

Research Project on Religious Communities and Civil Society in Europe

A Brief Outline

Religious Communities and Civil Society in Europe is a large-scale exploratory research project aimed at assessing the position of religious communities as potential or active civil society actors in Europe, and at looking into differences in their positioning on legal, historical, cultural, and behavioural grounds. The project is being undertaken by the Maecenata Institute¹, Berlin. The core research team consists of Dr. Rupert Graf Strachwitz, Director of the Institute, and Sarah Albrecht M.A..

The seemingly vitalizing impact of religion and religiosity on civil society is a research topic that has been extensively looked into, not only in the USA, but increasingly also in a European context. Faith based charities have also been objects of scholarly work in the context of civil society theory and empirical studies. What still seems to be missing is an evaluation of the role of institutionalized religious communities, and of circumstances that facilitate or impede their status as civil society organisations. One assumption is that in a European context, legal relations between the state and various religious communities (minorities and majorities alike) play a crucial role in shaping the religious communities' scope for action within the arena of civil society.

What we are aiming at is to see

- a) whether and if so, how religious communities are moving away from being part of a system of government, and are becoming part of what is generally termed civil society,
- b) what effects this has on these communities,
- c) what effects this has on civil society in general.

Our geographic focus is Europe, with a look at Turkey and a glance at Israel. The project started in the autumn of 2015 and is due to be completed in late 2018. In the course of the research, additional momentum has arisen due to the increased interest in religion throughout Europe, the interest in Islam in particular, the activities

¹ The Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society is an independent research centre and policy think tank on matters of civil society, civic engagement, and philanthropy. It was founded in 1997. See www.maecenata.eu for details.

and statements of Pope Francis, and the many debates to do with the 500th anniversary of the reformation.

By its very nature, the project is interdisciplinary. Most of the researchers involved however are social scientists, particularly political scientists, and not theologians. The academic interest is in civil society as part of a larger society, and is with religious communities (“Churches”) as such. We are not concerned with the theological arguments; nor are we talking about faith-based charities, or faith driven volunteerism.

Five associates have kindly agreed to collaborate with us on determining details of content, reviewing papers, identifying experts, conducting interviews, and contributing to the final outcome. They are:

- Prof. Dr. Rocco d’Ambrosio (Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome),
- Prof. Dr. Paul Dekker (University of Tilburg, Netherlands),
- Dr. Anna Domaradzka (University of Warsaw, Poland),
- Prof. Dr. Johan von Essen (Ersta Sköndal University College, Sweden),
- Prof. Dr. Vassilios Makrides (University of Erfurt, Germany).

In addition, a number of other colleagues have agreed to act as advisors. With the associates, we have held workshops in 2015, 2016, and 2017. A conference to present findings is scheduled to take place in Rome in November, 2018.

Research and dissemination were grouped into six work packages:

- (1) a legal report,
- (2) a data report,
- (3) comprehensive narratives, to include papers written by senior researchers,
- (4) specific papers, commissioned following a call for contributions,
- (5) associated projects, interim reports, presentations, and workshops,
- (6) dissemination and follow-up in a final conference (2018), two edited volumes (2019), and presentations at conferences.

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