

THE CONFESSIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE POPULATION OF POST-WAR EUROPE BETWEEN SECULARIZATION AND RESTRUCTURING

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Abstract: The geographical interest in the confessional structure of the population is extremely complex and the analysis of the recent evolutions proved the existence of a big variety of the religious situation in Europe. The percentage of the great European Christian cults has generally decreased at the national level (with few exceptions). The process of laicization of the European society deserves special attention. All these confirm the conclusions stated by Delumeau (1993) on the contradictory tendencies manifested under the present religious circumstances.

Keywords: Geography of the Religions, laicization, Religious Practices, dynamics, restructuring, Europe

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The approached topic is extremely complex, marked by ambiguities and liable to various subjective assessments. The geographical interest in the confessional structure of the population manifests itself through:

- its explanatory importance in deciphering certain territorial structures induced by geodemographic and economic evolutions;
- its role in shaping regional solidarities with long-term effects from a strategic perspective;
- explaining certain territorial disparities from the social-economic, political and cultural perspective;
- the internal dynamics of the territorial structures induced by the forms of organization specific to religious systems;
- decoding certain conflicting situations of an often complex genesis (ethno-religious and/or linguistic, Ungureanu and Muntele, 2006).

The present paper is not an exhaustive one, playing only a prospective part because:

- the collected information – extremely diverse, contradictory and marked by ambiguities – was systematized and homogenized, starting from the necessity of building an as coherent as possible data basis;
- we have also taken into account a series of surveys made by different international organisms in respect of religious practices and their dynamics;
- the mapping of the information was made in the spirit of simplicity and clarity in order to induce an objective interpretation.

The starting point is represented by the synopsis taken over from D. A. Barret (World Christian Encyclopedia, 2001, figure 1). It points out the existence of three distinct periods in the history of the evolution of the religious currents in

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Europe: the first one lasts *until about the year 1 000*, when the last polytheist religions gradually disappear under the impulse of the expansion of Christianity and later of Islam; the second one is characteristic to *the period between the years 1 000 and 1 700*, when the distribution of the religious currents in Europe gets simpler – it’s true, at the cost of some successive schisms; the third one is specific to *the modern period*, after 1 700 when, either certain religious systems spread (especially the South and East Asian ones, by means of both immigrants and proselytism) or a lot of new currents appear – many of them having a metaphysical or syncretic nature that marks a moment of clear separation between sacred and profane – a period of “unbewitching the world”, of secularization of social life.

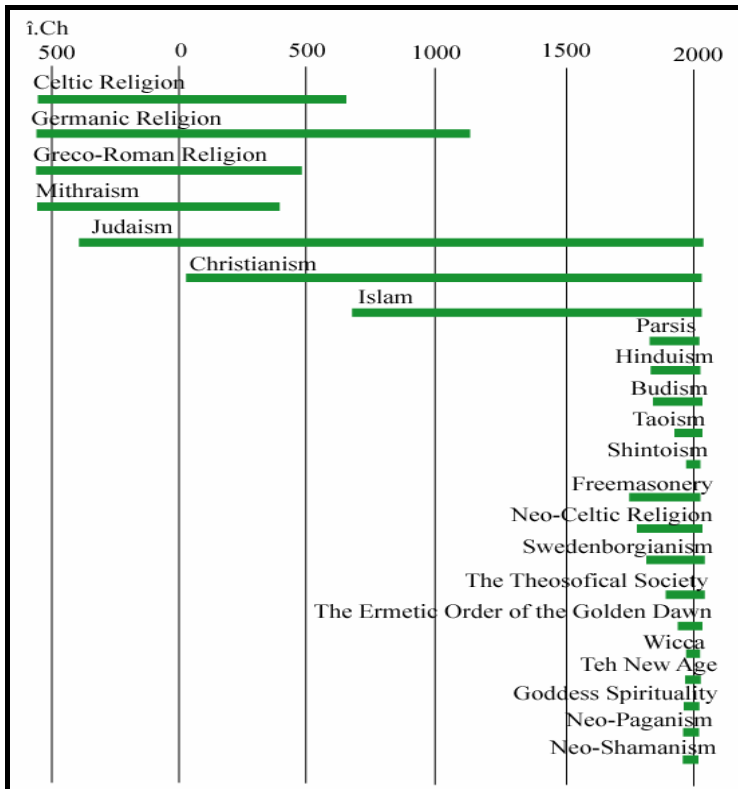


Fig. 1 Dynamics of the religions systems in Europe
(adaptation after D. A. Barret, 2001)

PRESENT DISTRIBUTION AND DYNAMICS OF THE MAIN RELIGIOUS CULTS AND CURRENTS IN EUROPE IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD

The percentage of the great European Christian cults has generally decreased at the national level (with few exceptions). On the contrary, the new religions are spreading. We can separate the following tendencies:

- *Catholicism* resists better in marginal areas (Ireland) or in regions dominated by Uniatism (Ukraine);
- *Protestantism* (in its classical forms) keeps its vitality in Northern states but loses ground in Germany and Great Britain;
- *Orthodoxism* has been eroded by serious recent demographic evolutions but gains ground in the South-West of the continent by means of emigration.

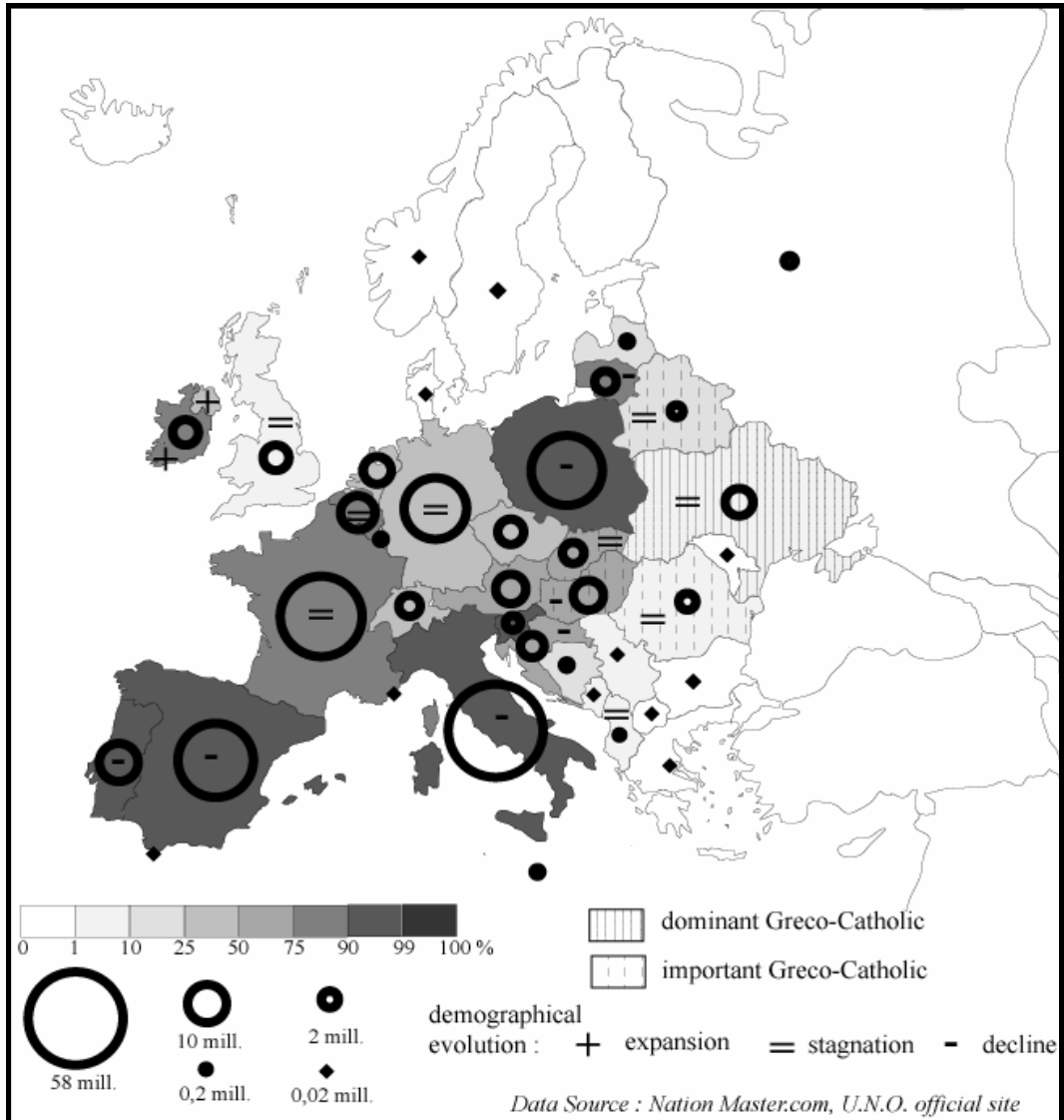


Fig. 2 Percentage of Catholic population in 2005

- *Islam* passes through an ample expansion in the areas of old implantation (the Balkans, the Russian Federation) but especially in the Western part of the continent;

- *Neo-Protestant cults* experience a general, differentiated and extremely regionalized expansion so that one can distinguish areas of predilection for each of them. However, *the Pentecostal cult* stands out as a possible vector of a massive restructuring of the ratios of forces between the great European Christian cults. It is interesting to study the way in which a hard core of the diffusion of these cults has been shaped at the European level, outside the area of origin of some of them. We can call it "Carpathian", being centred upon Romania and Ukraine. The waves of diffusion, outlined in figure 6, are purely orientative but indicate the existence of some preferences for certain cultural areas.

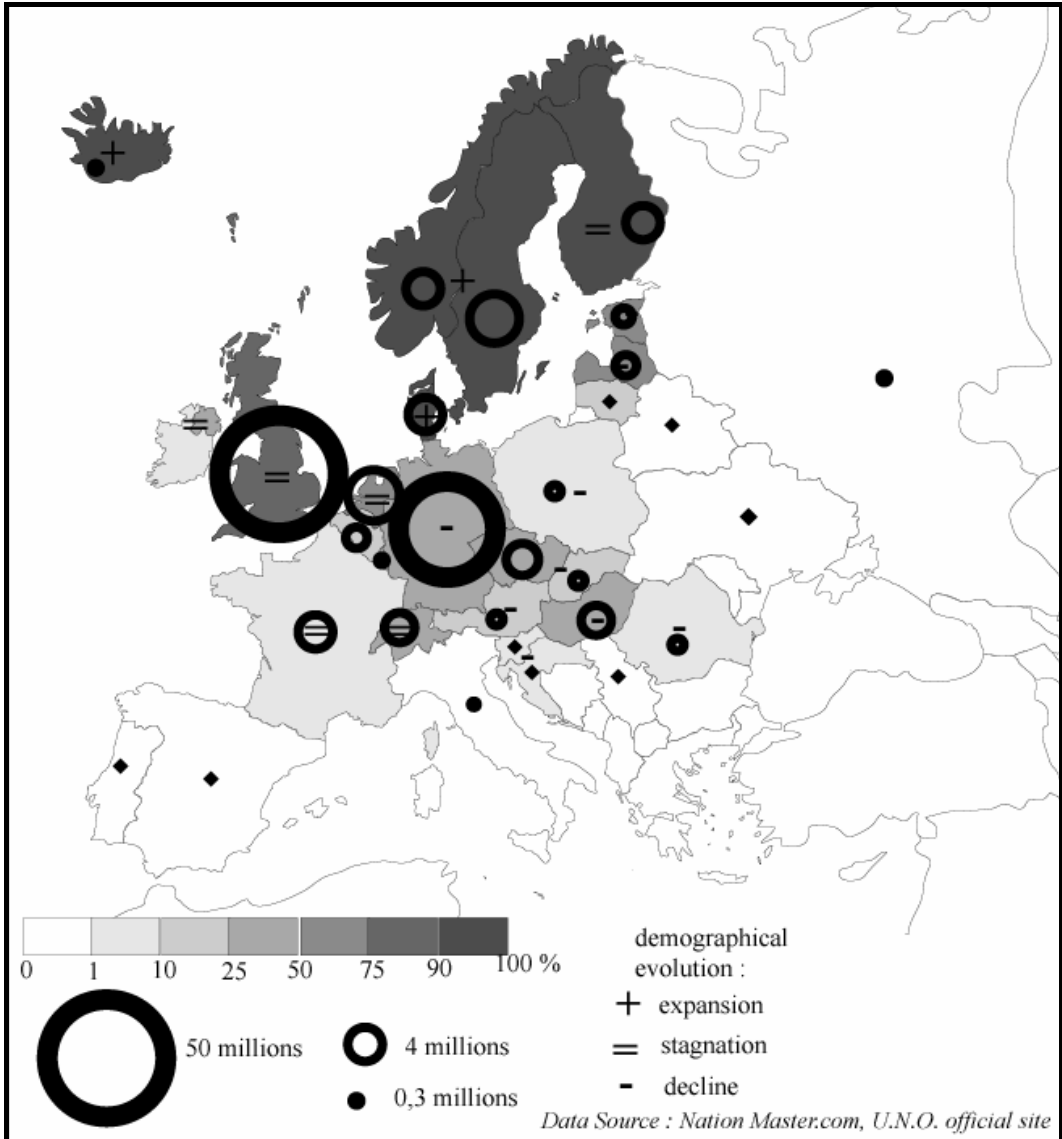


Fig. 3 Percentage of Protestant population in 2005

We can add to these evolutions the more and more important insertion (by means of globalization) of some extra European religions but also the emergence of some new religious movements through syncretism or appealing to the necessity of establishing an agreement between science and spirituality.

All these tendencies will deeply change the picture of the spatial distribution of the traditional cults and religions on the continent, having very spectacular consequences from the perspective of the political relations between the European countries, but especially within the European Union, where immigration stands out as a necessity in order to keep social and economic balance.

Of course, we can wonder to what extent we will be able to identify whole peoples by their belonging to a certain system of religious values in the context

in which the roller of globalization acts in a double way: homogenization of life style (especially from the material point of view) and diversification of the ways in which the individual relates to spirituality. This takes place in the context of a process of globalization of the great religious movements, thoroughly depicted by certain full-sized papers (Smart, 2000).

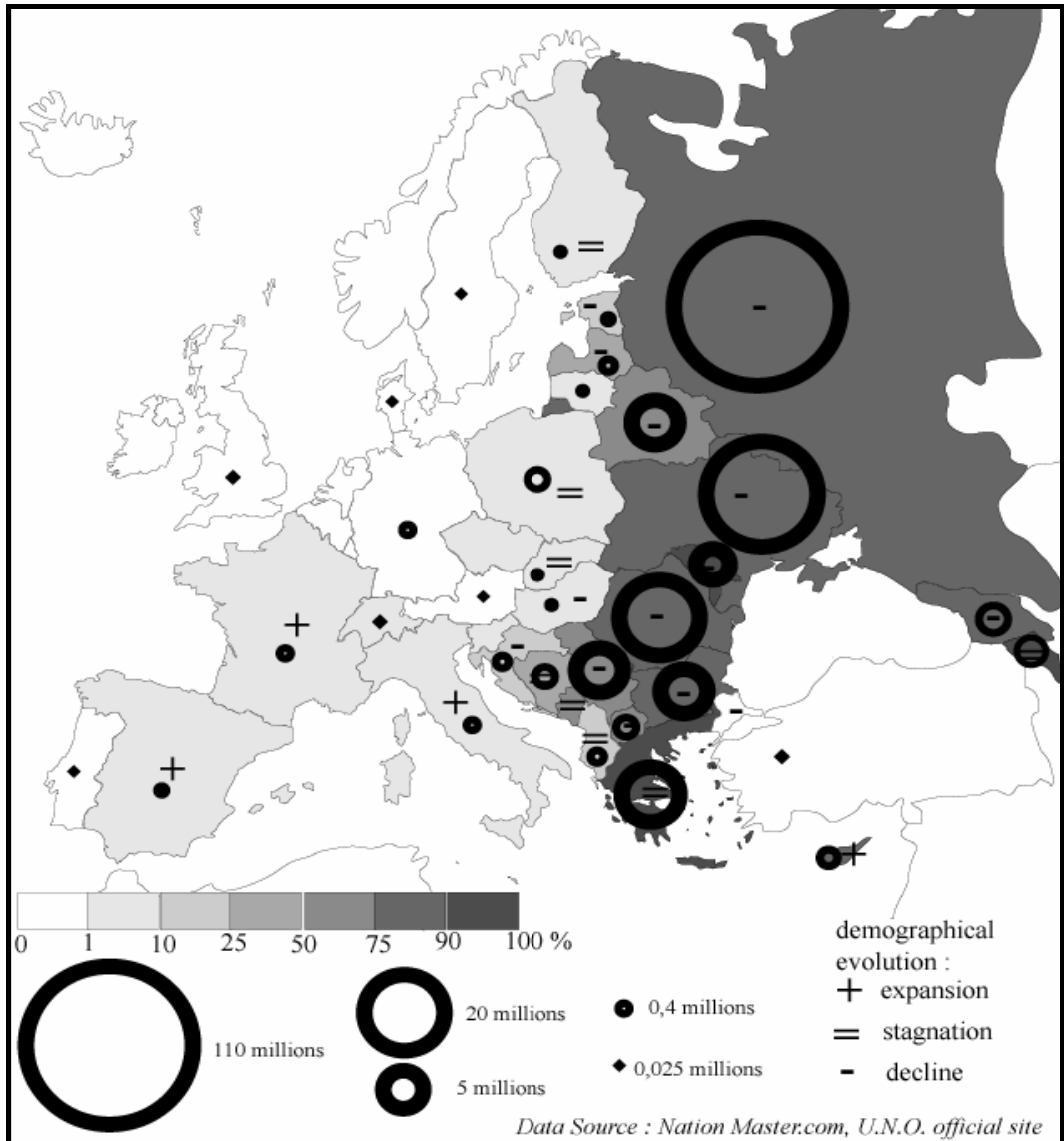


Fig. 4 Percentage of Orthodox population in 2005

The process of laicization of the European society deserves special attention (figure 7). Being closely connected to the modernization process, it has taken place in a non-homogeneous way, depending on the advance of the urban culture-their main vector, but also on the impact of certain ideologies of philosophical origin, many times unnatural and politically controlled, as it was

the case by excellence of the communist ideology whose role was in certain situations rather ambiguous (including in the particular case of Romania).

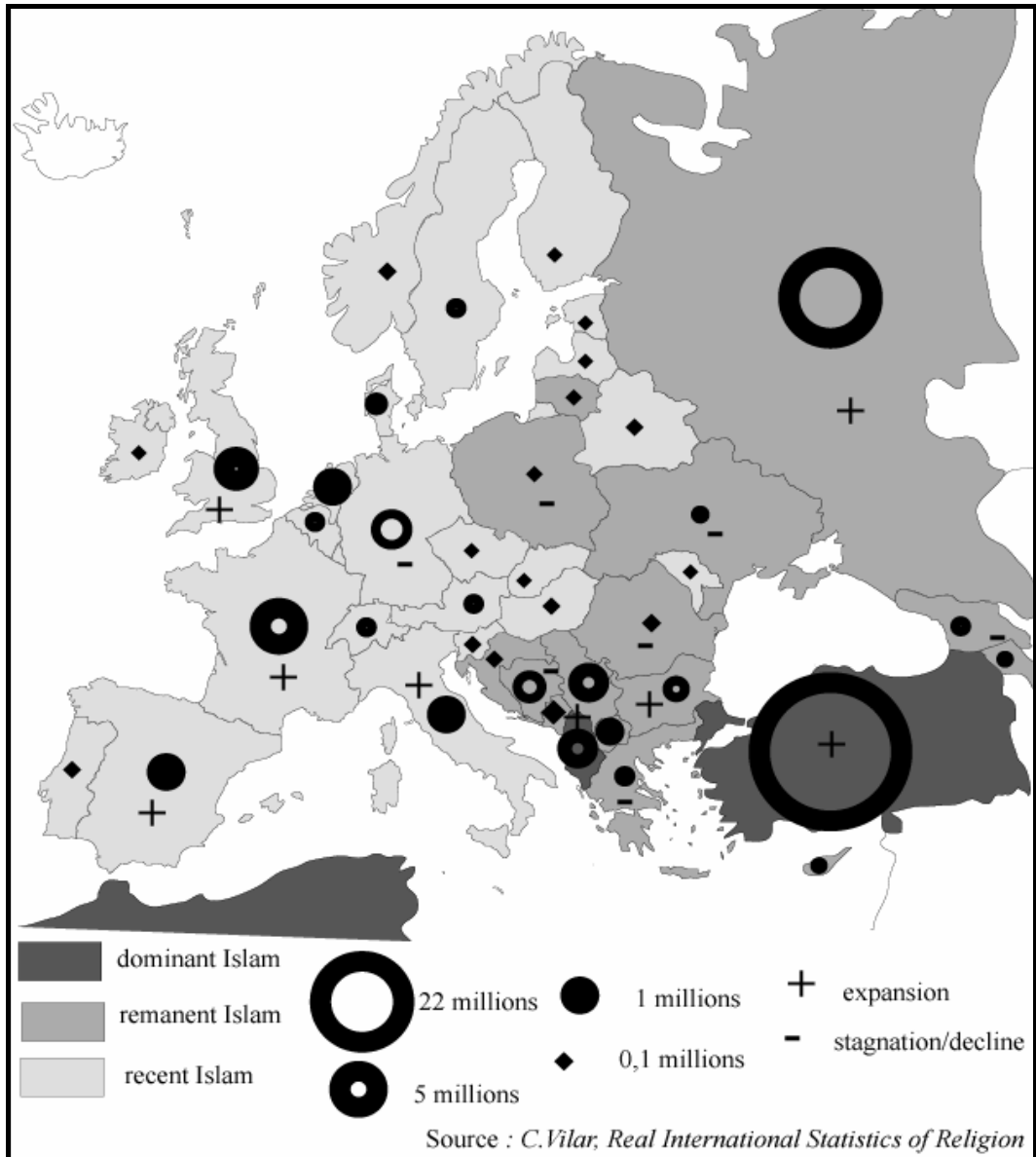


Fig. 5 Percentage of Muslim population in 2006

Agnosticism, perceived as a current that doesn't accept the possibility of knowing transcendent reality (Vilar, 2005), allows us to see the role of the French Revolution in 1789 but also the resistance of some "hard" cores of the great traditional Christian cults (Poland or Italy for Catholicism, Greek or Romania for Orthodoxism). The weak penetration of the Muslim area (Albania, Turkey) is remarkable, being the expression of the (im)possible reconciliation between Islam and Christianity (?).

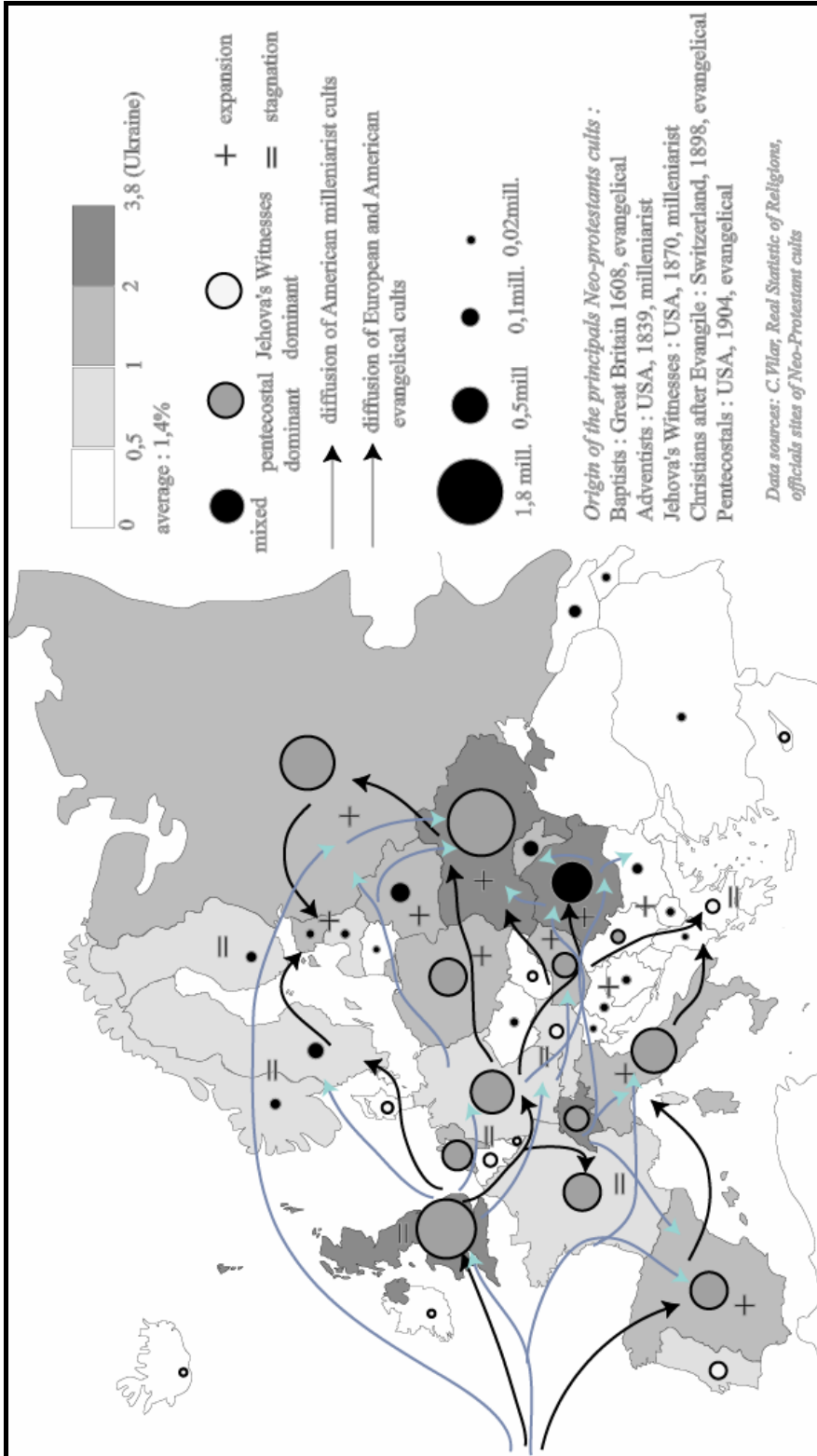


Fig. 6 Spatial distribution and dynamics of Neo-Protestant cults

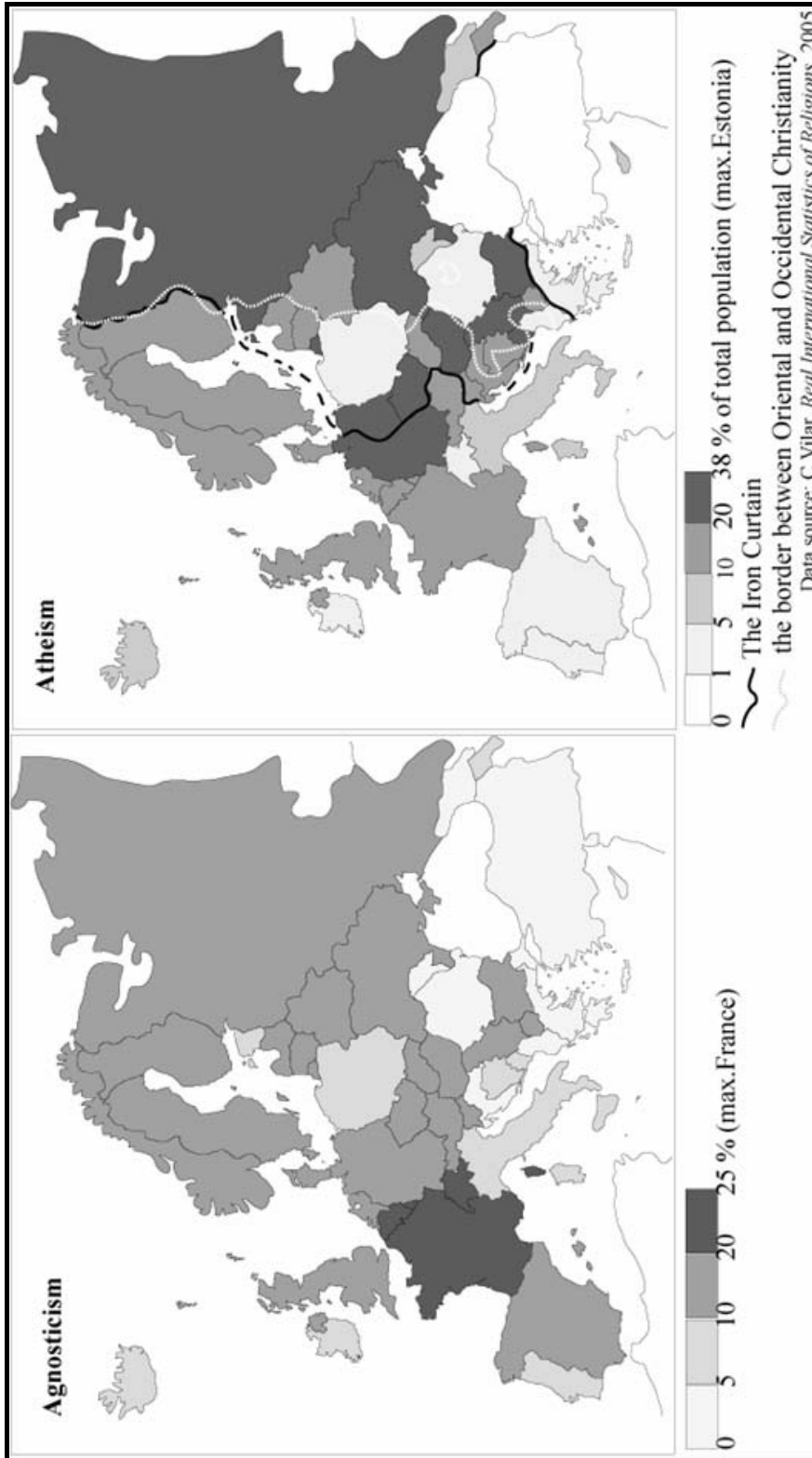


Fig. 7 Distribution of Agnostics and Atheists in Europe

Atheism, in its classical sense of refusing Divinity (Vilar, 2005), has a somehow similar distribution, the role of the communist ideology being ambiguous - undoubted in certain countries (such as the Russian Federation, Bulgaria) but vague in others (Germany, for example). It is remarkable the refuse of atheism both in meridional and in certain more conservative states (from the point of view of the religious practice) in the East (Romania, Poland).

TYOLOGY OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN POST-WAR EUROPE

In order to be able to synthesize the evolutions noticed at the European level, the Romanian case is pretty conclusive, even though we deal with a certain delay of some processes here. The available (fragmentary but illustrative) data prove the incidence of the secularizing ideologies (at a low level compared to other communist countries) by means either of the increased number of people who declare themselves as atheists or of the refuge of many persons who have been deceived by the decline of religious practices (or rather by the impossibility of connecting them to modern reality) in Neo-Protestant communities (harder to be controlled by the regime before 1989). The collapse of communism introduced new evolutions (which had taken place earlier in most European countries) through the growth of the number of advocates of Neo-Protestant cults and of those who declare themselves as atheists or having no religion. In the Romanian case it is remarkable the high rate of identification with a religious cult (a situation that was reconfirmed by the censuses in 1992 and 2002) in opposition to the evolutions in most European countries.

Using the collected information we have made a typology of the evolution of religious practices, taking as main variable the surveys integrated in full-sized papers (Catholic Encyclopedia, World Christian Encyclopedia etc.) that confirm the „fight” between the vectors of laicization (modern, scientist, agnostic movements) and those of preserving the religious spirit, through evangelization, expansion of some exotic cults, appearance of Neo-Paganism or, more frequently, through generalization of Deism as a simple form of manifestation of the belief in Divinity.

It is interesting how the states are classified in five groups that can also be interpreted from the angle of some cultural affinities or behavioural particularities. Thus, the first type groups states in which the dominant cult either has the status of state religion (Greece) or has a great importance in defining the respective peoples as against their neighbours (Poland, Ireland or predominantly Muslim countries). The second type (somehow similar in respect of evolution trends) comprises some countries with a predominantly Orthodox population, in which Church traditionally enjoys high confidence (Serbia, Romania) or some Catholic states in which the participation to religious practices is linked to the presence of some important centers of this cult (Italy) or to the festivism of certain rituals (Spain). Central-European and Northern states have an intermediary status between the last two types, illustrating best the influence of modern ideologies: on the one hand there are France, Great Britain and the Benelux countries – lying in the van of laicization and multiculturalism; on the other hand there are the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus and Bulgaria, where communism deeply impregnated spirits, generating however a trend of orienting towards Neo-Paganism combined with Deism (respect for religious norms without taking part in specific practices, regarding religion only as a cultural fact) (figure 8). Some studies point out an undoubted link between the serious demographic situation in these countries (especially after 1990) and the decline of religious practices (Blum, Darskii, 1999).

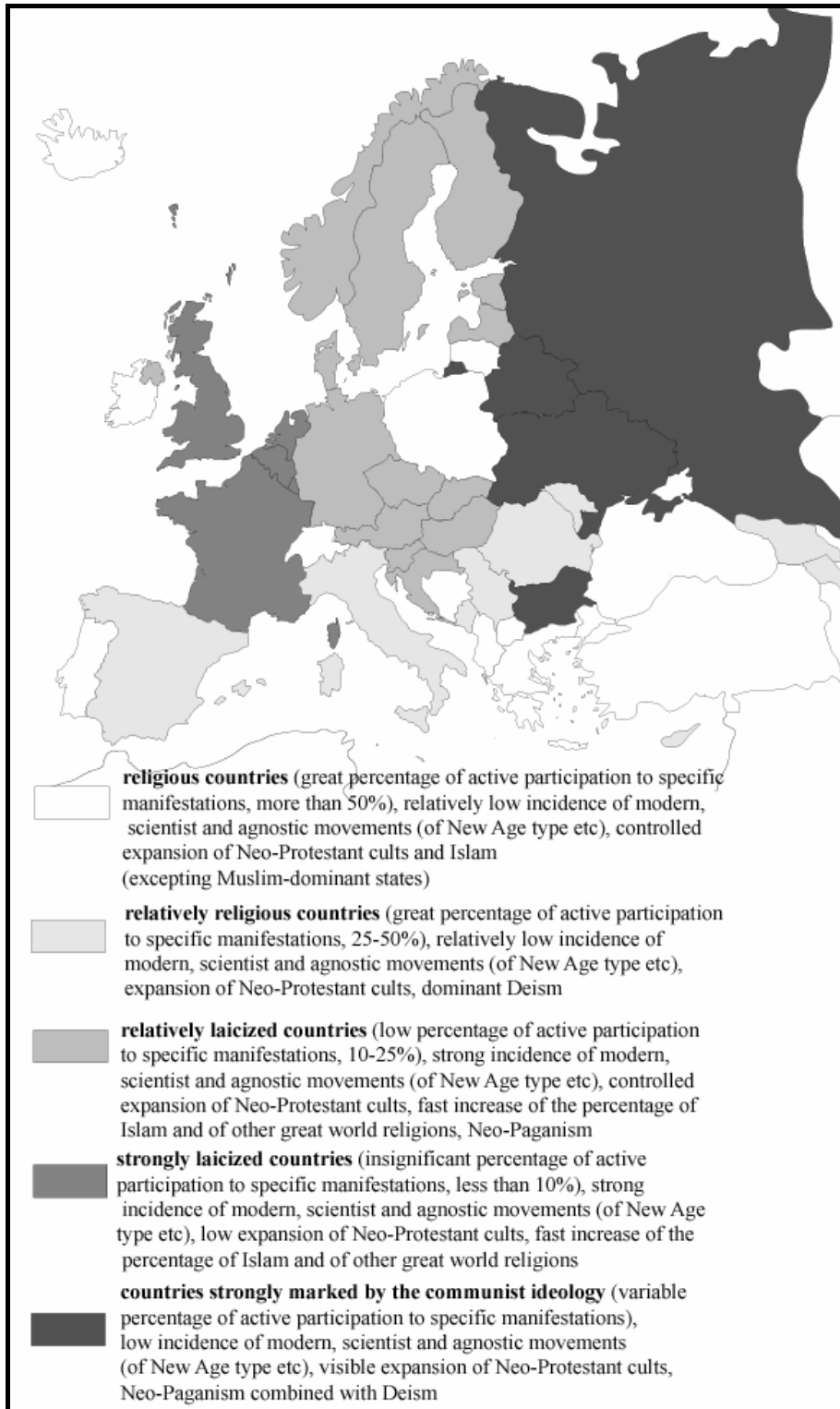


Fig. 8 Typology of the evolution of religious practices in post-war in Europe

All these confirm the conclusions stated by Delumeau (1993) on the contradictory tendencies manifested under the present religious circumstances: “on the one hand, the nebula of diffuse beliefs, the tendency towards syncretism, the attraction for esotericism....on the other hand the return to aggressive integrism...” (page 6). The noticed trends prove the continuity of the ongoing changes with the movement of social emancipation started about two centuries ago. The direction of these changes inspired important studies (Rémond, 2001) that converge towards the idea that Europe on the whole has engaged itself in a general direction which is not known well enough but which can be detected in the succession of some changes in the relations between religion and society.

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