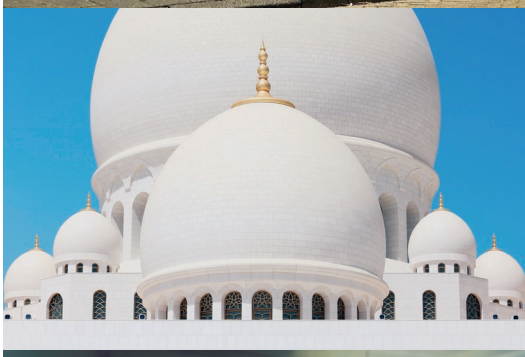
GREASE
Religion, Diversity
and Radicalisation

POLICY BRIEF

The Power of Positive Connections: Western European Approaches to State-Religion Relations and Radicalisation



How can state-religion relations be developed in ways that foster democratic engagement and act against radicalisation without interfering in the legitimate workings of religious institutions and organisations? The need to answer this complex question has gained urgency in the wake of high-profile terrorist attacks in recent years and ensuing policy responses focussed on addressing radicalisation.

Our assessment of counter-radicalisation measures in Belgium, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom reveals that Western European countries have so far failed to produce a satisfactory answer to the above question. Indeed, these measures (which are duplicated to a large extent in other Western countries) have imposed undue restrictions on public religion - above all on Islam - without producing noticeable benefits.

Little suggests that accommodating religious diversity in the public sphere is more or less likely to contain religiously inspired radicalisation. But there is evidence suggesting that restrictive interference in religious institutions can be ineffective and even counterproductive when it comes to addressing radicalisation.

Alternatively, benefits can accrue from states nurturing supportive and positive relations with religion. State-religion partnerships can reduce socio-political alienation and disenfranchisement, which have been identified as contributing factors in radicalisation. Efforts aimed at preventing religiously motivated violent radicalisation should avoid restrictive interference and securitisation and instead focus on promoting democratic engagement and political participation of religious groups.

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Governance of religious diversity in Western Europe

In the four countries examined, efforts to tackle religiously inspired radicalisation have resulted in undue restrictions being imposed on public religion, above all on Islam. Belgium, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom are all countries in which state-religion connections are a feature, and all have sought to develop institutional relations with their Muslim minority populations. In recent years there has been a trend in all four countries towards measures that are more restrictive of public religion, a trend which particularly affects Islam and Muslims because of concerns over violent radicalisation. These restrictive policies come in many forms, starting with extra conditions placed on Muslim organisations and extending to limitations placed on freedom to manifest religion in public space. Such restrictions and the discourse accompanying them have fuelled stigmatization, with radicalisation being conflated with social issues involving Muslims.

This restrictive trend, however, is not at all uniform. It varies from country to country and is observable to different extents. Overall, we find that the character of state-religion connections is extremely significant. Below we identify key differences in the character of such connections in the four countries, factoring them into our recommendations for developing state-religion relations in ways that foster democratic engagement and act against radicalisation.

Connections between state and religion: character matters

Moderate secularism

Belgium, Germany, and the UK's approach to the governance of religious diversity is one in which religion and religious organisations are afforded significant public roles in contributing towards the public and common good, and where there are positive and cooperative relationships between state and religious organisations. We call this 'moderate secularism'. There are significant institutional connections between state and religion, and accommodations for religious diversity are made.

State-religion connections are guaranteed in constitutional and primary legislation documents in Belgium, Germany, and the UK. Significant cooperation is particularly evident in education and social welfare, in part owing to the historical importance of churches in these areas. Routes to formal recognition, such as public corporation status in Germany, have also been available for religious minorities, including Muslims. As well as formal mechanisms, measures that are pragmatic or ad hoc have also filled gaps; in Germany, for example, Buddhist and Muslim groups have informal arrangements in place for religious education provision in public schools in some regions where they do not have formal public corporation status. These guarantees and measures all secure a positive and contributory public role for religion in society.

Secularist statism

By contrast, France's approach sees higher levels of state interference in the religious sphere and tighter restrictions on religion in the public sphere. We call this 'secularist statism'. This is based on French republicanism that is more antithetical to recognising group difference in legal and public policy instruments. This does not preclude state-religion connections. Yet the character of these connections is markedly distinct; religious difference in France is more fully restricted to the private sphere and the state exerts greater control.

Key policy questions

- Is there a connection between radicalisation and the different approaches to state-religion relations described above?
- Is religiously inspired radicalisation more likely to occur in response to one approach than the other?
- And what are the implications of the two different approaches in combatting radicalisation?

Violent radicalisation: Religious diversity is not the problem

We find little to suggest that countries that are accommodating of religion and religious diversity in the public sphere are more or less likely to experience religiously inspired radicalisation.

While France's stricter approach has been a feature of discourse surrounding explanations for occurrences of violent radicalisation, this does not explain why the UK with its comparatively more open accommodations has also witnessed attacks on a scale similar to that of France and to a much greater degree than Belgium or Germany.

Likewise, there is little to suggest that these countries are more or less likely to experience higher levels of far-right identitarian radicalisation, although in Germany far right attacks have been

more frequent and serious than Islamist attacks. All countries have experienced attacks on minorities (predominantly Muslims and Jews) from far-right perpetrators, including Christian-identitarians; that is, those who draw on an idea of Christian identity as oppositional to religious others. And all countries have seen far-right parties make political gains, often on explicitly exclusionist anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim platforms.

At the very least, this suggests that greater state interference in the affairs of religious institutions and organizations is ineffective in achieving its intended aim. At worst, increased restrictions can produce effects that are in fact detrimental for addressing violent radicalisation. Taking that into account, we argue below that there is no reason for high levels of state interference in - or control of - religion. Instead, relationships and connections between state and religion should be cooperative.

A bulwark against radicalisation: State-religion relations as positive forms of belonging and political participation

Given that the quality of state-religion connections is extremely significant, absent or negative state-religion connections are likely to do more harm than good. By negative we mean cases where state-religion connections may be subject to excessive conditions and controls. We found these types of relations can produce feelings of alienation, disenfranchisement, frustration, and resentment toward social and political processes. Organisations we spoke to, along with many experts, warn these can be contributing factors in radicalisation and make the work of organisations working in this area difficult. This is true especially if such connections are characterized by interference and control, or where they are established only with a narrow range of groups. It is particularly problematic when such relations are seen as politically contingent, when it is regarded as expedient to utilize some groups against others in order to fulfill a particular political programme. As a result, stringent conditions for - or barriers to - state-religion connections are generally not conducive to ensuring genuinely pluralistic and democratic engagement and political participation.

By contrast, positive connections, where they are based on partnerships as part of a process of pluralistic social and political participation, bring substantial benefits. State-religion partnerships and relations can be effective against forms of social and political alienation and disenfranchisement. We found that when groups and organisations were positively engaged, they can work to oppose radicalisation and promote a sense of belonging and democratic engagement. Crucially, this is best achieved through supportive and positive connections and relations rather than direct interference and impositions. There are signs that a wider variety of groups in the countries examined are beginning to be engaged. This should be extended and formalized.

Further illustration of the benefits of positive state-religion relations is provided by recent research comparing the response of Christian groups in Germany, France and the US to rises in identitarian populism. The research showed that the dominant Christian churches in Germany acted as an effective bulwark against identitarian populism precisely because of the types of state-religion connections found under moderate secularism. Together, these findings suggest formal forms of state-religion connections of the kind found in countries of moderate secularism can play a productive role against more extremist movements or restrictive responses.

These findings also stand contrary to suggestions that state-religion connections, particularly those of dominant churches, are necessarily alienating for religious minorities. We find that minorities do not seem to protest the position of a dominant religious establishment. Such is the case with the Church of England. Minorities might in fact appreciate such an establishment or arrangements such as those found in Germany and Belgium whereby the state recognizes the public and national significance of religion. One positive example is where informal arrangements have been extended to minority religious groups to provide religious education in some regions of Germany when formal connections (via public corporation status) are absent. These kinds of arrangements should be extended and formalised to ensure their wider benefit.

These types of recognition hold out the prospect of extending state-religion connections and provide a space for religion in public life. They thus offer a possible resource against alienation on religious grounds. Our findings suggest that aggressively secular arrangements that seek to keep religion out of public space to a high degree are far more likely to produce a sense of alienation. We conclude that much more public discussion is needed about the positive role of religion in largely secular Western European societies.

Governance trends and effects

Building on this distinction between moderate secularism and secularist statism, we have identified three specific trends which can contribute to alienation, stigmatisation and marginalisation of religious minorities from society and political culture.

These three specific trends (outlined below) can be seen collectively as part of a general trend towards more restrictive measures on religious institutions and organisations across all four countries we investigated. But it is occurring differently in France than it is in Belgium, Germany and the UK. This is consistent with their different approaches to state-religion connections outlined above.

In general, as policies to manage religious diversity have become increasingly entwined with measures addressing (violent) radicalisation, they have become more restrictive of religious diversity and religious freedoms. Efforts to establish and sustain institutional connections with Muslims have become subject to far greater interference. More conditions are imposed on Muslims than on other religious groups. Fortunately, we also see, in some instances, renewed thinking and attention to how accommodation and inclusion might be achieved.

1. The first trend of concern relates to limitations placed on the freedom to manifest religion in public space. Here we are principally concerned with bans that have been introduced focussing on Muslim women's clothing, such as the hijab, niqab or burqa, and which can have wider effects. Where bans exist, they are restrictive of the rights and ability for some minorities to fully belong in public space. They can be extremely alienating and signal a different class of citizenship, one marked by suspicion and conditionality.

Here, France has introduced more comprehensive blanket bans of ostentatious religious symbols in schools (2004) and face coverings in public (2011). These laws have also had more indiscriminate effects for people of other faiths, meaning the negative effects of these laws and policies have been felt more widely. Sikh students wearing turbans, Jewish students wearing the yarmulke, and Christians displaying 'big' crosses have been expelled under the 2004 law. Moreover, it is notable that even when face masks were made mandatory as part of the Covid-19 pandemic, forms of Islamic face covering remained unlawful.

By contrast, in Belgium and Germany there have been more uneven or limited bans. In Germany, for example, such bans only affect civil servants, and they are unevenly found in different regions. A recent law (2021) widening the ban of ideological symbols for civil servants was in fact provoked by far-right tattoos, although it has come to include religious symbols in its remit. In Belgium, bans have appeared unevenly, and some bans have recently been revoked even as their possibility has been upheld. This has been the case, for instance, in relation to the recent Constitutional Court ruling (2021) that such bans would be legal in universities. In response, a number of Flemish universities stated they would not bring in such bans, and schools in Wallonia revoked bans. In the UK there are no such bans and there is a general lack of any serious political attention to them.

2. A second trend of concern relates to the state imposing extra conditions on Muslim organisations and mosques and subjecting them to increased interference. Managed well, institutional connections provide an opportunity for minority religions to gain a foothold in a country's political environment and participate in the structures of governance. However, institutional connections can also become a channel for greater government interference, regulation, or control. They can lead to restrictions on diversity or conditions being placed upon it. As a result, the character of these connections might be different for Muslims from those that apply to other religious groups.

Conditions imposed on state-religion connections can take different forms. They can prevent them from devloping at all or failing to develop fully. Conditions may constitute barriers to the formalisation of such connections, rendering them *incomplete.* Or conditions may serve as barriers to the realisation of state-religion connections completely, leaving them *absent*.

An example of interference can be seen in the way states have intervened significantly in the appointment of members in Muslim representative organisations.

Conditions have also been constantly shifting, making it hard for some to establish connections and become recognised by government authorities. Organisations and mosques complain, for example, about increasingly stringent conditions and the 'moving goalposts' of what they are expected to do in order to be recognised by authorities. These might include signing declarations or demonstrating in other ways that they reflect particular values. It can mean adhering to certain building regulations which are then changed. This can create a sense of being seen as automatically suspicious and a 'problem'.

Moreover, both long-established and newer organisations face high degrees of political contingency. If regarded as being critical of government policies, they can struggle to form connections with government. In some cases, Muslim organisations and NGOs have been forcibly closed. This is particularly the case in France, where Muslim charities and human rights organisations, such as the Collective against Islamophobia, have been shut down. This thus limits the ability of some religious organizations to participate in governance and to represent affected communities, narrowing the range of voices involved in democratic participatory processes of governance.

This can be extremely frustrating for the affected groups. It alienates them not just from a sense of belonging, but also from participation in the political life of the country, especially on matters that concern their communities directly. In terms of governance infrastructure, a state's demands can thus become barriers themselves to participation in the democratic process and community involvement.

3. A third trend of concern is the tendency to associate radicalisation with social issues and welfare, especially in connection with Muslims. This has multiple negative effects. One is that funding for social programmes becomes attached to counter-radicalisation strategies. This creates spaces in which young people can feel surveilled by such programmes rather than feeling free to engage themselves politically and socially and to engage in debate. It results in alienation and disenfranchisement from social and political processes. It can also undermine social programmes, distorting the focus of youth work particularly. Consequently, a wide array of issues come to be seen as related to violent radicalisation, including those which might simply reflect socially conservative perspectives found throughout society or forms of crime unrelated to violent radicalisation, such as domestic abuse. The conflation of violent radicalisation with these issues can stigmatise Muslims further. Not only can it distort the true variance of social and political views that Muslims hold; it does little to address real welfare issues, in some cases deflecting problems to the attention of inappropriate departments. For example, organisations and civil servants report that incidents that would normally be treated as cases of youth delinquency or domestic violence may be regarded as issues of radicalisation when they involve Muslims.

Summary

Despite similar governance trends towards greater interference and restrictions in all four countries, we conclude that moderate secularism, with positive and cooperative connections and relations between government and religions, is a better guarantee of public religious freedoms. Nevertheless, even in a moderate secular state, public religious freedoms must be actively and vigorously upheld in order to maintain social and political liberties. The findings of our investigation speak in favour of upholding and extending positive forms of state-religion connections. This conclusion is also supported by the evidence on whether imposing more restrictive measures or religious organisations helps or hinders efforts to combat violent radicalisation. Positive state-religion connections can help overcome the kinds of alienation and disenfranchisement that may contribute to radicalisation processes and prohibit fuller forms of democratic inclusion and social belonging.

Policy conclusions and recommendations

For the attention of:

- The Ministry of the Interior in France
- The Home Office in the UK
- The Federal Ministry of the Interior in Germany
- The Federal Public Service Interior in Belgium
- Departments/ministries for education, welfare, and health - as well as local authorities - in their partnerships with local faith-based organisations and their involvement in education and welfare services

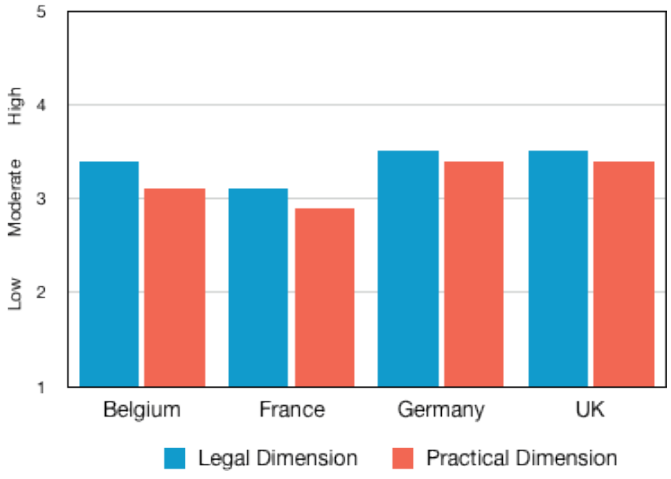
Key points

- A lack of state-religion connections for minorities increases their sense of disenfranchisement and alienation.
- More or less interference in religious affairs does not seem to make a difference in preventing religiously inspired/attributed violent radicalisation
- Increased state control and interference in religious organisations increases their sense of disenfranchisement, alienation and of being viewed as a 'suspect community' and a 'problem'.
- State-religion connections help increase a

sense of belonging and democratic participation.

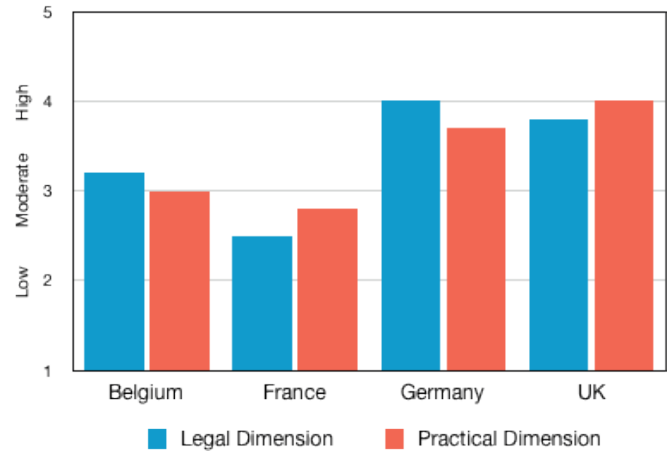
- When state-religion connections are positive and cooperative, they can serve as a bulwark against extremism

Figure 1: Level of Freedom of Religious Institutions from the State



Source: GREASE Indicators

Figure 2: Level of Rights of Religious Minority Groups



Source: GREASE Indicators

Recommendations

1. **Develop and expand state-religion connections to engage a 'democratic constellation' of groups.**

   It is important to recognise that religious minorities are not homogenous groups but rather a heterogenous mix of people with different national and ethnic backgrounds, different theologies, political positions, social views, ages and so on. No one organisation will be able to represent this variety. Hence, seeking a single or very limited range of interlocutors is more likely to lead to resentment and ineffective policies.

2. **Promote democratic engagement and political participation of religious groups through engagement.**

   The democratic constellation should not be limited to include only those groups that conform to particular political positions or views as this will undermine the genuine democratic character of engagement and create resentment and alienation. Broad representation helps support and promote Muslims as part of the democratic citizenry contributing to governance, rather than the as objects of governance.

3. **Avoid linking funding for religious organisations and groups to security and counter-extremism policies.**

   Such links breed distrust within community organisations and undermine citizenship. Social programmes should not be attached to security such that they become tools of surveillance. This can be counter-productive and serve to undermine rather than build trust and positive relations between minorities and government.

4. **Promote freedom of religion in ways that enable freedom of practice**.

   Freedom of practice is guaranteed in constitutional documents but is often restricted in practice. These restrictions usually target Muslim women and there is no evidence to suggest that it has any bearing on radicalisation. Such measures restrict Muslims more than adherents of other religions. This can lead to a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement.

5. **Avoid conflating socially conservative positionvs with radicalisation.**

   Social and welfare work should avoid conflating either socially conservative views or social problems (such as domestic violence) with radicalisation. Social problems should be dealt with by the appropriate social welfare departments and police where necessary, rather than be treated as security issues. Conflating socially conservative positions with radicalisation can result in one group - Muslims in particular - being singled out for negative attention even though such views are not particular to that group. Such conflation can distort perception of distinct issues which require distinct policy responses.

6. **Outline clear paths to recognition and institutional connection.**

   Cultivating positive state-religion connections can have clear benefits. Therefore, one should avoid measures that make that process difficult and laborious (e.g. changing goal posts) or obfuscate it. Religious organisations should be given clear guidelines for how to engage positively with government at local and national levels. Instead of a state management approach, the aim should be to foster positive connections in a spirit of collaboration towards shared policy goals.

About the GREASE Project

What can Europe learn from other parts of the world about governing religious diversity? The GREASE project has been finding out. Our consortium has brought together researchers and eminent scholars from Europe, South & Southeast Asia, Asia Pacific and the MENA region. Together we have investigated how religious diversity is governed in 24 countries. Comparing norms, laws and practices, we have sought to ascertain what is useful (or not useful) in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research has shed light on different societal approaches to accommodating religious minorities and migrants. GREASE aims to deepen our understanding of religious diversity governance, emphasizing insights for countering radicalisation.

The GREASE project is coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou and Dr. Tina Magazzini from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Lily Yakova from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Racius from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia).

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For more information on GREASE and to access resources produced as part of the project, visit the website: http://grease.eui.eu

This is part of the GREASE Policy Brief Series. Other briefs in the series include:

- Preventing Religiously Motivated Radicalisation: Lessons from Southeastern Europe
- Managing Religious Diversity and Radicalisation in Malaysia and Indonesia
- Preventing Religiously Inspired Violent Radlicalization Among Moroccan Youth: Barriers and Opportunities

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