

Religion and Higher Education Achievement in Europe

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Although religion has historically been a structuring dimension of higher education systems in Europe, little research interrogates the contemporary link between religion and higher education. Such an analysis would be of interest, at two levels. First, it is about understanding the role played by higher education in a given society. Are there some specific religious contexts, in which higher education appears more or less developed, and what do we learn from these contexts' comparison? Second, it is about taking religious backgrounds or belongings into account, in the reading of inequalities of access to higher education. Historically, some groups have been refrained from accessing higher education, and European societies are, today, still more or less organized along religious lines. This calls for the consideration of religion as a potential indicator of inequalities, along with an ethnic and socioeconomic background.

To understand these issues, data are used from the European Social Survey. From the five waves of this survey (2001–2010), we obtained a sample of 181,492 individuals born between 1939 and 1979, from 30 European countries.

We then built an original research design to compare tertiary-degree holders to the rest of the population, looking at their religious background.

RELIGION, EDUCATION, AND SOCIETY

The first striking result consists in a global trend: In Europe, the most secular societies tend to be those with a higher level of education. Comparing the two groups of societies—the most secular ones with a higher level of tertiary education and the most religious ones with a lower level of tertiary education—another trend appears: Countries of a Protestant tradition are more likely to have a high level of tertiary education, compared with countries of Catholic tradition. How can one explain these trends? Some research shows that Protestantism has not only generated a high level of economic prosperity, as Max Weber identified, but also a high level of literacy and more education necessary for reading the Bible. Indeed, based on the history of Protestantism and Catholicism, one finds a major difference regarding these religions' role in society: In Protestantism, the individual relationship to knowledge is straight, the Bible has early been translated into German (by opposition with the long-lasting domination of Latin in Catholicism), and the development of schooling was supported during the Reformation. So, today's differences of higher education system development can be interpreted, at least partly, as the consequence of historical choices; in this case, the choice of a common language of religious instruction, which came with a less hierarchical structure of Protestantism, compared with Catholicism. This is coherent with the fact that, in 1900, countries with a majority of Protestants had nearly reached a universal level of literacy, which was not the case of any Catholic countries.

This shows how a choice made by the religious institution at some point of history can have long-lasting effects on the development of education. It also calls for the development of a societal and historical approach, to explore the complex link between higher education and religion.

RELIGION, EDUCATION, AND INDIVIDUALS

The second important results concern the weight of religious background on the individual probability to access tertiary degrees, everything else being equal. To address this issue, the impact of the religious background has been investigated on access to higher education—for each country—controlling for age, gender, the parental level of education, parental profession, parental and respondent's country of birth, citizenship, sense of belonging to an ethnic minority, or a discriminated group as well as language spoken at home. Is there a residual impact of religion, once these variables are controlled for?

First, it appears that individuals without any religious belonging are often more likely to hold a tertiary degree, in countries where a majority of respondents declare a religious belonging. For example, in Portugal, Spain, Poland, Austria, and Slovakia—countries where the majority of the population is Catholic—the respondents who declare themselves “without religion” are more likely to hold a tertiary degree than those who declare a religion. It is also the case in Greece and Russia, two countries with a majority of the population being of Orthodox faith.

Second, in countries where most respondents declare no religious belonging, respondents who affirm a religious belonging, tend to have more probability to hold a tertiary degree. This is, for example, the case for Catholics in

the United Kingdom, Sweden, or Belgium and for Protestants in the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Latvia.

Third, if based on the access to tertiary education of different religious minority groups by comparison with the largest groups, Muslims appear less likely to hold a tertiary degree in at least five countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, and Switzerland) and Orthodox in one (Switzerland). Furthermore, regarding different age groups of national populations, changes are observed in the representation of various religious communities holding tertiary degrees. This means that the impact of religious belongings changes overtime.

RELIGION AS AN INDICATOR

So why dig in the burning societal issue of religion, when questioning access to higher education? The trends previously underlined are obviously hard to explain, as they are the product of complex and obscure processes. Still, digging further seems worthwhile for at least three reasons. At a theoretical level, interrogating the multicausality of the relation between religion and higher education should help understanding the dynamics at play between higher education and society. At a more pragmatical level, this examination offers an opportunity to analyze how societal dynamics are intertwined with individual ones in education trajectories. What is the role of higher education in the building up of nation states integrating diverse religious communities? Finally, it also underlines the interest of not limiting an analysis of inequalities in education to the classical socioeconomic and ethnic background but of enlarging it to the different belongings individuals express as part of their world.