

Civil Society Analytical Report

THE QUIET EROSION OF EUROPE'S CIVILIZATIONAL CODE

Historical Christian Heritage, Freedom of Religion or Belief,
and the Resilience of Societies in the OSCE Region

Author & Editor

Yevgeny Bort

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PUBLICATION NOTE

The Quiet Erosion of Europe's Civilizational Code

Historical Christian Heritage, Freedom of Religion or Belief, and the Resilience of Societies in the OSCE Region

PUBLISHER	MEcoVEA e.V., Berlin
AUTHOR & EDITOR	Yevgeny Bort
EDITION	Analytical edition · September 2026
DATA CUT-OFF	23 September 2026
STATUS	Independent civil-society report; not an OSCE or ODIHR publication
WEBSITE	www.mecovea.com

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This document is an independent contribution from civil society. It does not express the official position of the OSCE, ODIHR, any OSCE participating State, or any religious body cited in the report. References to institutional or religious documents are used for analysis and attribution only.

Editorial approach

The edition distinguishes documented findings from interpretation, narrows causal claims where the available evidence is insufficient, and separates official statistics from civil-society monitoring. Quantitative claims central to the report were checked against the cited institutional or primary sources. The report has not undergone formal academic peer review.

Suggested citation

Yevgeny Bort. The Quiet Erosion of Europe's Civilizational Code: Historical Christian Heritage, Freedom of Religion or Belief, and the Resilience of Societies in the OSCE Region. MEcoVEA e.V., Berlin, 2026.

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Executive Summary

Europe's religious landscape is changing. The central question is not whether a secular and plural Europe can exist, but how it preserves the moral, cultural and institutional resources on which a free society depends.

European security is usually discussed in terms of military capacity, economic stability, energy, migration and technology. The human dimension adds another layer: whether societies retain the institutions, habits and shared language that allow freedom, responsibility and trust to be transmitted across generations. This report examines one part of that question - the changing public role of historical Christianity in Europe - without arguing for a confessional state or a privileged legal status for Christians.

The term “civilizational code” is used here as analytical shorthand for historically formed ideas and institutions through which societies transmit human dignity, responsibility, solidarity, voluntary service and limits on state power. It is not an ethnic category, a claim of religious monopoly, or a closed definition of European identity. Europe's political and moral traditions have multiple sources. Christianity is nevertheless one of the deepest and most durable among them, particularly in law, education, charity, architecture, the calendar and the language of the person.

The scale of religious change is measurable. Pew Research Center estimates that Christians made up 67% of Europe's population in 2020, about 505 million people. Between 2010 and 2020, their absolute number fell by 9%, while the religiously unaffiliated population grew to 190 million. In Western Europe, Pew's earlier survey work also found a wide gap between Christian identification and regular participation in church life. These are demographic and sociological observations, not a judgement about individual belief. [4, 5]

France illustrates the institutional dimension of that change. Pastoral statistics published by the Holy See in September 2026 show that between 1980 and 2024 the number of Catholic parishes in France fell from 38,391 to 10,925 and the number of priests from 38,876 to 12,590. Baptisms declined from 513,501 to 186,165 and religious marriages from 217,479 to 40,678. The number of baptised Catholics as recorded in church statistics did not collapse at the same rate. The result is a widening distance between inherited affiliation, institutional capacity and religious practice. [6]

Material heritage is under pressure as well. At least 1,600 of roughly 40,000 religious buildings maintained by French municipalities are closed because of poor condition, and municipalities frequently face restoration costs that exceed local budgets. In Germany and elsewhere, deconsecrated churches are increasingly adapted to new uses. Reuse can preserve buildings, but it also changes the social and memorial function for which those buildings were created. [7, 9]

Security is part of the picture. ODIHR treats anti-Christian hate crime as a distinct field within its work on intolerance and freedom of religion or belief. In May 2026 it held a regional workshop in Rome on anti-Christian hate crimes and the security needs of Christian communities in Western Europe. OIDAC Europe, a civil-society monitor, identified 2,211 anti-Christian hate crimes in Europe in 2024, including 274 personal attacks. Its total combines official data, ODIHR information and independent monitoring; it should not be presented as a single harmonised police dataset. [3, 10]

The report does not claim that secularisation causes loneliness, family change, political polarisation or a decline in public trust. The available evidence does not support such a simple causal chain. It does, however, justify closer attention to the institutions through which social ties are maintained. Religious communities are one part of that social infrastructure, alongside families, schools, municipalities, associations and other forms of civil society.

The constitutional question is therefore more precise than a call to “restore religion”. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde argued that the liberal secularised state depends on preconditions it cannot itself guarantee. A free state cannot manufacture moral conviction by coercion without ceasing to be liberal. The policy problem is how a plural society protects the freedom and institutional space in which responsibility, restraint, solidarity and civic trust can grow.

The report concludes that recognition of Christian heritage and full equality for other religions and non-religious worldviews are not contradictory objectives. The appropriate response is neither confessional restoration nor cultural amnesia. It is a combination of freedom of religion or belief, accurate monitoring of hate crime, preservation of heritage, religious literacy, transparent rules for the reuse of sacred buildings, and research that distinguishes measurable relationships from political narratives.

DATA SNAPSHOT

Indicator	Verified figure	Source
Christian identification, Europe	67% of population; 505m Christians in 2020	Pew [4]
Religiously unaffiliated, Europe	190m in 2020; +37% since 2010	Pew [4]
Catholic parishes, France	38,391 (1980) → 10,925 (2024)	Holy See [6]
Municipal religious buildings closed, France	At least 1,600	Le Monde [7]
Anti-Christian hate crimes, 2024	2,211 identified; 274 personal attacks	OIDAC [10]
EU loneliness survey, 2022	13% most/all of time; 35% at least some of time	JRC [13]

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

- Dates and populations matter. A figure for Europe, the European Union or Western Europe is not silently generalised to the entire OSCE area.
- Source types remain separate. Official statistics, church statistics, survey research, media reporting and civil-society monitoring are identified rather than blended.
- France is used as a detailed case study because of the quality of the available longitudinal data; it is not presented as a proxy for all European countries.
- “Civilizational code” is an analytical term in this report, not a legal category and not an argument for religious privilege.
- Where the evidence does not establish causation, the text uses conditional language and identifies the point as a research hypothesis.

Key Findings

- Europe remains majority Christian by self-identification in the latest comparable continental benchmark, but both the Christian share and absolute number declined between 2010 and 2020. Religious disaffiliation was the largest driver of change. [4]
- In Western Europe, Christian identity often persists without regular religious practice. Identity, institutional participation and belief should therefore be measured separately. [5]
- France provides unusually detailed evidence of institutional contraction in Catholic life: far fewer parishes, priests, baptisms and church marriages than in 1980, even though the church’s count of baptised Catholics remains high. [6]
- The future of church buildings is not only a religious question. It is also a matter of public finance, architectural heritage, community use and local memory. [7, 9]

- Anti-Christian hate crime is a recognised OSCE/ODIHR issue. Civil-society totals are useful but are methodologically different from national police statistics and must be labelled accordingly. [2, 3, 10]
- No robust evidence supports a simple claim that secularisation causes loneliness, family breakdown or political instability. These variables interact with demography, economics, urbanisation, digitalisation, migration and other factors.
- The strongest policy case is not for state promotion of Christianity, but for equal freedom of religion or belief, protection of religious communities, preservation of heritage, and a public culture capable of understanding its own historical sources.
- The concept of human dignity has religious and secular lines of justification. Christian anthropology and Kantian ethics reach the same practical boundary at one critical point: a person must not be reduced to a mere instrument, resource or object of administration. [15-23]

1. Purpose, Scope and Research Questions

This report studies the changing place of historical Christianity in European public life and asks what those changes may mean for cultural continuity, freedom of religion or belief, local social infrastructure and the human dimension of security. It does not offer theological judgements between Christian traditions and does not argue that public authorities should favour Christianity over other religions or non-religious convictions.

“Historical Christianity” is used in a broad cultural-historical sense. It includes Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant traditions, as well as the ancient Oriental Orthodox traditions - Armenian, Coptic, Syriac and Ethiopian - that form part of the wider European and Mediterranean Christian inheritance. These traditions differ substantially in doctrine, institutions and political history. They are grouped here only where the analysis concerns long-term cultural presence and the transmission of ideas about the person, responsibility, community and moral obligation.

“Civilizational code” refers to a historically accumulated vocabulary of dignity, responsibility, solidarity, voluntary service and legitimate limits on power, together with the institutions that transmit those ideas. The term is deliberately narrower than “European identity”. Europe is plural, and its intellectual formation also reflects Greek and Roman antiquity, Judaism, the Enlightenment, humanism, constitutionalism and other traditions. The report’s claim is not exclusivity, but historical weight.

The report uses “Christian humanism” to describe the proposition that every person possesses an inherent worth that does not depend on origin, social utility, health, age, productivity or political status. The secular legal order can affirm the same conclusion for reasons independent of theology. The distinction matters: a plural state need not endorse a religious explanation in order to recognise that a religious tradition helped shape part of its moral vocabulary.

1.1 Research questions

- What measurable changes can be documented in Christian identification, practice, institutional capacity and material heritage in Europe?
- How do those changes intersect with freedom of religion or belief, protection from hate crime and the security needs of religious communities?
- Which broader claims about social cohesion and resilience are supported by evidence, and which should remain research hypotheses?
- How can public institutions recognise historical Christian heritage without compromising state neutrality or the equal rights of other religions and worldviews?
- Which policy measures are practical at OSCE/ODIHR, national, municipal and civil-society levels?

1.2 Constitutional context: secularisation and freedom

Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde described the rise of the modern European state as a process of secularisation: political legitimacy gradually separated from a unified religious-political order and acquired an independent legal basis. On this account, the secular state is not necessarily anti-religious. It refuses to make adherence to a particular religious truth a condition of citizenship.

This leads to two principles that structure the report. First, state neutrality is compatible with a visible religious and cultural public sphere. Second, attempts to recreate social unity through coercive ideology — religious or secular — contradict the liberal character of the state. The policy question is therefore not how the state can manufacture belief, but how it can protect the freedom and institutional space in which citizens, associations, families, religious communities and cultural traditions generate social trust and moral responsibility. [17]

“The liberal, secularised state lives by preconditions that it cannot itself guarantee.”
Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde - commonly known as the Böckenförde dictum [17]

2. Methodology and Limitations

The report combines official statistics, institutional publications, demographic and sociological research, OSCE/ODIHR materials, Holy See statistics, European Union data and civil-society monitoring. Sources are not treated as equivalent. Official statistics are identified as such; church statistics are used for institutional and pastoral trends; survey data are used for self-identification and practice; civil-society monitoring is labelled separately.

Geographic categories require particular care. “Europe” in Pew Research Center data, the European Union and the 57-state OSCE area are not interchangeable. The strongest demographic evidence used here concerns Europe as defined by the source. The report therefore avoids presenting European figures as though they represented the entire OSCE region. References to the OSCE concern the organisation’s human-dimension commitments, participating States and ODIHR’s mandate.

Observation periods also differ. Pew’s most recent comparable continental estimates describe change from 2010 to 2020; the Holy See series for France runs from 1980 to 2024; the EU Loneliness Survey is from 2022; OIAC’s 2025 report concerns incidents recorded in 2024. Dates are stated because older evidence should not be presented as a current snapshot.

The report does not attempt to prove a single causal chain linking secularisation, demographic change, loneliness, family structure, mental health, political polarisation or public trust. These processes have multiple causes. Where the report discusses possible risks to resilience, the wording is deliberately conditional. Correlation, institutional co-occurrence and historical interpretation are not treated as proof of causation.

A further limitation is case selection. France receives substantial attention because recent Holy See statistics provide an unusually long and internally consistent pastoral series and because local-government ownership makes the condition of religious buildings a public-policy issue. France should not be treated as a proxy for every European country. The German example of church reuse serves as an illustration rather than a continental trend estimate.

The report also distinguishes doctrinal sources from empirical evidence. Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant texts are cited to show how religious traditions justify dignity, freedom and responsibility; they are not used to establish demographic or sociological facts. Contemporary ecclesiastical commentary is treated as attributed interpretation, not as independent evidence.

3. Relevance for the OSCE Human Dimension

The OSCE's concept of security is comprehensive. Alongside politico-military and economic-environmental dimensions, it includes the human dimension: human rights, democratic institutions and the rule of law. Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is part of that framework and is directly connected to peaceful coexistence in plural societies. [1, 2]

ODIHR's 2019 policy guidance on freedom of religion or belief and security stresses that security measures and the protection of this freedom should be mutually reinforcing rather than treated as competing goals. The guidance is addressed to policymakers and situates religious freedom within the OSCE's wider security architecture. [2]

Christian communities fall within the same framework as every other religious or non-religious group. Their security concerns do not require a special hierarchy of rights. They concern equal protection: the recording and prevention of hate crime, safety of places of worship and cemeteries, protection of clergy and community representatives, and the ability to manifest religion lawfully in public and private.

The issue is not hypothetical. On 26-27 May 2026 ODIHR held a regional workshop in Rome on responding to anti-Christian hate crimes and addressing the security needs of Christian communities in Western Europe. Participants included Christian communities, civil-society organisations, international experts and state authorities from Austria, France, Italy and Spain. [3]

Historical heritage creates a second connection to the human dimension. Churches and other religious sites are places of worship, but many are also protected monuments, public landmarks, archives of local memory and venues for social and charitable activity. Decisions about their protection, closure or reuse sit at the intersection of religious freedom, cultural policy, municipal finance and community life.

4. Evidence: Identity, Practice, Heritage and Security

The evidence points to a substantial transformation, but not to a single European pattern. Identification, practice, institutional strength and physical heritage move at different speeds.

4.1 Christian identification and religious switching

According to Pew Research Center, about two-thirds of Europe's residents identified as Christian in 2020. The Christian population stood at roughly 505 million, 9% lower in absolute terms than in 2010, while the Christian share fell to 67%. Over the same decade, the religiously unaffiliated population rose by 37% to 190 million and reached 25% of Europe's population. Pew identifies religious switching - particularly movement from Christian upbringing to no religious affiliation - as the largest driver of the change. [4]

These figures describe identification, not the intensity of belief or practice. Pew's 2018 study of Western Europe found that non-practising Christians formed a large share of the population in most surveyed countries. Many respondents continued to identify as Christian while attending religious services only rarely. The difference between inherited identity, present self-identification and active participation is therefore analytically important. [5]

The same research also cautions against treating "cultural Christianity" as a single political category. Non-practising Christians, church-attending Christians and unaffiliated adults differ across many issues, and those differences interact with education, age, political ideology and national context. For this report, Christian identification is used only as a demographic and cultural indicator, not as a proxy for political attitudes. [5]

4.2 France as a case study of institutional contraction

Pastoral statistics released by the Holy See on 18 September 2026 provide a long series for the Catholic Church in France. Between 1980 and 2024, the number of parishes fell from 38,391 to 10,925. The total number of priests fell from 38,876 to 12,590. Baptisms declined from 513,501 to 186,165 and religious marriages from 217,479 to 40,678. [6]

The same series records baptised Catholics at 84.72 per 100 inhabitants in 1980 and 74.93 in 2024. Those figures should not be read as direct measures of active faith or current self-identification: baptismal statistics and survey identity answer different questions. Taken together with the decline in parishes, clergy and sacramental participation, however, they show that historical Catholic belonging can persist while institutional practice and capacity contract sharply. [6]

FRANCE: SELECTED CATHOLIC PASTORAL INDICATORS

Indicator	1980	2024	Change
Parishes	38,391	10,925	−71.5%
Total priests	38,876	12,590	−67.6%
Baptisms	513,501	186,165	−63.7%
Religious marriages	217,479	40,678	−81.3%
Catholics per 100 inhabitants	84.72	74.93	−9.79 pp

Source: Holy See Press Office, pastoral statistics for France, 18 September 2026 [6]. Percent changes calculated from source values.

4.3 Churches as material infrastructure of memory

For centuries, church buildings in European towns and villages have served more than a liturgical function. They organise urban space, preserve archives and art, mark family and civic memory, and often host charitable, musical, educational and social activity. When a church closes, the consequence is therefore not purely religious; a local institution changes or disappears.

In France, local authorities are responsible for a very large stock of religious buildings. Le Monde reported in November 2024 that at least 1,600 of roughly 40,000 religious buildings under municipal responsibility were closed because of dilapidation. Restoration costs are often difficult for small municipalities to finance. The figure describes condition and closure, not abandonment for ideological reasons. [7]

The church of Saint-Pierre-aux-Liens in Gesté illustrates the long-running conflict between heritage preservation and local budgets. Most of the neo-Gothic buildings were demolished after a dispute over restoration and maintenance costs, while the tower and crypt were retained. The case is best understood as a heritage and finance conflict rather than evidence of a coordinated policy against Christianity. [8]

Reuse is another response. In Würzburg, the former parish church of St Andrew is being converted for bouldering, a café, yoga and community use after deconsecration. The building is preserved while its liturgical function ends. Similar projects raise a practical question that will become more common: how can former sacred spaces be adapted without erasing architectural memory or treating religious symbols in a degrading way? [9]

4.4 Anti-Christian hate crime and community security

ODIHR recognises anti-Christian hate crime within its broader work on bias-motivated crime and freedom of religion or belief. Relevant incidents include attacks on individuals, threats, vandalism, arson, cemetery desecration and damage to places of worship. [1, 3]

OIDAC Europe's 2025 report identified 2,211 anti-Christian hate crimes in Europe in 2024, including 274 personal attacks. OIDAC states that the headline total is assembled by cross-checking official police statistics, OSCE/ODIHR material and the organisation's own monitoring, with duplicates removed. It separately notes that it independently documented 516 anti-Christian hate crimes, or 1,503 incidents when thefts and break-ins at religious sites are included. [10]

The distinction matters. A composite civil-society estimate may reveal incidents that are absent from a single national database, but it is not equivalent to a harmonised police statistic. Public reports should identify the source type and methodology rather than merge all numbers into a single undifferentiated total.

KEY INDICATORS AND WHAT THEY DO - AND DO NOT - SHOW

Area	Evidence	Interpretation	Ref.
Religious identity	Christians: 67% of Europe in 2020; 505m people	A majority remained, but the share and absolute number fell over 2010–2020	[4]
Practice	Non-practising Christians form a large population in Western Europe	Identity and active participation are not interchangeable	[5]
Pastoral capacity	Sharp fall in French parishes, clergy and sacraments since 1980	Institutional contraction is measurable; France is a case study, not a proxy for all Europe	[6]
Built heritage	At least 1,600 French municipal religious buildings closed due to condition	Preservation is also a finance and infrastructure issue	[7]
Community security	OIDAC: 2,211 incidents; 274 personal attacks in 2024	Useful civil-society monitoring, with a methodology distinct from police statistics	[10]
Social ties	EU-LS 2022: 13% lonely most/all of time; 35% at least sometimes	Measures social connection; does not identify religion as the cause	[13]

5. Christian Traditions and the Grounding of Human Dignity

The report's central normative concern is the idea that human worth precedes political approval and social utility. Christian traditions do not articulate that proposition in identical ways, and their historical relationship with modern rights is complex. A credible account must include both the contribution and the conflict.

5.1 Catholic line of justification

The Catholic declaration *Dignitas infinita* states that every human person possesses an inalienable dignity grounded in his or her being. It presents this dignity as recognisable by reason and, within Christian anthropology, as rooted in creation in the image and likeness of God. The document places human dignity prior to circumstance, status and social usefulness. [15]

This language sits within a twentieth-century development in Catholic social and constitutional thought. *Pacem in terris* describes the human being as a person endowed with intelligence and free will, possessing universal and inalienable rights and duties. *Dignitatis humanae* grounds religious freedom in the dignity of the person and argues against coercion in matters of religion. [20, 21]

That development should not be rewritten as a simple linear story. Nineteenth-century papal documents criticised important strands of liberalism, and the Catholic Church's eventual embrace of modern religious freedom emerged through conflict and reinterpretation. Acknowledging that history makes the contemporary argument for dignity more credible, not less. [22]

5.2 Orthodox lines of justification

The Holy and Great Council's 2016 text *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World* grounds the unique dignity of the human person in creation in the image and likeness of God. It connects dignity with freedom, responsibility, peace and the rejection of discrimination. The same text states that freedom without responsibility and love can become self-defeating. [18]

The 2008 document of the Russian Orthodox Church likewise distinguishes the inalienable dignity of human nature from the moral use of freedom and places strong emphasis on responsibility. It represents the position of the Moscow Patriarchate and should not be presented as binding on Orthodoxy as a whole. [19]

For the Life of the World, published in 2020, offers another Orthodox approach. It was prepared by a commission of Orthodox scholars appointed by the Ecumenical Patriarch and approved for publication by the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It is influential but not a universally binding doctrinal text for all Orthodox churches. [16, 24]

5.3 Protestant traditions and plural models of normativity

The Protestant landscape is institutionally and theologically diverse. Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, evangelical, free-church and liberal traditions assign different weight to Scripture, confession, conscience, individual autonomy and adaptation to social change. It is therefore methodologically weak to speak of a single "Protestant position" on secularisation or moral change.

Historically, Protestant traditions contributed to literacy, schooling, voluntary association, social welfare and the development of individual conscience. They also participated, in different times and places, in political exclusion, confessional conflict and state control. The relevant analytical point is not a ranking of confessions, but the range of ways in which communities justify dignity, freedom, obligation and limits on power.

5.4 Person and individual

The report uses "person" in a specific sense. The individual is an independent bearer of rights whose freedom must be protected against the state and society. The language of the person adds relationship, responsibility and recognition of others as equally inviolable bearers of dignity. It does not subtract from individual rights. It asks what social and moral habits make their responsible exercise possible.

This distinction also avoids a false choice between community and liberty. Communities can sustain identity and mutual obligation, but they can also become coercive.

Individual rights protect people from precisely that danger. A resilient plural society needs both: strong rights and institutions capable of generating voluntary responsibility rather than enforced conformity.

6. Christian Symbolism in Public Space

Public controversies over Christian symbols often mix genuine administrative decisions with exaggerated or false claims. A serious report must separate the two. There is no Europe-wide prohibition on Christmas, Christmas trees, crosses or Christian holidays. Claims of blanket bans usually collapse when examined case by case.

A widely circulated story that Sweden had prohibited Christmas lights out of deference to Muslim communities was debunked by EUvsDisinfo. The underlying dispute concerned the technical suitability of certain lamp posts for decorations, not a religious ban. The example shows why cultural anxiety should not substitute for verification. [12]

A different case arose in 2021, when an internal European Commission guide on inclusive communication suggested avoiding assumptions that everyone is Christian and, in some examples, using “holiday period” rather than “Christmas period”. The Commission later withdrew the internal document. In its written responses to the European Parliament, it stated that celebrating Christmas and using Christian names are part of Europe’s heritage and that the guidance had been intended to promote inclusion, not to prohibit Christian practice. [11]

The distinction is important. Neutral or inclusive language can be legitimate in a plural institution. At the same time, repeated replacement of historically specific terminology can have a cultural effect even when no anti-religious intent exists. Assessment therefore requires attention to purpose, context, legal effect and cumulative public perception.

Three mechanisms recur in these disputes. The first is institutional neutrality: public bodies seek language that addresses people of different beliefs equally. The second is administrative risk avoidance: organisations choose neutral terminology to reduce complaints or litigation. The third is commercialisation: “holiday season” or “winter” language can appeal to a broader market than explicitly religious language. None of these mechanisms, by itself, demonstrate a coordinated policy of de-Christianisation.

The policy challenge is to distinguish neutrality from erasure. A secular state can recognise the historical origin of a holiday, building or symbol while protecting equal access and equal dignity for people who do not share the associated faith. Historical literacy is compatible with pluralism.

7. Societal Resilience: Evidence, Limits and Research Hypotheses

This section deliberately separates measurable social conditions from hypotheses about their causes.

7.1 What evidence shows

The EU Loneliness Survey 2022 found that, on average, 13% of respondents in the European Union felt lonely most or all of the time during the previous four weeks; a further 35% felt lonely at least some of the time. Loneliness varied substantially between countries. The survey does not identify secularisation as the cause. [13]. Eurostat reported 203.1 million households in the EU in 2025. Of these, 76.1 million were single-adult households without children, up 19.2% from 2016. These figures describe household structure. They do not measure isolation, family quality or religious change and should not be used as proxies for those concepts. [14]

Pew’s Western European research offers a more directly relevant observation: active religious participation is associated with some forms of civic participation, including charitable and voluntary activity. Association is not proof of causation, but it gives a defensible reason to include religious communities among the institutions studied when assessing local social capital. [5]

7.2 The Böckenförde problem

Böckenförde's constitutional argument helps define the issue without turning it into a demographic morality tale. The liberal state grants freedom and must protect pluralism, but it cannot compel the convictions and self-restraint that make freedom workable without undermining its own liberal character. The state therefore relies in part on social sources it does not control. [17]

Those sources are not synonymous with religion. They can be found in families, schools, civic associations, trade and professional communities, cultural traditions, philosophical commitments, volunteer organisations and religious life. Historical Christianity is relevant because, for centuries, churches were among the institutions that organised education, charity, mutual aid and moral formation across Europe. Their decline changes the institutional landscape even when other organisations take over some of those functions.

The right policy question is not whether governments should replace lost religious adherence. They should not. It is whether a free society understands and sustains independent institutions through which people learn responsibility, cooperation, service and limits on self-interest.

7.3 Research hypotheses - not established causal findings

Several propositions deserve further study but should not be stated as established conclusions. First, the weakening of dense local institutions including parishes, clubs, unions and voluntary associations, may reduce opportunities for regular face-to-face participation. The relevant variable is institutional participation, not religious identity alone.

Second, reduced knowledge of the historical sources of concepts such as dignity, conscience and responsibility may make public debate more dependent on present-day political language. This is a hypothesis about civic education and cultural memory; it requires comparative research rather than assertion.

Third, rapid changes in symbolic language can contribute to perceptions of exclusion among people who identify strongly with historical traditions. Perception can matter for social cohesion even when the underlying policy is neutral. The appropriate response is evidence-based communication, not the assumption of either malicious intent or irrational grievance.

Finally, the loss of moderate forms of belonging may create space for more rigid identity movements. This mechanism is plausible in many domains - religious, nationalist, ideological or online - but the report does not claim that declining church participation directly produces political radicalisation.

8. Human Dignity and the Limit on Instrumentalisation

The most durable bridge between the report's religious and secular arguments is the refusal to reduce the human being to utility. Christian anthropology reaches that conclusion through the inherent dignity of the person. Kantian ethics reaches it through the requirement to treat rational beings as ends in themselves and never merely as means.

"The human being, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means."
Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, 1785, AA IV:428 [23]

Applied to contemporary institutions, the practical boundary is clear: a person should not be treated solely as an economic input, demographic unit, medical case, biological material, data profile or object of technical administration. Public policy inevitably uses categories and data, but those tools must remain subordinate to the rights and dignity of the persons they describe.

This question becomes more urgent as digital systems influence employment, welfare, healthcare, policing, migration management and access to services. The report does not develop a full theory of artificial intelligence or bioethics. It makes a narrower recommendation: regulatory systems should retain explicit human-rights safeguards against forms of decision-making that obscure responsibility or reduce individuals to a score, category or predicted behaviour.

Contemporary church voices also connect the question of dignity with Europe's changing cultural identity. Auxiliary Bishop Athanasius Schneider of Astana has publicly argued that the weakening of Christian identity has consequences for European social and political life. His broader political claims, including those concerning migration, are contested and are not used here as empirical evidence. The reference is retained only as an example of a contemporary ecclesiastical position in the wider debate. [25]

The analytical value of this convergence is limited but real. A secular constitutional order does not need to adopt Christian anthropology, and a Christian church does not need to derive dignity from Kant. Yet both traditions can set a boundary against pure instrumental reasoning. In plural societies, overlapping conclusions reached from different premises can provide a stronger basis for public ethics than attempts to impose a single worldview.

9. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The recommendations are grouped by actor. They are designed to protect freedom, improve evidence and preserve cultural memory without creating a hierarchy of religions.

9.1 For OSCE/ODIHR

- 1. Improve comparability of hate-crime data.** Continue strengthening common reporting standards for anti-Christian hate crime while clearly separating national police statistics, ODIHR submissions and civil-society monitoring. Methodological transparency is more valuable than a single headline number.
- 2. Extend practical security guidance.** Build on the 2026 Rome workshop and existing ODIHR guidance with practical tools for protecting churches, cemeteries, clergy and community events, including cooperation protocols between religious communities, municipalities and police.
- 3. Keep FoRB and security mutually reinforcing.** Security policy should not treat visible religion as a risk category in itself. Restrictions should be lawful, necessary, proportionate and neutral across religions and worldviews, in line with ODIHR's policy guidance.

9.2 For participating States and national institutions

- 4. Protect visible religious life on equal terms.** Freedom of religion or belief includes the lawful public manifestation of religion as well as private belief. Neutrality should mean equal legal protection, not the compulsory invisibility of historically rooted traditions.
- 5. Strengthen religious and historical literacy.** Education should explain the role of Christian, Jewish, classical, humanist, Enlightenment and other traditions in European history. Teaching historical Christianity is not confessional instruction; it is part of understanding European institutions, art, law and culture.
- 6. Preserve independent moral institutions.** Policy should recognise that social resilience depends on institutions outside the state. Families, associations, schools, religious communities and voluntary organisations require legal space to organise, serve communities and transmit values without coercion.

9.3 For municipalities and heritage authorities

7. Create long-term inventories and funding priorities. Municipalities should assess the condition, use, heritage value and local social function of religious buildings before closure becomes an emergency. Small municipalities need access to pooled expertise and financing mechanisms.

8. Adopt transparent standards for reuse. When a former church is adapted, decisions should involve local communities and address architectural value, memorial significance, remaining religious symbols and the dignity of the space. Reuse can be creative without being deliberately degrading.

9. Distinguish preservation from fossilisation. Not every building can or should remain in liturgical use. The aim should be to preserve significant heritage and memory while allowing sustainable new functions where congregational use is no longer viable.

9.4 For churches and civil society

10. Improve public data and accountability. Religious organisations should publish accessible information on membership, participation, buildings, social services and incidents where methodology permits. Better data make both alarmist and dismissive narratives easier to test.

11. Separate pastoral claims from empirical claims. Churches and civil-society organisations can make moral arguments openly, but demographic, criminological and social claims should be sourced and methodologically qualified. This distinction strengthens credibility.

12. Build local partnerships beyond confessional boundaries. Heritage, charity and community-security projects are strongest when they include municipalities, other faiths, non-religious associations, historians, schools and local residents rather than presenting preservation as an exclusively confessional concern.

9.5 For research and technology policy

13. Study institutional participation, not only religious identity. Future research should compare the social effects of active participation in parishes, clubs, sports organisations, unions, neighbourhood groups and other associations. This is more informative than treating “religious” and “secular” as sufficient explanatory categories.

14. Test causal claims explicitly. Research on loneliness, trust, volunteering, family formation and polarisation should control for age, income, education, urbanisation, migration, health and digital behaviour before attributing effects to religious change.

15. Keep the person visible in digital governance. AI, welfare, health and administrative systems should include human oversight, contestability and clear responsibility where automated categorisation can materially affect rights or access to services. The underlying principle is that data representation must never become a substitute for the person.

10. Closing Reflections

Europe can become less religious and remain committed to human rights. Nothing in this report establishes that secularisation necessarily produces moral or political decline. The narrower conclusion is that societies should understand the historical and institutional sources from which their public ethics developed, especially when those institutions are changing rapidly.

Historical Christianity is one of those sources. It shaped institutions of charity and education, the architecture of towns and villages, the calendar, forms of association and, through a long and sometimes conflictual development, the European language of personhood, conscience and dignity.

Recognising that record is not the same as idealising it. Churches also resisted freedoms later incorporated into the modern rights tradition, and Europe's legal order owes much to non-religious philosophical and political developments.

The most defensible objective is therefore neither restoration nor erasure. A plural society can protect equal rights, maintain a secular state, recognise historical Christian heritage and allow religious communities a visible public presence. Those principles reinforce one another when applied consistently.

Böckenförde's warning remains useful because it identifies the structural problem without prescribing a single religious solution: freedom depends on forms of self-restraint and social responsibility that the state cannot simply command into existence. A mature public policy should therefore pay attention to the independent institutions in which those habits are learned and practised.

Kant provides a complementary limit in secular terms. Whatever changes in religious affiliation, institutions or technology, human being cannot be treated merely as a means. That principle offers a stable point of convergence between different European moral traditions and a practical test for policy: institutions should serve persons, not reduce persons to functions of institutions.

The quiet erosion described in the title is therefore not a claim that Europe is disappearing. It is a warning against losing the capacity to name, understand and critically transmit the cultural and moral resources that made a plural and rights-based order possible. Preservation in this sense is not nostalgia. It is an exercise in institutional memory.

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About the Author / About MEcoVEA



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

YEVGENY BORT

Journalist · Analyst · Chair of MEcoVEA e.V.

Yevgeny Bort is a journalist, analyst and chair of MEcoVEA e.V. His work focuses on European identity, freedom of religion or belief, historical memory, human dignity and the role of civil society in international and humanitarian cooperation. Within MEcoVEA he is also involved in educational and humanitarian initiatives linking practical assistance with cultural dialogue and institutional responsibility.

ABOUT MECOVEA E.V.

MEcoVEA e.V. — Multicultural and Ecological Vision for Eurasia and Africa e.V. - is a Germany-registered non-profit association and a Berlin-based platform for humanitarian, educational, cultural and ecological cooperation between Europe, Eurasia and Africa. Its work connects civil society, education, international dialogue, humanitarian assistance, human rights, sustainable development and cultural exchange.

The organisation describes its approach in terms of practical partnership, transparency and measurable local impact. Its projects include cooperation with municipalities, schools, medical institutions, civil-society organisations and expert networks. This analytical report forms part of MEcoVEA's work on human dignity, cultural dialogue and the responsibility of civil society.

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NOTES

Space for observations, questions, references and follow-up.

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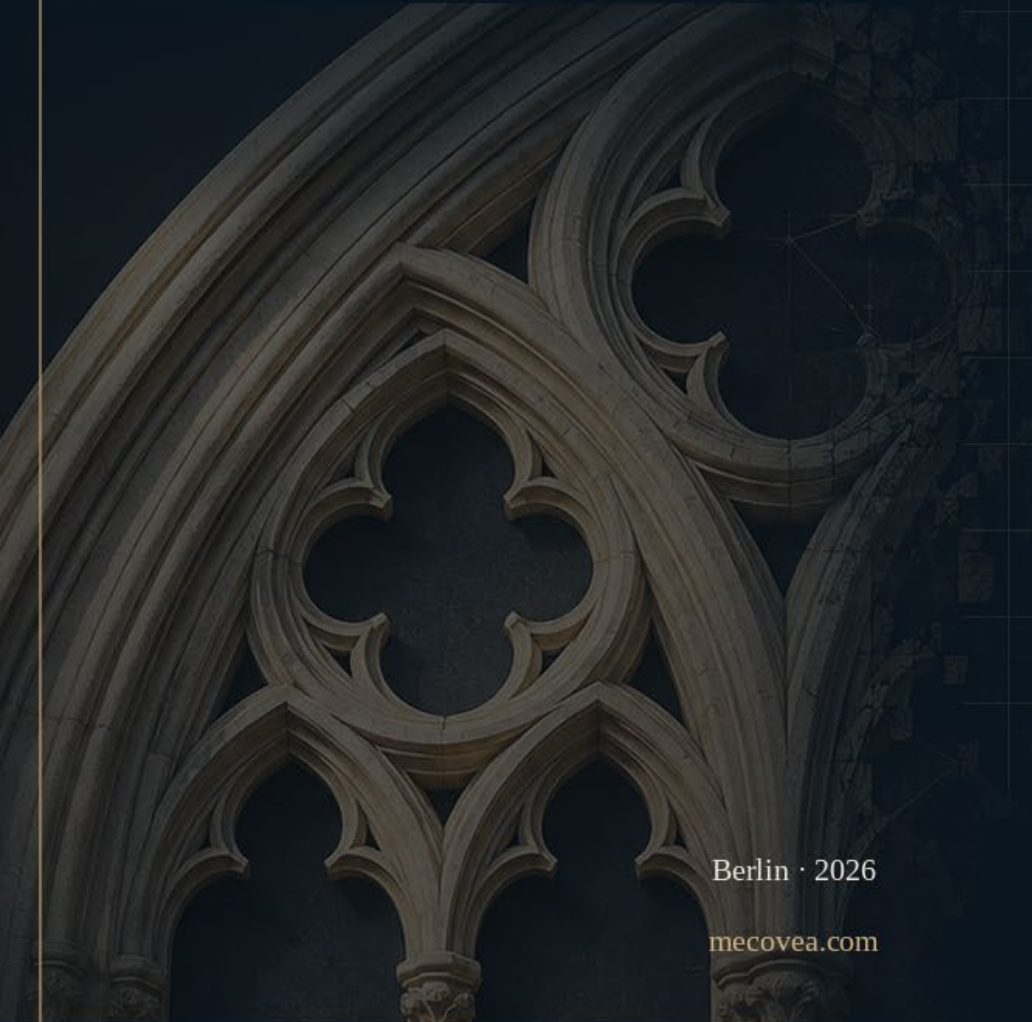
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