

Secular governance and religious diversity in Western, Central, Eastern Europe, and Latin America: Comparative challenges and emerging models

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ABSTRACT: Europe and Latin America navigate religious pluralism through contrasting secular frameworks shaped by distinct historical trajectories. This analysis examines how Latin American secular states manage religious diversity differently from Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. Despite secularization theories predicting religious decline, both regions show religions maintaining public influence while states remain formally neutral. Migration, technology, and evangelical movements create region-specific challenges: Latin America faces growth in evangelical Christianity and indigenous revitalization; Europe confronts Islamic integration and Christian nationalism. The emerging framework of *pluri-confessional secularization*, in which secular states accommodate diverse religious traditions without privileging any denomination while religious institutions adapt to democratic frameworks, offers analytical tools beyond traditional secularization paradigms. This study provides strategies for managing religious diversity in interconnected societies.

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1. Introduction

Freedom of religion, as guaranteed in international human rights instruments, emerged from Europe's sectarian conflicts as a legal principle designed to protect both belief and non-belief within plural political orders (Díez – Picazo 2021). While this right enjoys robust constitutional and judicial protection (Olmedo Bustos v. Chile 2001; Leyla Şahin v. Turkey 2005), its institutional realization has become increasingly complex under conditions of intensified religious diversity, public religious visibility, and the erosion of classical assumptions about religious privatization.

Across Europe and Latin America, secular democratic states are formally committed to religious freedom and state neutrality, yet they operate with markedly different historical legacies of church-state relations, nation-building, and religious pluralization. Western Europe developed secular governance through gradual institutional negotiation, shaped by Christian dominance and later transformed by migration-driven diversity. Central and Eastern Europe confronts a distinct configuration in which post-communist democratization coincided with religious revival and the politicization of confessional identity (Beaumont et al. 2020). Latin America assumed another trajectory, combining formally secular constitutionalism with historically entrenched Catholic privilege, rapid evangelical expansion, and the growing public recognition of indigenous spiritual traditions.

These divergent trajectories have generated distinct challenges for secular governance. In Central and Eastern Europe, secular institutions have increasingly been drawn into conflicts where religious nationalism, democratic consolidation, and minority protection intersect. In Western Europe, secular governance has focused on recalibrating inherited legal frameworks in response to visible religious diversity. In Latin America, secular arrangements have evolved through layered institutional adjustments accommodating new religious actors and, in some cases, epistemological pluralism. Together, these contexts reveal that the management of religious diversity is not governed by a single model of secularism, but by regionally patterned configurations shaped by historically situated struggles over religious authority and public legitimacy.

This article examines how secular democratic states across Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America institutionally manage religious diversity, and how regional patterns of secular governance structure these responses. It asks: What are the primary challenges faced by secular states in

these regions in governing religious diversity, and how do historically embedded configurations of secular governance shape institutional strategies of accommodation, regulation, and contestation?

The article's contribution lies in advancing a comparative, regionally grounded analysis of secular governance that moves beyond national case studies and normative typologies. By placing Latin American experiences in systematic dialogue with Western and Central and Eastern European contexts, the study identifies patterned configurations of secular governance and introduces the concept of pluri-confessional secularization to capture the adaptive transformation of secular regulatory frameworks under conditions of intensified religious and spiritual plurality. Rather than treating secularism as a fixed institutional model or presupposing religious decline, the article approaches secular governance as a historically contingent and evolving field of political regulation.

2. Theoretical foundations and methodology

2.1. Theoretical frameworks: secularism, autonomy, and intersectionality

State neutrality and democratic principles shape religious governance models across Europe and Latin America. This research employs three theoretical frameworks:

Political Secularism: Modood and Sealy (2022) identify how states manage religious pluralism through political structures, institutional dynamics, and social integration methods. Rather than imposing rigid separation, secular states often incorporate religious traditions to promote social cohesion while maintaining democratic principles (Finke 2013). European states negotiate Islamic values within historically Christian frameworks, while Latin American states recognize indigenous spiritualities alongside Christian denominations. These patterns reveal secularism as a contextual negotiation between religious and democratic authority.

Twin Tolerations Theory: Stepan's (2000) framework establishes that democracy requires reciprocal autonomy, religious institutions cannot control state policy, while states must not suppress legitimate religious activities. This balance faces strain when European democracies accommodate Muslim minorities within systems designed for Christian churches, or when Latin American states balance Catholic privilege with evangelical growth and indigenous rights. Effective governance requires negotiating mutually acceptable spheres of influence rather than imposing rigid separation.

Intersectionality: Applying intersectional analysis (Crenshaw 1991; Bilge 2013) reveals how religious governance compounds multiple marginalizations. Religion intersects with ethnicity, migration status, and socioeconomic position (d'Urso – Bonilla 2023). In Europe, Muslim women face discrimination that combines religious, gender, and racial dimensions (Cesari 2025). In Latin America, indigenous peoples experience marginalization at the intersection of religious, ethnic, and colonial categories.

These frameworks illuminate pluri-confessional secularization synergistically: political secularism assists in the institutional analysis, twin tolerations offer democratic guidelines, and intersectionality reveals how formal arrangements produce lived inequalities.

2.2. Methodology: Comparing Secular Democracies

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design oriented toward identifying patterned configurations of secular governance rather than establishing deterministic causal relationships. It draws on Mill's method of difference, as reformulated in comparative political research through the most similar systems design (Mill 1843; Gerring 2007). This guides the structured comparison of democratic contexts that share core constitutional commitments to secularism and religious freedom while differing in their historical trajectories and contemporary modes of religious accommodation. In this sense, Mill's method functions not as a strict causal-testing device but as a heuristic framework that informs the case delimitation and comparative focus.

The comparison is conducted at a regional level, examining Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America as macro-contexts that exhibit internally diverse yet structurally comparable challenges. These regions are selected because they combine formal secular constitutionalism with contrasting legacies of church–state relations, processes of democratization, and patterns of religious pluralization. Western Europe represents contexts of long-term secular institutional development shaped by negotiated settlements between church and state and by migration-driven diversification. Central and Eastern Europe reflect post-communist democracies in which religious revival is intersected with nation-building and democratic consolidation. Latin America is characterized by formally secular states historically marked by Catholic hegemony and, more recently, by evangelical expansion and the growing public recognition of indigenous spiritual traditions.

Empirical material is drawn from a focused selection of countries within each region to illustrate how shared analytical dimensions operate under different historical and institutional conditions. Western European cases include

France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Italy. Central and Eastern European cases encompass Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, and Serbia. Latin American cases include Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. These cases are not treated as discrete units for paired causal comparison but as analytically situated sites through which broader regional configurations of secular governance are traced.

The selection of Central and Eastern European cases is analytically driven by their shared experience of post-socialist transformation and religious reinstitutionalization. These contexts converge around four characteristics: the transition from officially atheist regimes to democratic orders in which religion reemerged as a public actor; the symbolic fusion of historically dominant Christian confessions with national identity narratives; the politicization of religion through defensive secularism or religious nationalism; and exposure to European Union normative frameworks, generating tensions between domestic religious policies and supranational legal standards. This convergence allows for a focused examination of how similar post-communist conditions yield divergent secular governance arrangements.

Other European contexts frequently cited in debates on secularism and religious diversity, including the Czech Republic, Albania, and the Baltic states, are not examined as focal cases. Their exclusion reflects methodological delimitation rather than analytical irrelevance. The Czech Republic represents an outlier of advanced societal secularization characterized by comparatively low levels of public religious contestation (Lužný – Navrátilová 2001). Albania's constitutional multiconfessionalism follows a distinct historical trajectory shaped by Ottoman legacies and post-atheist reconstruction (Clayer 2003). The Baltic states combine post-Soviet religious regulation with pronounced ethno-national dynamics that introduce central variables beyond the scope of this analysis (Karpov et al. 2012). Including these cases would have expanded the comparative universe in ways that would dilute analytical coherence and depth.

The empirical analysis applies thematic content analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework of familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. The textual corpus consists of constitutional texts adopted between 1990 and 2024, jurisprudence from national constitutional courts as well as the European Court of Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and policy documents including concordats, religious freedom legislation, and official regulatory frameworks. These materials are examined to identify the recurring institutional logic, regulatory practices, and discursive constructions shaping secular governance across regions.

Six analytical themes structure the empirical sections of the article: concordat arrangements and inherited privileges; migration-driven diversifica-

tion; religious political mobilization; public space contestation; the accommodation of non-Western worldviews; and digital transformation challenges. These themes correspond to Sections 4.1 through 4.6 and provide a common analytical grid through which regional patterns are traced. The regions are compared across six constant analytical dimensions (legal legacies, modes of pluralization, political mobilization, public space regulation, epistemological accommodation, and digital transformation), while historical trajectories and governance responses constitute the primary axes of variation. The typology of secular governance models is theoretically anchored in Kuru's (2007; 2009) distinction between assertive and passive secularism and in the multiple secularities framework developed by Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt (2013), which emphasizes how societies articulate the religious-secular distinction in relation to specific reference problems.

From these frameworks, the analysis identifies four operative models of secular governance: assertive secularism, characterized by strict institutional separation of religion and state; cooperative neutrality, marked by regulated partnership arrangements; transitional secularism, reflecting the recalibration of inherited privileges under conditions of pluralization; and defensive secularism, where religious nationalism contests liberal secular principles.

Romania and Serbia are analytically positioned between cooperative neutrality and defensive secularism, reflecting the political salience of Orthodox revival since 1989, exemplified by extensive state-supported church construction and symbolic claims linking Orthodoxy to national identity. Bolivia is treated as an extension of cooperative neutrality toward epistemological pluralism through the constitutional recognition of indigenous worldviews (Constitute Project 2009 Art. 4), while Peru illustrates the coexistence of inherited Catholic privileges and constitutional protection of indigenous communities (Republic of Peru 1993 Art. 50).

Religious accommodation patterns are thus analyzed through six analytical constructs corresponding to the article's structure: concordat regimes and inherited privileges examined through political secularism frameworks (Modood – Sealy 2022); migration-driven diversification analyzed via the theory of twin tolerations (Stepan 2000); religious political mobilization; public space contestation and symbolic governance; the accommodation of non-Western worldviews examined through intersectional analysis (Crenshaw 1991; Bilge 2013); and emerging challenges linked to digital religious mobilization. Across these constructs, constitutional documents, judicial decisions, policy frameworks, and scholarly analyses provide the empirical basis for tracing how divergent historical trajectories generate distinct but comparable configurations of secular governance.

3. Secular models in context: concepts and historical evolution

3.1. From secularization to laicity: clarifying key concepts

This analysis differentiates three related concepts. Secular denotes an epistemic category, involving modern spheres operating independently from religious authority. Secularization describes sociological processes through which religion's social significance transforms, including functional differentiation, the decline of practice, and the privatization of beliefs. Secularism constitutes a political doctrine that advocates particular religion-state arrangements.

This study examines secular governance, the institutional and policy frameworks through which states manage religious pluralism, rather than secularism as ideology or secularization as process, though all three intersect empirically. As Wohlrab-Sahr (2012) argue, understanding “multiple secularities” requires attention to the cultural meanings underlying distinctions between religious and non-religious domains in specific contexts.

Secularization thus represents a social evolutionary path through which religion evolves to compete against multiple fields in society rather than retain its dominant position (Casanova 2009). Public space thus experiences religious pluralism, where various traditions function simultaneously. Laicity governance promotes complete religious separation between state institutions and politics (Setton – Blancarte 2010), functioning to develop an unbiased public sector upholding religious tolerance while excluding faith-based input in state decision-making.

In practice, secularization and laicity intersect. Finke (1990) explains how U.S. Constitutional laicism established a religious marketplace that has stimulated competition among religious groups. Religious institutions often consider secularization as threatening national identity (Alcalá 2018), while public life features religious discourse campaigning for traditional morality and national principles (Boas et al. 2019). This tension shapes the divergent institutional responses examined below.

3.2. Historical divergence in Europe and Latin America

Secularism took divergent paths in Latin America and Europe because historical experiences combined with contemporary political issues. The Catholic Church has historically wielded both political and religious authority across Latin Amer-

ica since colonization. Despite secular constitutions, practical church-state separation remained limited, with the Church maintaining significant influence over politics, education, healthcare, and social welfare in countries like Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia (Hernández 2009). This relationship evolved through agreements including concordats and religious conflicts such as the Reform War and the Cristero War, which defined the region's approach to church-state interactions (Alcalá 2018; Jaksic 2011).

European secularization followed different timelines: France's 1905 *laïcité* legislation established strict separation after revolutionary anti-clericalism (Weisse 2016), while Germany maintained state-church financial partnerships for social service delivery (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2008). Post-war ecumenical movements and the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) reshaped interdenominational relations without eliminating religion from political activity (Greenberg 2019).

These historical trajectories have crystallized into four contemporary challenges that test the adaptability of secular frameworks in both regions: the legacy of concordats, migration-driven religious diversity, the political mobilization of religious groups, and contested religious visibility in public spaces. Thus, while Latin America's secularism evolved within a framework of contested Catholic dominance, Europe's trajectory reflects the gradual legal formalization of religious plurality within state structures.

4. Comparative challenges in secular governance

4.1. Concordats and religious institutions: legacy and legal ambiguity

European states face a paradox, with religious institutions that vary across the continent's different regions. In CEE, Poland's 1993 concordat with the Vatican, negotiated during early democratization, granted the Catholic Church extensive privileges in education, military chaplaincy, and tax collection, creating a *confessional state in secular clothing* (Ramet 2014; Grzymała – Busse 2015; Krukowski 2014). Hungary followed similar patterns under Viktor Orbán's government, increasingly blurring the lines between state policy and Christian identity, while Slovakia's concordat negotiations have stalled precisely because of concerns about democratic compatibility (Vékony – Račius 2023).

Western European states inherited different but equally complex concordat arrangements. Germany's concordat-legitimized church tax system effectively transforms the state into a tax collector for Christianity, while Muslim com-

munities must rely entirely on voluntary contributions (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2008). Italy's 1984 concordat revisions marked a strategic retreat, shifting from establishing Catholicism as the state religion to preserving its role as cultural patrimony. Spain's 1979 concordat survived the entire transition to democracy precisely because its treaty status insulated it from legislative reform (Cesari 2025; Díez-Picazo 2021).

How can secular states sign privileged agreements while maintaining neutrality? As international treaties, concordats occupy a peculiar position, above ordinary legislation yet below constitutional principles. European concordats reveal a pattern of selective secularization; states maintain strict secular policies for minority religions while preserving historical Catholic privileges (Andersen – Jensen 2019; Ragazzi 2009).

Latin American experiences offer instructive contrasts. Despite facing similar Catholic dominance, countries like Mexico and Brazil developed different strategies. Mexico's radical anticlerical history, including the Cristero War, ultimately produced pragmatic accommodation where the Church maintains social influence without formal political power (Alcalá 2018). Brazil demonstrates another path: maintaining formal separation while allowing extensive Church involvement in social services, creating *relative laicities* that adapt to local contexts rather than imposing rigid separation (Esquivel 2008).

The persistence of concordats reveals how path dependence shapes contemporary religious governance. Historical agreements create institutional legacies that constrain present policy options. Yet Latin America's longer experience suggests concordats need not be immutable. Chile's gradual reform of its concordat system, involving moving from Catholic monopoly toward recognition of religious plurality, provides a model for incremental change that European states might consider (López 2016). The key insight is that formal agreements can evolve through reinterpretation rather than confrontation, allowing states to maintain stability while expanding religious freedom. These institutional legacies profoundly shape how states respond to contemporary challenges, particularly the religious diversity migration creates.

4.2 Migration, religious diversity, and national identity

Europe's response to migration-driven religious diversity reveals regional differences, illuminating challenges. Central and Eastern European governments frame religious diversity as a threat to national identity. Hungary's construction of border fences and Prime Minister Orbán's 2018 declaration that "We don't see these people as Muslim refugees. We see them as Muslim invaders" epitomizes this defensive posture (Barry 2019). Poland presents an even starker contrast:

while welcoming over 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees following Russia's 2022 invasion, Polish authorities maintain strict opposition to migrants from predominantly Muslim regions. During the 2021 Belarus border crisis, Poland deployed military forces to prevent Middle Eastern asylum seekers from entering, despite international humanitarian concerns (Zdanowicz 2023; Friedman 2024).

Slovakia follows similar patterns, with former Prime Minister Robert Fico's 2016 declaration that *Islam has no place in Slovakia*, reflecting widespread regional attitudes (Lorenz – Anders 2021). These policies stem from understanding national identity as intrinsically tied to Christian heritage, where religious diversity represents an existential threat rather than social enrichment (Helbling – Kalkum 2017; Balsam 2023).

Western European states, while generally more accepting, struggle with different aspects of religious diversity. Between 2010 and 2017, Muslim populations grew significantly, from 4.5% to approximately 7.7% (Pew Research Center 2017). France exemplifies Europe's most rigorous approach through its sequential restrictions: the 2004 Islamic headscarf ban in schools, the 2010 full-face covering prohibition, and the 2021 anti-separatism law, which intensified the oversight of religious organizations. These measures produced tangible socio-economic consequences: The *Trajectoires et Origines 2* study revealed that only 26% of hijab-wearing women living with partners and children were participating in the labor market, compared to 48% of those without hijabs (Beauchemin et al. 2016).

Latin America approaches religious diversity through migration differently via two mechanisms. First, rural-to-urban migration creates religious markets where evangelical churches compete with Catholicism by offering migrants spiritual and material support. Brazil's trajectory illustrates this dynamic: Catholic affiliation declined from 92% (1970) to 65% (2010), coinciding with exponential Pentecostal growth, transforming the religious landscape without the collapse of religious influence in politics (Pew Research Center 2013; 2014). This pattern, evident in tri-border cities such as Foz do Iguazu, facilitates integration rather than division (Queiroz 2019). Second, emigration creates transnational religious networks. Brazilian evangelicals in the US and Europe maintain connections, generating circular flows of religious ideas and resources, strengthening social cohesion (Sheringham 2013). The contrast with Europe becomes stark in Chile: Santería, introduced by Afro-Caribbean migrants, has become the country's fastest-growing religion without generating the existential anxieties characterizing European responses to Islam, absent the civilizational narratives that frame the Muslim presence as incompatible with European identity (Orellana 2024).

The difference lies not in the religions themselves but in how states frame religious diversity: as enrichment or invasion, and as normal market competition or civilizational conflict? The Brazilian case demonstrates how initial Cath-

olic institutional resistance to evangelical growth in the 1970s and 1980s gave way to pragmatic coexistence by the 2000s, with both traditions competing through democratic mobilization rather than seeking state suppression. These trajectories suggest that states can move beyond defensive postures through sustained institutional adaptation. As religious communities establish themselves through migration, they inevitably seek a political voice and representation.

4.3. Religion in the political arena

Religious groups' political mobilization presents European democracies with challenges shaped by their distinct histories (Grzymała – Busse 2015). In CEE, after decades of suppressing religious political expressions under communism, states now face religious movements that view political engagement as both a right and a duty (Stan – Turcescu 2007). Poland's Radio Maryja and associated movements created a *Catholic-nationalist media empire* that has significantly influenced electoral outcomes (Wysocka 2008). Hungary's Fidesz party has masterfully instrumentalized Christian identity, transforming religious symbols into political weapons while claiming to defend *Christian Europe* against secularist threats (Vékony 2023). In Romania, the Orthodox Church influences debates on social policies and family issues (Stănescu 2022). In Serbia, the Orthodox Church aligns with nationalist narratives, shaping identity politics (Radić 2025). A Pew Research Center (2017) survey substantiates these patterns: majorities in Poland (64%), Hungary (57%), and Romania (74%) view their religion as central to national identity.

Western European states are witnessing varied religious and political mobilization, reflecting path-dependent institutional arrangements. Germany's churches maintain influence through social service provision partnerships (Becker 2018), while the UK's moderate secularism permits advocacy within formal separation (Nistor 2019). France's model of strict *laïcité* faces challenges from increasingly assertive religious communities, prompting the 2021 anti-separatism law to limit religious political influence (Yeung 2021). Southern Europe presents distinct patterns shaped by transitions from authoritarian rule: Italy's concordat enables Catholic influence through formal and cultural channels (Ascoli – Artoli 2019), while Spain navigates post-Franco democratization, transforming from church-state fusion to contemporary debates over religious symbols (Astor – Mayrl 2022).

In Latin America, Brazil's Evangelical Parliamentary Front expanded from 73 seats in 2014 to 191 in 2022, representing 32% of lawmakers (Alves 2022). This growth occurred through pragmatic coalition-building and constituent mobilization rather than civilizational defense rhetoric. During the 2022 elections,

evangelical churches operated as political machines, campaigning from pulpits and distributing materials through religious networks (Barros – Tavares 2024).

When Argentina debated abortion legalization in 2018, evangelical and Catholic lawmakers formed effective partnerships despite the historical tensions, demonstrating that religious political action need not be sectarian (Gudiño 2022). Costa Rica's 2018 presidential election saw support for evangelical candidate Fabricio Alvarado surge from 2% to 24.8% after campaigning against same-sex marriage, yet this occurred through democratic mobilization rather than authoritarian appeals (Pignataro – Treminio 2019).

The comparative evidence suggests that Latin American religious politics operates through different logics than CEE patterns. While Hungarian Fidesz and Polish PiS frame religious politics as civilizational defense, Brazilian evangelical parties pursue concrete material interests through coalition bargaining. This difference reflects institutional context: Latin American religious markets emerged through domestic competition, whereas CEE religious nationalism developed in response to perceived external pressures from the EU and migration. Guatemala's 2023 election, where evangelical networks supported progressive candidate Bernardo Arévalo against establishment parties, demonstrates that religious political engagement can transcend conservative-progressive binaries precisely because competitive religious markets produce pragmatic political actors rather than ideologically rigid blocs (OpenDemocracy 2023).

The economic dimensions of religious political power also differ significantly. Brazilian evangelical churches leveraged political influence for concrete material benefits: tax exemptions, debt forgiveness totaling \$190 million, and protective legislation (Página 12 2022). This transactional approach, while raising questions about corruption, operates within normal democratic interest group politics. In contrast, European religious politics often focuses on symbolic issues like crosses in public spaces or Christian preambles in constitutions, offering emotional satisfaction but limited material benefit to religious communities. This political mobilization extends beyond electoral politics into struggles over religious visibility in public spaces.

4.4. Public spaces and religious symbols: comparative visibility conflicts

Religious symbol management varies across Europe and Latin America. In Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Poland and Hungary, Christian symbols in government buildings, schools, and public squares are defended as cultural heritage integral to national identity. Poland maintains crucifixes in courtrooms and schools, with the Constitutional Tribunal framing them as consistent with cul-

tural traditions, while Hungary's Fundamental Law explicitly affirms the Christian heritage of the nation regarding religious expression (Vékony 2023). When EU institutions question these practices, responses frame resistance as defending sovereignty. Sites like Częstochowa in Poland illustrate why such resistance resonates: pilgrimage centers function as spaces where national and religious identity fuse, making EU criticism of religious symbols appear as attacks on national existence itself (Liro et al. 2022; Topidi 2019).

In Slovakia, debates over religious symbols in public schools echo such dynamics, with courts often ruling in favor of maintaining Christian symbols as part of national heritage (Vladár 2021). Likewise, in Romania, religious processions and icons are visibly integrated into public ceremonies, reflecting a model where religion and nationalism are intertwined within the public sphere (Stan – Turcescu 2021).

Romania and Serbia present distinctive patterns of religious symbol proliferation, illustrating the post-communist fusion between national and Orthodox identity. Romania has witnessed extensive Orthodox church construction since 1989, culminating in the People's Salvation Cathedral in Bucharest, at 127 meters, the world's tallest Orthodox church. Partially consecrated in 2018, coinciding with the centenary of the modern Romanian state, and fully consecrated in 2025, the cathedral has cost approximately €270 million, the majority coming from public funds. The Romanian Orthodox Church calls it a "symbol of national identity" and a post-communist "spiritual rebirth" (Associated Press 2025). As anthropologist Giuseppe Tateo (2020) documents, no fewer than 34 Orthodox cathedrals have been constructed in the past three decades in Romania. These cases demonstrate how the politics of religious symbols in CEE are interwoven with ethno-national assertions in ways distinct from heritage debates in Western Europe.

Western European approaches create *multiple secularities* (Wohlrab-Sahr – Burchardt 2013). France's assertive *laïcité* generates recurring conflicts: from removing crosses from public monuments to restricting mothers wearing headscarves on school trips (Agence France-Presse 2018; Teeple 2015). Germany's *open neutrality*, affirmed in the 2021 ruling permitting teachers' headscarves, explicitly rejects the French model (H'Madoun 2020). The UK's moderate secularism enables greater religious visibility, even overseeing Sharia-compliant banking through financial authorities (Cattelan 2023; Modood 2019). Spain exemplifies transitional secularization where religious symbols increasingly represent cultural heritage rather than living faith, a *culturalized religion* that maintains presence while diluting meaning (Astor – Mayrl 2022).

Latin America offers a radically different model. Despite constitutional secularism, religious symbolism saturates public life without generating European-style conflicts because states approach religious visibility pragmatically rather

than ideologically. Mexico hosts millions at the Basilica of Guadalupe, reflecting lived religion in an enchanted modernity where modernity transforms rather than eliminates religion (Da Costa et al. 2021). Brazil's debates focus on practical funding for religious monuments rather than principled opposition to visibility. Argentina negotiates crucifix placement through democratic dialogue rather than civilizational conflict (Vives 2018).

The key difference lies in how societies understand relationships between religious visibility and state neutrality. European states often operate with zero-sum logic: religious symbols either dominate or face exclusion. Latin America suggests a third option where religious symbols can be simultaneously sacred for believers and cultural for others, though this model comes with its own challenges around authentic religious freedom versus cultural reduction. Yet beneath these visible conflicts lies a deeper challenge: accommodating worldviews that reject Western secular categories entirely.

4.5. Indigenous spiritualities and postcolonial secularism in Latin America

While Western, Central, and Eastern Europe lack significant indigenous populations, the challenges that indigenous spiritualities pose to secular governance illuminate the structural tensions inherent in modern secular frameworks. The core issue is not simply the accommodation of additional religious groups, but the encounter between secular legal categories and worldviews that do not conform to Western distinctions between religion, culture, politics, and knowledge. Indigenous ontologies often integrate spirituality with territorial belonging, communal authority, and cosmological order, thereby challenging regulatory systems built upon the separation of belief from social and political life (De la Cadena 2010).

Across Latin America, constitutional reforms and judicial developments increasingly recognize indigenous spiritual traditions as collective systems of meaning and practice rather than as privatized beliefs. Bolivia's 2009 Constitution explicitly acknowledges indigenous cosmovisions within a plurinational framework, expanding secular governance toward epistemological pluralism (Constitute Project 2009 Art. 4). Colombia's Constitutional Court has recognized rivers and territories as rights-bearing entities grounded in indigenous spiritual worldviews, incorporating relational ontologies into secular legal reasoning (Cano 2018). In Guatemala, the state recognition of Maya spiritual authorities in family law reflects the emergence of legally plural arrangements in which indigenous religious practices acquire formal institutional standing (Sieder 2020). Mexico's post-San Andrés frameworks, Peru's protection of sacred sites, Ecu-

dor's incorporation of *Buen Vivir*, and Bolivia's inclusion of *yatis* in state ceremonies further illustrate how Latin American states have begun to negotiate the limits of secular categories when confronted with indigenous spiritual claims (Díaz 2019; Caria – Domínguez 2016; Schilling-Vacaflor – Flemmer 2020; De la Cadena 2020).

These developments demonstrate that indigenous spiritualities challenge not only the neutrality of the secular state but also the epistemological foundations through which religion becomes legally intelligible. Indigenous claims frequently enter public institutions framed as cultural heritage, environmental protection, or collective rights rather than as matters of religious freedom, revealing the selective recognition produced by secular governance regimes (De la Cadena 2015). This translation process exposes how secular law privileges certain forms of religion shaped by Christian and European historical experience while marginalizing relational, territorial, and cosmological forms of spirituality.

From a comparative perspective, the analytical value of indigenous cases does not lie in their social equivalence to European minority religions, which emerge from fundamentally different historical and political conditions. Rather, they highlight the shared epistemological tensions that arise when secular governance encounters worldviews that resist the privatization of religion and the functional separation of spiritual authority from communal life (Tym 2024). In this sense, indigenous experiences illuminate the structural limits of secular regulatory frameworks without implying comparable social positions or policy prescriptions.

Processes of pluri-confessional secularization are visible here in an expanded form. Secular governance increasingly extends beyond the management of denominational plurality toward experimental accommodations of epistemological diversity. Indigenous claims compel states to renegotiate the conceptual boundaries of religion itself, prompting institutional responses that blur inherited distinctions between religion, culture, law, and politics. Rather than adding another confessional layer to plural societies, indigenous spiritual revitalization reveals a deeper transformation in which secular governance confronts ontological pluralism as a political and legal problem.

At the same time, these dynamics unfold within complex religious fields marked by internal contestation. The rapid expansion of evangelical movements within indigenous communities has generated conflicts over spiritual authority and social organization, as traditional practices are sometimes delegitimized as incompatible with Christian doctrine (Garrard – Burnett 2016). Latin American states have generally addressed these tensions through pluralistic legal frameworks that seek to protect competing religious claims without privileging a single religious actor, further illustrating the adaptive character of secular governance under conditions of intensified diversity.

Indigenous movements' refusal to separate spiritual, political, and ecological domains thus points to alternative configurations of governance in which relationships with land, non-human entities, and ancestral authority occupy a central place (De la Cadena 2015). Within the framework of pluri-confessional secularization, these cases foreground a dimension of secular governance in which the challenge is not only to accommodate multiple religions, but to recalibrate the epistemic terms through which religion is recognized, regulated, and governed in democratic legal orders.

4.6. Digital religion: transnational challenges beyond borders

The digital transformation presents European states with religious governance challenges that legal frameworks cannot adequately address. Traditional tools of concordats, registration requirements, and public space regulations become largely irrelevant when religious authority flows through Instagram stories and TikTok videos. This challenge affects all European states but manifests differently across regions.

In Central and Eastern Europe, digital platforms have amplified existing religious-political movements. Poland's *Radio Maryja* expanded the Church's influence exponentially through digital channels, spreading ultraconservative Catholic-nationalist messaging to Polish diaspora communities across Europe despite regulatory attempts in multiple jurisdictions (Wysocka 2008). Beyond radio, *Radio Maryja TV* and YouTube channels broadcast political sermons and religious commentary, reinforcing conservative positions on abortion and LGBTQ+ issues while mobilizing voters during elections (Płachecka 2022). In Hungary, religious content creators such as *777blog.hu* and YouTube channels linked to Fidesz-aligned Catholic groups reach audiences far beyond national borders with content that blends faith and nationalist narratives, actively shaping debates about migration and family policy (Andok et al. 2023).

In Slovakia, digital platforms have become central to the efforts of Marian pilgrimage sites to promote religious-national identity during political campaigns (Bielicki 2019). Meanwhile, foreign religious influencers, such as American evangelical YouTube preachers, shape domestic discourse in Romania by promoting conservative social values, despite having no physical presence (Stan – Turcescu 2021).

Western European states face different digital challenges. While CEE governments leverage digital platforms to amplify religious nationalism, Western states confront the opposite problem: regulating religious content they perceive as threatening secular values. France's 2021 anti-separatism law represents Europe's first major attempt to apply *laïcité* principles to online spaces,

monitoring religious content to combat separatism, yet complicating distinctions between legitimate religious expression and extremism (Yeung 2021; Robert – Kaya 2023). Germany and the UK face analogous dilemmas, struggling to regulate online hate speech that claims religious justification while protecting legitimate religious expression without clear criteria for distinguishing between them.

Latin America's earlier encounter with digital religion provides both warnings and models. Brazil's digital pastors, with millions of followers but no institutional affiliation, created a religious authority entirely outside traditional structures. Pastor André Valadão's 6 million Instagram followers make him more influential than many denominational leaders, yet when his sermons faced a hate speech investigation, authorities struggled to apply frameworks designed for physical pulpits to virtual platforms (Andrade – Dib 2024).

The Vatican's social media outreach connects millions across Latin America. Pope Francis's 2020 documentary statements expressed an openness to civil union legal protections for same sex couples (comments that emerged from a 2019 interview initially edited by Vatican communications), yet did not represent formal Church teaching, and were subsequently clarified by Vatican officials, nonetheless demonstrating how digital circulation may transform papal remarks into global political discourse instantaneously (Lynch 2018; Winfield – Verza 2020; Vatican Secretariat of State 2020).

Digital spaces also offer opportunities for marginalized religious communities. Mapuche communities in Chile use platforms to preserve sacred traditions while building global support. The #MachiLibertad campaign simultaneously defended imprisoned spiritual leaders and educated worldwide audiences about Mapuche cosmology (Schlosberg – Carruthers 2010; Millaleo 2020). Similarly, European minority religious communities (from British Muslims to Romanian Pentecostals) use digital platforms to maintain their identity and resist assimilationist pressures.

The emergence of religious *influencers*, new authorities operating outside traditional oversight, is the greatest challenge. Unlike institutional religious leaders subject to registration, taxation, and regulation, digital religious entrepreneurs operate in regulatory gray zones between protected religious expression and commercial activity (Campbell – Evolvi 2020). Their hybrid commercial-religious activities, selling courses, merchandise, and *blessings*, defy classification within frameworks designed to operate with clear institutional boundaries.

European attempts at regulation reveal the complexity of applying territorial secular principles to de-territorialized religious expression. The questions multiply: How can France maintain *laïcité* when French citizens receive religious instruction from global sources? How can Germany's church tax system function when believers increasingly follow online rather than institutional authori-

ties? How can Poland defend Catholic national identity when young Poles engage with globalized religious content?

Latin America's struggle offers no easy solutions but suggests that adaptation rather than resistance may be the only viable path. Attempts to strictly control digital religious expression often prove both ineffective and counterproductive. Instead, states might need new categories, thereby acknowledging how digital transformation is fundamentally altering religious authority and community. For European states (whether defending traditional arrangements in the East or managing pluralism in the West), this represents an uncomfortable reality: the digital era has already transformed religious landscapes in ways no border fence, concordat, or *laïcité* law can reverse. Collectively, these challenges, from concordats to cyberspace, reveal the inadequacy of classical secularization theory and demand new paradigms.

5. Pluri-confessional secularization: toward a new governance paradigm

5.1. Secularism beyond decline: redefining the religious presence in democracy

“Pluri-confessional secularization” emerges as an analytical framework for synthesizing three theoretical perspectives. First, Modood and Sealy’s (2022) political secularism emphasizes the pragmatic accommodation of religious diversity within state frameworks. Second, Stepan’s (2000) twin tolerations establish that consolidated democracy requires religious and political institutions to maintain minimum boundaries of mutual freedom of action. Third, the intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991; Bilge 2013) reveals how religious identities interweave with gender, ethnicity, and class in specific power configurations. Unlike French assertive secularism, pluri-confessional secularization does not seek religious exclusion from public spaces. Unlike German cooperative neutrality, it does not presuppose established national churches. Unlike British multiculturalism, it attends specifically to religious dimensions of diversity beyond ethnic cultural categories. The framework proposes five requirements for effective governance: (1) institutional separation without hostility toward religion; (2) the equitable recognition of multiple religious traditions; (3) the protection of individual rights within religious communities; (4) spaces for religious participation in public deliberation; and (5) mechanisms for managing conflicts between religious rights and other fundamental rights.

Classical secularization theory expected religion to fade from public life, but contemporary evidence challenges this linear narrative. Historical secularization, driven by capitalism and technological development, reshaped but did not eliminate religion's interaction with human rights and government systems (Mallimaci 2017). Religious institutions, once politically neutral to preserve their influence (Vallier 1970), now engage directly in political processes. Liberation theology pioneered this shift by linking faith to social justice activism (Levine 2009). While Catholic politics oscillated between collaboration and confrontation, Protestant and Pentecostal churches pursued increasingly direct political engagement (Boas et al. 2019; Freston – Cooper 2024).

This transformation manifests through religious activism that shapes politics and society across Latin America and Europe through three key mechanisms. First, democratic transitions have opened up spaces for religious pluralism, as seen in the rise of Pentecostalism in the Netherlands (Vermeer – Scheepers 2021), Hungary (Lavrič – Flere 2015), and Poland (Vékony 2023), forcing the Catholic Church to compete with other denominations (Hale 2017). Second, religious organizations have become strategic partners in social service provision, filling gaps in Germany (Becker 2018), the UK (Nistor 2019), France (Boudreaux 2006), Italy (Ascoli – Artoli 2019), and Sweden (Nordgren – Richert 2023). Third, they have gained moral authority through peacebuilding efforts in Peru, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Brazil, translating this into political capital (Alcalá 2018).

5.2. Balancing religious legitimacy and democratic authority

The growing involvement of religious institutions across the public domain creates hurdles for maintaining democratic legitimacy. While democratic legitimacy derives from electoral mandates, religious organizations base their legitimacy on divine command, sometimes leading to tensions in rational policy discussions (Gullco 2016). This tension becomes particularly acute when religious actors claim authority over legislative matters in which democratic deliberation requires openness to changing social consensus. Religious participation in civil life must find its equilibrium by upholding democratic standards.

European states are adopting divergent institutional approaches to handle these difficulties. Germany works with churches through its partnership system, while Sweden authorizes registered faith groups and France regulates public religious expression through its assertive *laïcité* framework. However, Fidesz in Hungary exemplifies the drawbacks of political power using Christian identity as an instrument for political objectives (Vékony 2023).

An alternative model, citizenship-centered secularism, is gaining traction. Inspired by the Universal Declaration for Laicity (2003), this paradigm prior-

itizes freedom of conscience as a fundamental value, the independence of institutional bodies from religious directives in policy formation, and equal rights for all citizens belonging to different religious groups.

Such an arrangement would support Latin American freedom of religion equality while adapting to European religious diversity (Roberts 2023; Esquivel 2008). However, implementation challenges persist. Kolenc (2018) critiques European secularism, suggesting that strict government control over religious expression risks undermining pluralism, particularly affecting minority communities seeking public recognition.

6. Conclusion: toward inclusive and adaptive secular governance

This comparative analysis has examined religious governance across Western, Central, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, revealing both regionally specific configurations and cross-regional patterns of secular regulation. Rather than proposing unidirectional policy transfer, the analysis identifies structural similarities and divergences that illuminate institutional options available to secular democracies confronting sustained religious pluralization.

For Latin America, the findings indicate that pluri-confessional secularization constitutes not merely a theoretical construct but an emergent governance reality. The region demonstrates how formally secular states have developed adaptive arrangements capable of accommodating rapid religious diversification without abandoning constitutional commitments to neutrality. Brazil's management of evangelical–Catholic competition through democratic channels, Chile's incorporation of Afro-Caribbean religious diversity, and Bolivia's constitutional recognition of indigenous cosmovisions illustrate how secular governance is being recalibrated in practice. At the same time, these cases expose persistent tensions, including the commodification of religion through digital platforms, conflicts between indigenous spiritualities and expanding evangelical movements, and the enduring institutional weight of historical Catholic privileges. Pluri-confessional arrangements thus appear less as settled constitutional endpoints than as ongoing processes of institutional negotiation.

Situated comparatively, the Latin American cases highlight patterns of relevance across European contexts. For Western Europe, the analysis points to four dynamics: religious expansion managed through competitive fields rather than regulatory exclusion; the challenge of extending historical concordat regimes to new religious actors, particularly Muslim communities arriving through migration; growing strain on rigid *laïcité* models under conditions of visible plurality; and digitalization's destabilizing effects on territorially anchored regulatory

frameworks. Latin American trajectories thus function less as transferable solutions than as comparative indicators of emerging governance dilemmas.

The concept of pluri-confessional secularization provides a relevant analytical framework for Central and Eastern Europe, where secular governance remains entangled with post-communist nation-building, religious revival, and contested national identities. Defensive secularism grounded in Christian civilizational narratives risks eroding democratic legitimacy by recasting religious diversity as an existential threat. Comparative evidence suggests that concordat regimes sustain institutional stability when progressively recalibrated to include additional faith communities rather than mobilized as instruments of exclusion.

The accelerating digital transformation of religious life further intensifies these challenges. As authority and mobilization increasingly circulate through digital infrastructures rather than established ecclesiastical channels, secular states confront expanding tensions between protecting religious freedom and the politicization of faith. Perhaps most significantly, the constitutional incorporation of indigenous spiritualities in Latin America highlights that contemporary secular governance increasingly encounters epistemological limits embedded in European-derived models of religion and politics.

Taken together, these findings suggest that effective secular governance in plural societies depends less on rigid institutional formulas than on adaptive frameworks capable of mediating between historical religious establishments, migration-driven diversification, hybrid religious-political mobilizations, and challenges to secular categories posed by non-Western worldviews. For European democracies, the path forward lies neither in inflexible secularism that alienates religious majorities nor in religious nationalism that marginalizes minorities. The model of pluri-confessional secularization advanced here captures a dynamic equilibrium oriented towards protecting freedom of conscience, preserving institutional neutrality, and sustaining a plural public sphere in which diverse religious actors may participate without domination.

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