

West-and East-Europeans and their Belief in Reincarnation and Life after Death

Erlendur Haraldsson, University of Iceland

European integration is becoming more evident by the day. Doors that were long closed for social research in Eastern Europe have been wide opened and some interesting findings are emerging. The (West) European Values Survey was conducted around 1980 during the Cold War and was designed to assess in how far West-European nations are alike and how they differ in their beliefs and values. It permitted comparisons between countries. This unique survey dealt with leisure, work, government and politics, religion and meaning and purpose of life, morality, family life, contemporary social issues and more. It contains much

for those interested in religious-philosophical issues. In each country the survey was conducted by a leading institution and made on large and representative samples (average sample size 1140). Around 1990 and 2000 the survey was repeated as World Values Survey with an increasing number of countries participating, among them most countries of Eastern Europe. Having been involved with this survey in its early years, the author has since followed its development.

For half a century or more Eastern Europe was ruled by anti-religious regimes and that would be expected to affect such views as belief in life after

death. The survey contained two relevant questions. Do you believe in life after death? Do you believe in reincarnation? Let us look at the results, first for Western Europe and then for its Eastern counterpart. How do the two parts of Europe compare?

Western Europe

We find a lot of variability among Western European countries concerning belief in life after death. The figures for each country are given in Table 1. The highest percentage of believers is found in Catholic Malta (86%), Ireland (79%) and Protestant Iceland (78%). Fewest are the believers in Denmark (38%) and

West-Germany (39%). For the 20 countries of Western Europe the average percentage of believers in life after death is 57,05%.

The belief in reincarnation is also very variable among Western Europeans. 22,30% believe in reincarnation. The percentage of believers is highest in Iceland (41%), Switzerland (36%), United Kingdom and Portugal (29%), and lowest in Malta (12%) and Norway (15%).

Perhaps most unexpected is the finding of a substantial belief in reincarnation, and perhaps even more so the fact that 39,09% 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. Certainly not in line with the dominant doctrine of the Christian Church, 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? Did the anti-religious regimes have a clearly suppressive effect on belief in life after death? Of course, we have no survey data prior to these regimes, but knowing no better way let us assume that Eastern and Western Europeans held similar views before Europe became ideologically split into two halves.

It comes as no surprise that belief in life after death is strongest in Catholic Poland (80%), then in Lithuania (79%) and by the far lowest in East-Germany (15%). The mean for all the surveyed Eastern European countries is 47,6%, which does not deviate drastically from Western Europe.

For belief in reincarnation the mean is 27%. Particularly high is the belief 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 the anti-religious propaganda of these regimes on the beliefs of their populations 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

Table 1. Percentages of respondents in 20 countries of Western Europe who believe in reincarnation ("Do you believe in reincarnation, that is, that we are born into this world again?") and life after death. Data collected 1999-2002 unless otherwise indicated.

	Reincarnation	Life after death
Austria	23	59
Belgium	18	46
United Kingdom	29 ^a	58
Denmark	17	38
Finland	18	57
France	21	44
West-Germany	19	39
Luxemburg	24	54
Netherlands	21	50
Ireland	23	79
Northern Ireland	17	75
Iceland	41	78
Norway	15 ^a	45 ^a
Sweden	22	46
Switzerland	36 ^a	64 ^a
Greece	23	59
Italy	18	73
Malta	12	86
Portugal	29	47
Spain	20	50
Mean percentage	22,30	57,05

^a Data from 1990-1993.

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

	Reincarnation	Life after death
Belarus	32	41
Bulgaria	30	36
Croatia	24	68
Czech Republic	23	36
East-Germany	12	15
Estonia	37	36
Hungary	20	33
Latvia	33	45
Lithuania	44	79
Romania	28	68
Russia	32	37
Poland	25	80
Slovakia	20	68
Slovenia	17	32
Ukraine	28	40
Mean	27,00	47,60

Table 3. Belief in survival in Western and Eastern Europe (percentages).

	Yes	No	Don't 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

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 - in this case - better reflects the person's belief. Thus, it has been argued, "don't know" respondents can be looked upon as neither believers nor

disbelievers but somewhere in between, and thus can be ignored. At least partly this exclusion means that "doubt knowers" indirectly are divided between the groups of believers and disbelievers.

What happens if we include the "doubt knowers" into our analysis? That can be seen in Table 3. Data from Norway, Switzerland and United Kingdom (reincarnations only) were not available for this analysis.

What differences do we find between the two halves of Europe? That can also be seen in Table 3. It is interesting to compare the figures in Table 3 with our previous analyses. In the previous analyses (see Tables 1 and 2) Western Europeans have more believers in life after death (57,05%) 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 22,30% in Western Europe. A look at the figures that include the "don't knows" (Table 3) reveals that the percentages are lower when they are included but the differences remain significant. The huge number of participants make even slight differences significant.

Four out of Ten European Believers in Life after Death Believe in Reincarnation

Particularly unexpected is to find that in Europe as a whole 41,8% of those who believe in life after death also express belief in reincarnation. This is the most prominent finding of the analyses, also while it goes against the official doctrine of the Christian Church. In Western Europe 36.8% of believers in afterlife also believe in reincarnation whereas in Eastern Europe this figure is much higher or 50,2%. Rather oddly 7% of those who do not believe in life after death report belief in reincarnation (3,5% of the respondents).

Reincarnation is not a doctrine of the Christian Church, so how has it received substantial following? Pre-Christian sources from different parts of Europe indicate that belief in reincarnation was widely held at that time. 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 about the Celts in his book on the Gallic Wars that 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" (Book VI, 14). Roman historians refer to a similar belief among the Germans, e. g. Appianus of Alexandria (born around 100 after Christ) who writes: "Caesar conquered the Germans under their leader Ariowist, although they showed contempt for death because of their hope for rebirth" (Appianus, undated).

Celtic poems from pre-Christian Ireland contain stories of rebirth (Chadwick, 1955-56). In Northern Europe in the pre-Christian poems of the Poetic Edda (see Helgakvida Hundingsbana), it is written, e. g. that the female hero Sigrun was Svava reborn. In a commentary to the Poetic Edda written in Iceland in the 13. century we read "In ancient times people believed they were reborn but now it is considered an old wives tales". (Author's translation from Icelandic. For an English version of the Poetic Edda, see Larrington, 1996).

From the 18th and 19th century onwards Western and Asian scholars, philosophers and religious leaders introduced Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and philosophies to Europeans. This is certainly one of the contributing factors.

Furthermore - pre-Christian and scriptural influences aside - some people may also, when brooding on the question if some part of their nature survives death, have intuitively found reincarnation a plausible concept. The data presented here show a considerable degree of independence from scientific as well as religious authorities, as the proponents of established science generally reject personal survival and Christian religious authority rejects the concept of reincarnation.

Finally, a few words about the organisation of this remarkable survey. The European Values Survey, later World 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 its centre moved later to the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands. The survey was mostly conducted by Gallup and Gallup-affiliated companies. Prof. Ronald Inglehart of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan has played an important role in the 2nd and 3rd wave of the survey (around 1990 and 2000).

References

- Appianus from Alexandria (2nd century after Christ). *Romaika* (History of Rome).
- Caesar, G. J. (1956) *The Gallic War*. London: William Heinemann.
- Chadwick, N. K. (1955-56), *Literary Tradition in the Old Norse and Celtic Literature*. *Saga-book*, XIV, 3, p. 178.
- Halman, L. (2001). *The European Values Study: A third wave*. Sourcebook of the 1999-2000 European Values Study Surveys. Tilburg: EVS, WORC, Tilburg University.
- Haraldsson, E. and Houtkooper, J. M. (1991). *Psychic Experiences in the Multinational Human Values Study*. Who reports them? *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*. 85(2), 145-165.
- Harding S., Phillips D., & Fogerty M. (1986). *Contrasting Values in Western Europe*. London: MacMillan.
- Inglehart R., Basanez M., & Morendo A. (1998). *Human Values and Beliefs*. A Cross-Cultural Sourcebook. Anna Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Inglehart R., Basanez M., Diez-Medrano, J., Halman, L., & Luijckx, R. (2004). *Human Beliefs and Values*. A cross-cultural sourcebook based on the 1999-2002 values survey. México: Siglo XXI Editores.
- Larrington, C. (1996). *World Classics, The Poetic Edda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.