

Church-state disconnect: Official secularism

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [February 23, 2010](#) issue

Even after a century of Christian expansion worldwide, Europe still matters immensely in the map of the faith. According to the *World Christian Data base*, Europe—including Russia—has 580 million Christian believers, which is more than a quarter of the global total.

Though few of them realize it yet, a great many of these Christians are about to experience a far-reaching change in their legal, political and cultural environment. Europeans who have long been familiar with established churches are soon going to find themselves living with a U.S.-style separation of church and state, enforced by powerful secular-minded courts.

This revolutionary change results from the process of European unification. What was in the 1960s the European Economic Community morphed rapidly into the European Community. Now there is the European Union, with a set of emerging federal institutions, and prominent among these is the European Court of Human Rights, based in Strasbourg, which has the power to judge and condemn the statutes and policies of individual nations. Suddenly, and with remarkably little discussion, Europe has acquired something like an overarching supreme court.

As in the U.S., religious affairs are attracting judicial attention. Last year, the Court of Human Rights heard a complaint by Soile Lautsi, who felt that the display of crucifixes in Italian classrooms violated the secular principles by which she wished to raise her children.

The court agreed in a sweeping ruling that raised fundamental questions about countless aspects of ordinary life. Not only should crucifixes be kept out of classrooms, said the judges, but so should any signs that suggest the school environment “bore the stamp of a particular religion. This could be encouraging for religious pupils, but [it was] disturbing for pupils who practiced other religions or were atheists.”

Religious freedom implies the freedom not to believe in any religion, the court said, and that means the right not to be confronted by “practices and symbols which expressed a belief,” especially when these are associated with the state itself.

The *Lautsi* decision would not surprise Americans, but it is quite explosive in the European context. However secular Europeans seem to be, a majority still takes very seriously the notion of established churches. (France is passionately committed to *laïcité* and strict secularism, but it is in the minority.) In Sweden, for instance, a land which many academics take as a classic model of extreme secularization, governments still do things that would strike American observers as alarmingly theocratic. Although church and state were formally separated in 2000, Sweden’s list of public holidays includes Epiphany, Easter, Ascension, Whitsun/Pentecost, All Saints and Christmas. The very secular Netherlands has a similar list, while Denmark adds Common Prayer Day.

Like many European countries, Sweden still levies a church tax. Though voluntary, it is collected by the public revenue service. Some 70 percent of citizens still pay this levy, which in effect constitutes membership dues in a church that is a symbol of national identity. Across Europe, church taxes represent big money. Germany collects some \$12 billion annually, giving the country’s churches a rock-solid financial foundation.

In other aspects of public life, too, religion is hard to miss. Not long ago, an English court attracted some transatlantic astonishment when it ruled on the troubled issue of who exactly qualified as a Jew. A decision on this matter was essential because England has a system of state-supported religious schools, which gives the government a strong interest in ensuring that denominations enforce their rules consistently and equitably.

On a less charged matter, English schools have no problem in accepting explicitly religious displays such as Nativity plays. (These need not be too sophisticated theologically: recall the film *Love Actually*, in which one little girl in a Christmas pageant plays the First Lobster.)

Europeans, in other words, know little of the separation of church and state. But *Lautsi* means that they might be about to learn. *Lautsi* ruled that people should not be placed in a position in which they would have to use “disproportionate effort and sacrifice” to avoid officially supported religious manifestations. Although the court

did not have the power to enforce its policy directly—for instance, by banning crucifixes in schools—it could order substantial damages, and the threat of litigation would make it difficult for individual states to defend their policies in the long term. The *Lautsi* decision opens the way for a thorough purging of religious labels and institutions from education, from the calendar and from much public symbolism.

Following the controversy over the Danish cartoons of Muhammad a few years ago, European intellectuals began an impassioned debate about the role of religion, with many expressing the sense that the Christian contribution had been severely undervalued. The latest moves toward official secularism promise to keep that discussion very much alive.