in Greece there is a state church.

The conclusion provides a systematic comparative analysis of the countries based on their religious landscapes, political histories, and legal cultures. Rather than looking at heterogeneity within each cluster of countries as in the country grouping introductions, here we focus more on comparing across the country groupings. We close out the volume with some reflections on the large-scale sociological and legal implications of the study and the directions future research on this topic might take.

Notes

1 I thank Lene Kühle, Francesco Alicino, and Gabriel Bîrsan for helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.
2 The nomenclature of the virus is based on the World Health Organization. For more detail, see https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coro-navirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(COVID-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it (accessed 10 June 2024).
3 For a timeline of COVID-19, see https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/COVID19.html (accessed 16 June 2024).
4 For an historical account of religion–science interactions in past pandemics, see Phillips (2020).
5 For more detail, see https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-italian-army-called-in-to-carry-away-corpses-as-citys-crematorium-is-overwhelmed-11959994 (accessed 9 June, 2024).
6 For more detail, see https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-they-call-it-the-apocalypse-inside-italys-hardest-hit-hospital-11960597 (accessed 9 March, 2024).
7 For more detail, see https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8240715/Italian-church-filled-coronavirus-coffins-time-weeks.html (accessed 15 June, 2024).
8 It is worth mentioning that restrictions also varied within Europe, with stronger ones in north-western and southern regions than in the Eastern region, especially in the early stages of the pandemic (Kriesi and Oana 2022).
9 For an online global database about the impact of COVID-19 on religion, see the US-based Faith and COVID-19: Resource Repository, https://COVID-faithrepository.georgetown.domains/.
10 It is worth mentioning that this mid-pandemic (pre-vaccine) survey-based study was based on a survey entity's (in this case, YouGov's) panels, who were

invited to participate in an online survey, rather than nationally representative data (Baker Institute 2022).

11 These brief country reports (ranging in length from about two to 15 pages) were published on the EUREL website. Although the chapters in this volume have their origins in these country reports, they are much more developed in terms of their empirical data and reference to the literature compared to the country reports. The EUREL correspondents' meeting refers to a collective gathering of correspondents from each national context represented in this University of Strasbourg-based academic network. For more detail, see https://eurel.info/spip.php?mot258.

12 For a discussion of church–state interactions in the context of a majority religion, see Buckley (2016). For a classification of European countries regarding the presence or absence of a state church, see Barro and McCleary (2005).

13 Previous work has examined church–state interactions within Europe during the pandemic, comparing east/west or central/east flanks (e.g. Rudenko and Turenko 2021; Tytarenko and Bogachevska 2021). We depart from this interesting work by developing a more formal analytical framing.

14 For a useful account of different varieties of church–state interactions in Western Europe, see Ferrari (1995). See also Davie (2000). More broadly, church–state interactions in Europe vary between, at one end, militant secularism, which seeks to purge religion's place in the public sphere, and a pluralistic approach at the other, which involves religious groups exercising their own autonomy within the society (Rosenfeld 2020).

15 It is worth pointing out that governments in Europe relied heavily on scientific authority in their decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit a biomedical-heavy one with generally little room given to social science perspectives (Lohse and Canali 2021), which might have brought religion-related concerns more to the fore. For reflection on the relative marginalisation of sociology in COVID-19 debates, see Connell (2020).

16 Social trust may be defined as an individual's sense that people in society can be trusted (Welch et al. 2005).

17 For an account of legal debates about the impact of COVID-19 mandatory vaccinations on religious freedom (specifically religious belief), see Trispiotis (2022).

18 The concept of 'religious freedom' is a contested one. For more detail, see Fox (2018).

19 It is worth noting that there is also a tradition of case law regarding religious freedom in the European-level courts system (e.g. the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights) (du Plessis and Portaru 2022; Hunter-Henin 2022).

20 The European Consortium for Church and State Research has conducted research on church–state interactions in Europe as a factor shaping different pandemic responses (European Consortium for Church and State Research n.d.; see also Pin 2021). European Centre for Law and Justice data suggest that church–state interactions did not straightforwardly influence pandemic responses, with countries with quite different church–state interactions exhibiting similar religion-related restrictions (European Centre for Law and Justice 2020).

21 For a recent theoretical and empirical complexifying of this perspective, see Molteni (2021).
22 https://www.smre-data.ch/
23 For more detail on the distinction between lumping and splitting more generally, see Zerubavel (1996).
24 Initially, we opted to focus on comparing geographical regions (e.g. Nordic countries, Continental European countries, Eastern European countries) but then decided to use the current religion-driven approach.

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