



How European Governments Engage with New Religious Communities

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European states are grappling with challenges of religious pluralism. With more than 20 million Muslims now part of the European Union and “alternative religions” on the rise, controversies accompany such growing diversity. Many governments respond by intervening in religious affairs, seeking to balance religious freedom with social cohesion.

Religious governance is the process by which faith-based communities cooperate with state authorities in the regulation of religious matters. In this process, states select faith leaders to represent religious communities and serve as interlocutors. My research finds that the selection criteria of faith-based representatives can differ between national and local levels. National governments tend to pick interlocutors on the basis of ideal models of religious governance, while local governments often deal with religious diversity more pragmatically.

What Governments Try to Do

Governments are tempted to get involved in the regulation of religious beliefs and practices and promote liberalizing changes in religious communities. Despite proclamations of neutrality, government efforts in Europe are suspicious of non-mainstream groups like the Church of Scientology and Jehovah’s Witnesses as well as wary about well-established religions new to the country like Islam.

- In dealings with new religious movements, officials try to discriminate between “extremist sects” and “genuine religions.” Government authorities view many new movements as problematic, accusing them of practicing mind control and deceptive evangelization. This approach shifts understandings of the so-called cults from the realm of theology to the province of psychology.
- In dealings with immigrant religions like Islam, officials try to bolster moderate practices to ward off fundamentalist temptations. In the wake of rising anxieties about Islamic threats, European governments stress the incorporation of faith communities into national civic structures. As they push for integration, authorities create symbolic boundaries pitting liberal, modern Muslims versus conservative, orthodox Islamic groups.

Varied National Models of Religious Governance

Although basic legal principles have converged at the European level, national forms of cooperation between governments and minority groups remain based on diverse ideal standards. As previous scholars have argued, the diversity of approaches taken by European countries stems from the interplay of several factors:

- Particular traditions of citizenship – how political membership can be acquired and lost.
- Various migration policies – distinct regulations about family reunification, labor, migration, and asylum.
- Distinct church-state arrangements – such as French-style secularism, the Anglican establishment in the United Kingdom and the Dutch polder system.

These normative models of religious governance shape the selection of religious partners at the national level. For instance, studies show that the Turkish Islamist movement, *Millî Görüş* was recognized as an acceptable interlocutor by public authorities in the Netherlands, while it was labeled as an extremist group by the media and prevented from official access by politicians in Germany. Similarly, in dealings with new religious

movements, France has legislated and created agencies to combat cults in line with its deep-rooted tradition of strict secularism. Meanwhile, several new religions were granted official recognition and privileges in Denmark.

Pragmatic Forms of Local Engagement

Interestingly, local governments looking for reliable religious interlocutors can take approaches at odds with selection criteria at work in national religious governance. Like national authorities, local officials look for similar kinds of constructive religious representatives, favoring theologically moderate faith leaders with appropriate language and administrative skills, access to their communities, and willingness to help fend off security threats. Even so, local authorities take a more pragmatic and utilitarian approach when dealing with controversial religious actors.

In France, for instance, the revivalist Islamic organization called *Union des Organisations Islamiques de France* is widely portrayed as fundamentalist in the media and public discussions. But local politicians in several French cities, including Bordeaux and Nantes, have recognized and built cooperative relations with the group. Similarly, in Britain, leaders of the East London mosque, connected with the Bangladeshi Islamist movement *Jamaat-e-islami*, have built connections with local government officials. Their partnerships with local health and education services contrast with reluctant political engagements at the national level.

Why Local and National Efforts Diverge and How They Could Converge

Local efforts are more pragmatic in dealing with religious intermediaries for a number of reasons. It is easier for authorities to accurately assess the grassroots connections of faith-leaders at the local level, where their efficiency as service providers may well matter more than ideological stances. Religious leaders seen as threatening or nationally notorious can become less so when involved in face-to-face interactions with local authorities. Building local ties through participatory and interfaith efforts can deescalate high-stakes national controversies. As a result, the logic of inclusion and exclusion underpinning the selection of religious representatives can diverge between local and national levels. In order to deal more effectively with the ever-shifting boundaries between threatening extremism and religious variety, governments should try to balance normative principles of religious governance with social realities.

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Read more in Margot Dazey, *The Politics of Islamic Organisations in France* (Forthcoming).