

Popular psychology, belief in life after death and reincarnation in the Nordic countries, Western and Eastern Europe

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The European Values Survey explores national differences and similarities, also regarding religious beliefs which express popular assumptions regarding the nature of man and the ontological status of consciousness. These views differ radically from the dominant scientific view, also in academic psychology. The Nordic countries vary considerably in their beliefs in life after death and reincarnation with half of the respondents believing in life after death, and 43 percent of these believing in reincarnation which also goes against established views of the Christian Church. This shows independence from scientific as well as religious authorities. Is it a remnant of pre-Christian beliefs, due to exposure to Buddhist and Hindu concepts, or a sign of original independent thinking? Half a century of anti-religious regimes in Eastern Europe seems to have had no major effect on beliefs about personal survival, and the European Values Survey shows a widespread belief in reincarnation.

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Surveys of religious beliefs do not only reveal religious beliefs, they also reflect basic assumptions about the nature of man, and about the ontological status of the psyche and consciousness. Thus they reveal the popular psychology that is characteristic for a population.

One would expect the Nordic countries to be much alike in this respect, but data from the European Values Study (or Survey) show them to differ widely. This unique survey was first conducted in 14 West-European countries, Canada and the USA in 1980-83 (Harding, Phillips & Fogerty, 1986), repeated as World Values Survey in 43 countries in 1990-93 (Inglehart, Basanez, & Morendo, 1998) and in 81 countries in 1999-2002 (Inglehart, Basanez, Diez-Medrano, Halman, & Luijckx, 2004) that represent approximately 85% of the world's population.

The European Values Survey

The European Values Survey was initiated by the European Value Systems Study Group, a group of scholars and social scientists who wrote the original questionnaire that has undergone some changes over the years. The survey was initiated by Prof. J. Kerkhofs at the University of Louvain in Belgium and later moved its center to the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands.

The European Values Study project was "designed to empirically explore the patterns and changes in cross-national differences and similarities in basic social values in Europe. An important goal was to examine whether the emerging concept of one common European cultural identity has an empirical basis" (Halman 2001, p.1).

Only a small part of this unique survey concerns religious beliefs, as it deals mostly with leisure, work, government and politics, meaning and purpose of life, morality, family life, contemporary social issues and more. In each country the survey was conducted by a leading institution and made on a large and representative sample. In 2000 the mean sample size was 1140 for the 35 European countries and 1233 persons for the five Nordic countries (SD = 391). The author was involved with this survey in its early years and has since followed its development.

Belief in Life after Death and Reincarnation in the Nordic Countries

Let us take responses to two questions that reveal answers to a simple question. Are we only made of flesh and bones, or is there in us a "spiritual" part (consciousness, mind, some matter-transcendant reality) that survives the disintegration of the body when we die? The results for the five Nordic countries are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage of persons in the Nordic countries who believe in life after death and reincarnation ("Do you believe in reincarnation, that is, that we are born into this world again?") in the Human Values Survey. Data collected in 1999-2000, in Norway around 1990. R/L means the percentage of believers in life after death who also believe in reincarnation.

	N	Reincarnation	Life after Death	R/L
Denmark	1908	17	38	44,7
Finland	1038	18	57	31,6
Iceland	967	41	78	52,6
Norway	1239	15	45	33,3
Sweden	1015	22	46	47,8
Mean	1233	22,6	52,8	42,0

The figures show a considerable variability among the Nordic countries, with a mean of 52,8% believing in life after death. The highest percentage being in Iceland (78%), and the lowest is Danmark (38%). Hence slightly more than half of us Nordics believe that we not only consist of flesh and bones but also something beyond the perishable matter of our physical bodies and that this something continues to exist after we die. The dominant view of science is that death marks the end of personal existence. In so far as psychology and the biological sciences take a stand on this issue it is evident that popular psychology disagrees.

The deviation from the scientific stance gets even more extreme when we take notice of the fact that a substantial number of our Nordic contemporaries believe that we had a life before we were born, and not only will we survive death but will be born again into flesh and bones. In short, they believe in reincarnation. Here the mean for the Nordic countries is 22,6%. Thus more than every fifth person holds this view. The mean is 19,0 % if we adjust to population size of the five countries. However, this figure expresses an even more severe rejection of the dominant cultural/scientific view than believe in life after death. Regarding belief in reincarnation we find great variability among the Nordic countries, with Icelanders topping the list with 41% being believers. Icelanders' genetically closest relations, the Norwegians are lowest with 15%. A huge difference. It is primarily the Icelanders who differ from the other Nordic nations. Why? Is it because the pre-christian faith lived longer in Iceland? Is it because Icelanders are partly of Celtic origin? More about that later.

It is not only the scientific establishment that gets a slap in the face through these data. Our dominant Christian Church also gets a blow. It seems logical to assume that those who admit to a belief in reincarnation also believe in life after death, and the data support that. According to Christian doctrine there is life after death but none before and no repetition of the experience after we die. Again a large part of our fellowmen in the Nordic countries who believe in life beyond the grave do not agree. No less than 42% of those who believe in life after death also believe in reincarnation. This is a gross deviation from Christian doctrine as reincarnation is generally considered heretical by the Church. The survey findings indicate that the concept of reincarnation is alive and has a large following among those who believe in some kind of life after death.

Western Europe

So much about the Nordic countries. What about the rest of Europe? Let us further divide Europe into two parts, Eastern (former Communist) Europe and Western Europe thereby excluding the Nordic countries. We find a lot of variability among the 15 surveyed Western European countries concerning belief in life after

death. The figures for each country are given in Table 2. The highest percentage of believers is found in Catholic Malta (86%), Ireland (79%), Italy (73%) and Switzerland (64%). Fewest are the believers in West-Germany (39%) and France but with a substantial 44%. For the combined 15 countries of Western Europe the percentage of believers in life after death is 59%.

The belief in reincarnation is also quite variable among Western Europeans. The percentage of believers is highest in Switzerland (36%), United Kingdom and Portugal (29%), and lowest in Malta (12%). See Table 2.

Table 2. Percentages of respondents in 15 countries of Western Europe who believe in reincarnation and life after death. Data collected 1999-2002 unless otherwise indicated.

	Reincarnation	Life after Death	R/L
Austria	23	59	36
Belgium	18	46	37
United Kingdom	29 ^a	58	-
France	21	44	59
West-Germany	19	39	42
Luxemburg	24	54	46
Netherlands	21	50	41
Ireland	23	79	27
Northern Ireland	17	75	21
Switzerland	36 ^a	64 ^a	-
Greece	23	59	40
Italy	18	73	24
Malta	12	86	13
Portugal	29	47	53
Spain	20	50	39
Mean percentage	22,20	58,87	36,76

^a Data from 1990-1993.

Perhaps most unexpected is the finding of a substantial belief in reincarnation, and perhaps even more so the fact that 37% of those who believe in life after death also believe in reincarnation. This shows the concept of reincarnation as a major form of belief in life after death among the inhabitants of Western Europe. This is certainly not in line with the dominant doctrine of the Christian Churches, Catholic or Protestant. These facts open up several questions. Is this high "voting" for reincarnation due to cultural-religious influences from Asia (various cults and movements of the 19th and 20th century), is it due to remnants of pre-Christian beliefs, or simply the result of personal thinking and brooding on the question of our essential nature and destiny?

Eastern Europe

What about Eastern Europe? One might expect that half a century of Communist and anti-religious regimes might have drastically reduced these beliefs. Did the anti-religious regimes have a clearly suppressive effect on belief in life after death? We have no survey data prior to these regimes, but knowing nothing better let us assume that Eastern and Western Europeans shared similar levels of belief before Europe became ideologically split into two halves after the Second World War. See Table 3.

Table 3. Percentages of respondents in Eastern Europe who believe in reincarnation and life after death. Data collected 1999-2002.

	Reincarnation	Life after death	R/L
Belarus	32	41	63
Bulgaria	30	36	71
Croatia	24	68	32
Czech Republic	23	36	55
East-Germany	12	15	65
Estonia	37	36	85
Hungary	20	33	47
Latvia	33	45	63
Lithuania	44	79	59
Romania	28	68	38
Russia	32	37	75
Poland	25	80	31
Slovakia	20	68	27
Slovenia	17	32	40
Ukraine	28	40	64
Mean	27,00	47,60	54,33

Regarding belief in life after death we again see a great variability. Staunchly Catholic Poland is highest (80%), followed closely by Lithuania (79%), Slovakia (68%) and Romania (68%), whereas East-Germany is by the far lowest with 15% believing in life after death.

The belief in reincarnation is particularly high in the Baltic countries, with Lithuania holding the record for the whole of Europe, 44%. The lowest figure we find in East-Germany, 12%.

It is rather surprising that the former Communist states of Eastern Europe show this relatively high degree of belief in survival after death, whatever the form. Even in Russia about one-third believes in reincarnation. The effect of anti-religious propaganda on the beliefs of the populations of Eastern Europe seems to have been rather slight, if any, except apparently in East-Germany.

Differences between Western and Eastern Europe

In the published account of the World Survey “don't know” responses (not knowing, not sure, in doubt what to answer) were excluded from the analyses. This is sometimes done in social research for the sake of simplification, and because it can be argued that the “don't know” response indicates difficulties to decide if yes or no. Thus, “don't know” respondents can be looked upon as neither believers nor disbelievers but somewhere inbetween, and ignored. This exclusion means that “don't knowers” indirectly are divided between the groups of believers and disbelievers.

What happens if we include the “don't knowers” in our analysis? It can be seen in Table 4. Data from Norway, Switzerland and United Kingdom (reincarnations only) were not available for this analysis.

Table 4. Belief in survival in Western and Eastern Europe including the “don't knows” (percentages).

	Yes	No	Dont know
<i>Life after death</i>			
Western Europe	49,4	35,7	14,8
Eastern Europe	37,0	43,3	19,7
<i>Reincarnation</i>			
Western Europe	19,2	67,9	12,9
Eastern Europe	20,9	58,2	20,9

The differences between the two halves of Europe can be seen in Table 4. It is interesting to compare the figures in Table 4 with our previous analyses. In the previous analyses (see Tables 2 and 3) Western Europeans have more believers in life after death (58,87%) than Eastern Europeans (47,60). This difference is reversed when it comes to belief in reincarnation which is 27.00% in Eastern Europe compared to 22,20% in Western Europe. A look at the figures that include the “don't knows” (Table 4) reveals that the percentages are lower when they are included but the differences remain significant. The huge number of participants make even very slight differences significant.

These findings indicate that belief in life after death has been quite resistant to governmental efforts to change it. Also noticeable is the high percentage of East-European believers in life after death who also believe in reincarnation (54%), although the Eastern Church apparently rejects the concept of reincarnation just as much as the Western Churches, Protestant or Catholic.

Why belief in reincarnation?

Let us not ask the question of why people believe in life after death for, every religion supports it; but rather why people believe in reincarnation. Reincarnation does not only go against the scientific view but also against the dominant religious view in our part of the world. It is easy to point to three factors that may have had an impact on how relatively widespread the belief in reincarnation is.

First are pre-Christian beliefs in Scandinavia as well as other parts of Europe. The ancient Nordic poems in the Poetic Edda were first recorded in writing in Iceland in the 13th century but stem from the pre-Christian era (Sigurðsson 1999). From their contents we can assume that the Scandinavians believed in reincarnation. E. g., in the poem *Helgakvída Hundingsbana* it is stated that the female hero Sigrun was Svava reborn. In a commentary in the Poetic Edda we read: it was the belief in olden times that men were born again, but that is now called old women's superstition (Hollander, 1928, p. 237).

There are even cases where arguments were made as to why a certain person was believed to be another person reborn. Some of them resemble rare cases of children who claim to remember a former life (Stevenson, 2003; Haraldsson, 2001, 2003).

Pre-Christian literary sources from other parts of Europe tell a similar story. Plato discusses "metempsychosis" in several of his works (Phaedo 81c-82b, Phaedrus 248c-249b, the Republic 617d-620e, and Timaeus 41-42, 90c-92c.). Caesar writes in his book on the Gallic Wars (which took place in present-day France) "The cardinal doctrine which they [the schools of the Druids] seek to teach is that souls do not die, but after death pass from one body to another" (Caesar, Book VI, 14). Roman historians refer to a similar belief among the Germans (for example Appian of Alexandria: 1987-89). Celtic poems from pre-Christian Ireland contain stories of rebirth (Chadwick, 1955-56; Meyer & Nutt, 1897) similar to those in the Poetic Edda. These sources give us reasons to assume that belief in rebirth was common in Europe before Christianization.

Secondly, from the 18th century onwards Western and Asian scholars and religious leaders introduced Hindu and Buddhist religious scriptures and philosophies to Europeans and they received considerable attention (Zander, 1999). This was particularly the case in the 19th and 20th century when societies and movements were established in Europe that made the doctrine of reincarnation an integral part of their teaching.

Thirdly and lastly, some people may, when brooding on the question of whether some part of their nature survives death, intuitively have found reincarnation a plausible concept or possibility.

In the 19th century there was a fierce ideological battle between science and religion when adherents of science tried to demolish scientifically unfounded religious beliefs. This conflict has faded away into a peaceful coexistence, or a mutual ignoring of each others views. Survey data of the kind presented above remind us of an unsolved issue, some may say an unsolvable issue.

Some argue that science has not found the tools to explore satisfactorily the perennial question of whether we are something more than just flesh and bones, and hence the question remains open. A few others argue that such psychological phenomena as near-death and out-of-body experiences, apparitions of the dead and the rare phenomena of children claiming memories of a past life, may give a lead if further investigated. Others argue that the solution is obvious, flesh and bones and its derivatives, is all we are. As Plato put it, the music (mind, consciousness) only comes into existence when the musical instrument is played. Being a thinker of many facets Plato also put forward the argument of the timeless and imperishable nature of mind which lead him to the concept of reincarnation (metempsychosis). Perhaps it was through his argumentation that the great skeptic and philosopher David Hume (not a believer) wrote two millenniums later: "The Metempsychosis is the only system of this kind, that philosophy can harken to" (Hume, 1783, posthumously. See Wollheim 1966, 263-270).

Contact with the dead

Survey data do not only show that many people believe in life after death. A substantial number claim that they have been in contact with someone who has died. The European Human Values Survey indicates that every fourth person in Western Europe does that (Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991). This was revealed in the first wave of the European Values Survey (1980-83) through the question "Have you ever had the experience: Felt as though you were really in touch with someone who had died?". See Table 5.

Let us first look at the Nordic countries. The mean is 11,75% if we exclude Iceland, which differs radically from the rest of the Nordic countries. Iceland was highest among the participating countries, followed by Italy 34% and USA 30%. Some of the large countries of Europe follow, West-Germany with 28%, Great Britain 26% and France with 24%. Norway was lowest with 9% followed by Denmark with 10% reporting experiences of contact with the dead. The same question was a few years later a part of another survey in the USA and then the results were the same as in Iceland; 41% reported personal experiences of contact with someone who had died.

Table 5. Percentage of persons in countries of Western Europe who report "having felt as though they were really in touch with someone who had died".

Denmark	10
Finland	14
Iceland	41
Norway	9
Sweden	14
Belgium	18
Great Britain	26
West Germany	28
Holland	12
Ireland	16
France	24
Italy	34
Spain	16
EUROPE*	25
U.S.A.	30

*Weighted according to population size.

Research has also shown that every second widow and widower in Britain and the USA are convinced that they have perceived or felt the presence of their deceased spouse (Greely, 1987; Rees, 1971).

Hence, we do not only find widespread belief in life after death but, additionally, that a considerable part of the population claims a personal experience of the dead. A recent analysis by the author of a large number of such personal experiences opens up some challenging questions (Haraldsson, 2005).

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