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Five Centuries After Reformation, Catholic-Protestant Divide in Western Europe Has Faded

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Additionally, the Center received valuable advice on all phases of this project from expert advisers: Luis Lugo, director of community initiatives at the Doug & Maria DeVos Foundation and former director of religion research at Pew Research Center; the Rev. Thomas Reese, columnist for National Catholic Reporter; the Rev. Dr. Kendall Harmon, canon theologian for the Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina; the Rev. Dr. Steffen Lösel, associate professor of systematic theology at Emory University's Candler School of Theology; Thomas Albert Howard, professor of history and the humanities at Valparaiso University; Carlos M.N. Eire, professor of history and religious studies at Yale University; the Rev. John William Crossin, director of spiritual formation at Saint Luke Institute; Christopher J. Malloy, associate professor of theology at the University of Dallas; the Rev. Dr. Paul Hinlicky, professor of Lutheran studies at Roanoke College.

While the analysis for this report was guided by our consultations with the advisers, Pew Research Center is solely responsible for the interpretation and reporting of the data.

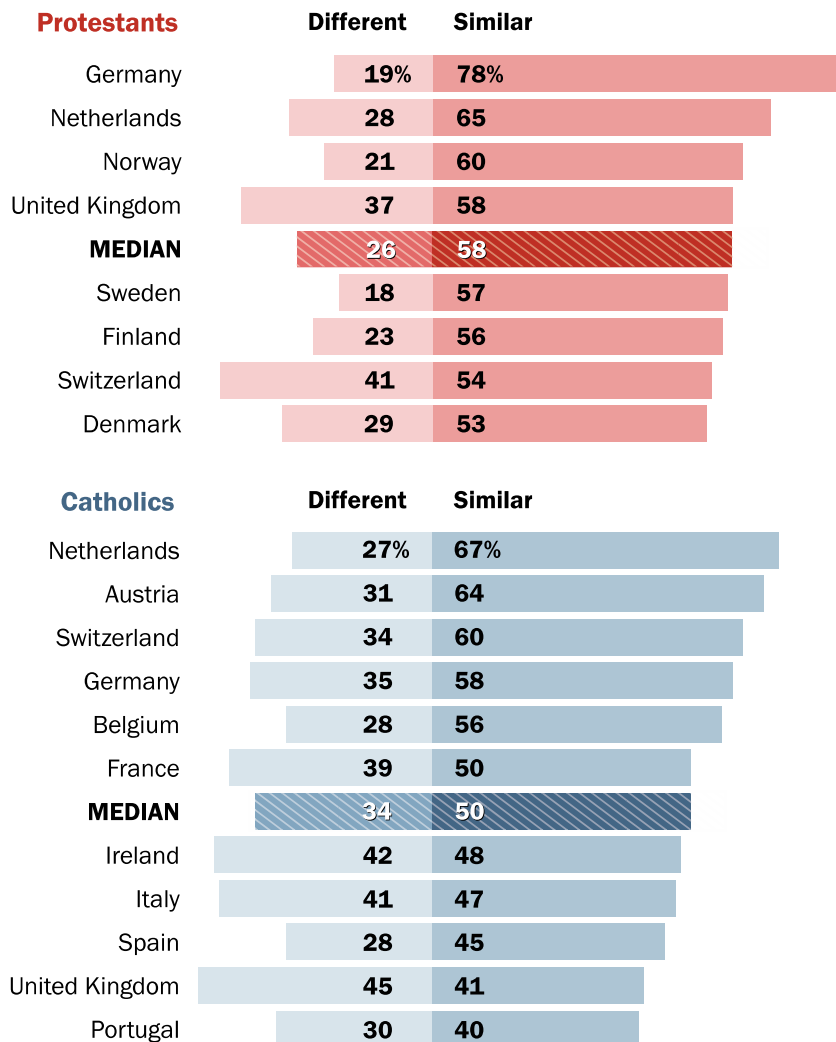
Five Centuries After Reformation, Catholic-Protestant Divide in Western Europe Has Faded

As Protestants prepare to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, a new Pew Research Center survey finds that the prevailing view among Catholics and Protestants in Western Europe is that they are more similar religiously than they are different. And across a continent that once saw long and bloody religious wars, both Protestants and Catholics now overwhelmingly express willingness to accept each other as neighbors – and even as family members.

The survey also shows that one of the major theological controversies of the Protestant Reformation no longer starkly divides rank-and-file Catholics and Protestants in Western Europe. Today, majorities or pluralities of both groups say that faith *and* good works are necessary to get into heaven – the traditional Catholic position. Fewer people say that faith alone (in Latin, *sola fide*) leads to salvation, the position that Martin Luther made a

Among Catholics, Protestants in Western Europe, more see their religions as similar than different

% who say Catholics and Protestants TODAY are religiously more similar than they are different/more different than they are similar



Note: Those who did not answer the question are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted April-August 2017 in 15 countries. See Methodology for details. "Five Centuries After Reformation, Catholic-Protestant Divide in Western Europe Has Faded"

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central rallying cry of 16th-century Protestant reformers.

Yet differences remain between the two Christian traditions. Geographically, Protestants are still concentrated in the north and Catholics in the south of Europe. In many countries, sizable minorities among both Catholics and Protestants (roughly four-in-ten or more Catholics in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy and France and comparable shares of Protestants in Switzerland and the UK) say the two groups are more different religiously than they are similar. And Protestants and Catholics who consider religion to be important in their lives are more likely to take their respective church's traditional position on salvation compared with those who say religion is less important.

These are among the main findings of a new Pew Research Center survey of 24,599 adults across 15 countries in Western Europe, conducted from April to August 2017 through telephone interviews on both cellphones and landlines. The study, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation, is part of a larger effort by Pew Research Center to understand religious change and its impact on societies around the world. The Center previously has conducted religion-focused surveys across [sub-Saharan Africa](#); the Middle East-North Africa region and many [other countries with large Muslim populations](#); [Latin America and the Caribbean](#); [Israel](#); [Central and Eastern Europe](#); and the United States.

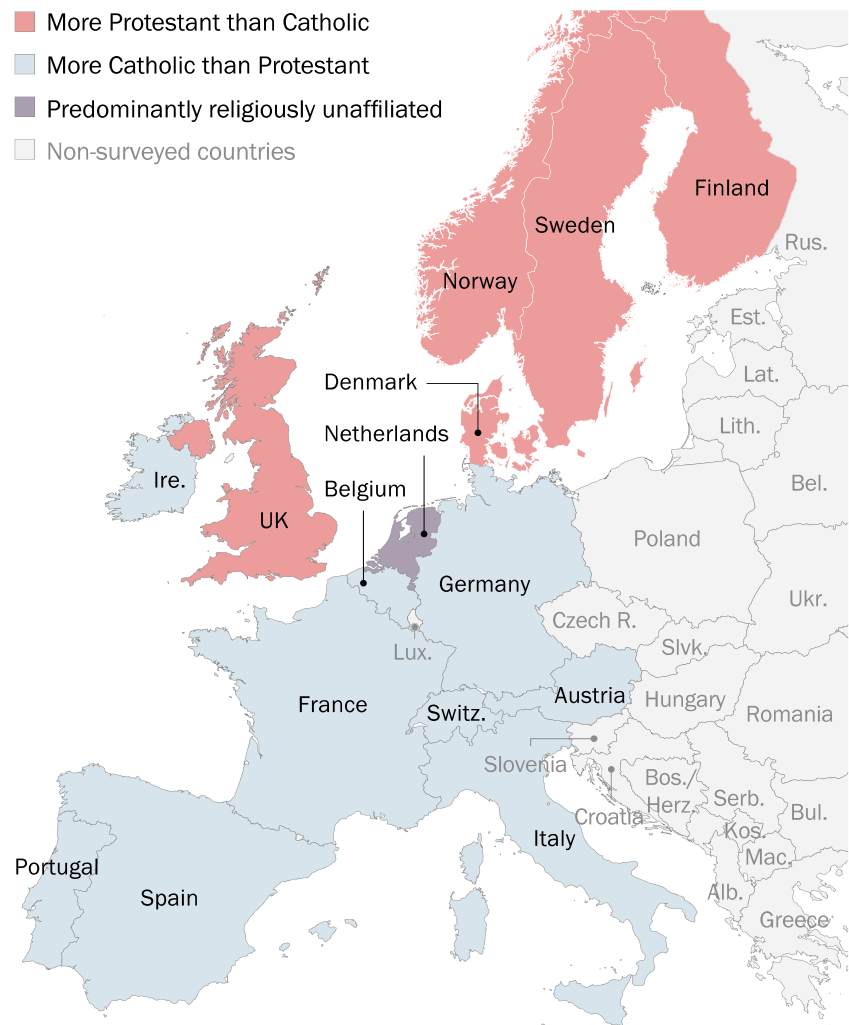
The new surveys are nationally representative, with samples of approximately 1,500 or more respondents in each country, allowing researchers to analyze the opinions of Catholics in 11 countries and of Protestants in eight countries.

Pew Research Center also asked Catholics and Protestants in the U.S. about their opinions on issues related to the Protestant Reformation, including on several questions that were asked in Western Europe as well. The results of the U.S. survey can be [found here](#).

Since this report was published, Pew Research Center improved the survey weights for greater accuracy. Subsequent analyses based on data from 15 European countries use updated weights leading to slight differences in some numbers between this report and [other publications](#). The substantive findings of this report are not affected by the revised weights. Please contact the Center for questions regarding weighting adjustments.

In Western Europe, few countries have an even mix of Protestants and Catholics

Protestants concentrated in Northern Europe, Catholics tend to live to the south



Note: Other religious categories are not shown (e.g., Jewish, Muslim, etc.).

Source: Survey conducted April-August 2017 in 15 countries. See Methodology for details.

Roughly five centuries after the rupture between Protestantism and Catholicism, Western

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Europe still mostly consists of countries whose populations are either predominantly Catholic or predominantly Protestant.

Catholics form the biggest group in nine of the countries surveyed, largely to the south. Protestants are the largest religious group in five countries, all in the north.

Germany – where Luther lived and wrote the list of 95 theological propositions whose publication in 1517 is the event many Protestants commemorate as the beginning of the Reformation – is 42% Catholic, 28% Protestant and 24% religiously unaffiliated. But even Germany is more religiously homogeneous on a regional level, with more Protestants in the north, Catholics in the south and people without a religious affiliation in the east. (See sidebar, page 11, for more on the Reformation.)

Most Western European countries lean heavily Protestant or heavily Catholic

% who identify as ...

	Catholic	Protestant	Unaffiliated
	%	%	%
More Protestant than Catholic			
Finland	0	73	22
Denmark	4	58	30
United Kingdom	17	54	24
Norway	1	47	43
Sweden	2	47	41
More Catholic than Protestant			
Italy	78	1	15
Portugal	77	4	15
Ireland	75	5	14
Austria	74	5	16
France	60	3	28
Spain	60	3	30
Switzerland	55	19	21
Belgium	49	4	37

Many Europeans identify with particular streams of Protestant Christianity rather than with Protestantism as a whole. For example, in Nordic countries, most Protestants identify as Lutheran, while in the UK, most identify as Anglican (or

Church of England). Anglicans sometimes describe their church as following a distinctive path that is neither Roman Catholic (since Henry VIII renounced the authority of the pope in 1534) nor wholly Protestant (since the Church of England still views itself as part of the universal or “catholic” church). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this analysis, Anglicans are included in the *broadly defined* Protestant category, along with the other churches that broke with Rome starting in the 16th century.

The Netherlands is the only country surveyed where a plurality of the adult population (48%) is religiously unaffiliated (identifying as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular”). But secularization trends are evident throughout the region. People with no religious affiliation make up substantial shares of the population in several countries, including roughly four-in-ten adults in Norway (43%), Sweden (41%) and Belgium (37%).

Germany	42	28	24
Predominantly religiously unaffiliated	%	%	%
Netherlands	20	18	48

Note: Other religious categories are not shown (e.g., Jewish, Muslim, etc.).

Source: Survey conducted April-August 2017 in 15 countries. See Methodology for details.

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Similar levels of religious observance among Catholics and Protestants in Western Europe

% who ...

	Say religion is very important in their lives	Pray daily	Attend church weekly
Among Protestants	%	%	%
Netherlands	51	58	43
Norway	27	27	9
Sweden	14	16	8
Germany	12	10	7
Finland	11	21	5
United Kingdom	11	6	9
Denmark	9	11	3
Switzerland	7	8	6

In addition, Catholics and Protestants in Western Europe generally show low levels of religious observance.

Relatively small percentages of both groups say that they pray daily (medians of 12% of Catholics and 14% of Protestants) and that religion is very important in their lives (13% of Catholics and 12% of Protestants). Attendance at church also is fairly low among both groups, although Catholics are somewhat more likely than Protestants to say they attend church at least once a week.

	MEDIAN	12	14	8
Among Catholics		%	%	%
Portugal		39	40	28
Spain		28	30	21
Ireland		22	17	21
Italy		21	19	25
Netherlands		14	17	5
Austria		13	7	11
Belgium		12	12	8
Germany		12	7	14
France		11	9	13
Switzerland		11	8	15
United Kingdom		10	9	9
MEDIAN		13	12	14

Source: Survey conducted April-August 2017 in 15 countries. See Methodology for details.
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Dutch Protestants stand out for their relatively high levels of religious observance: About half (51%) say religion is very important in their lives, and a majority (58%) report praying daily. In addition, 43% say they attend church weekly – higher than any Catholic population in Western Europe, and more than four times as high as Protestants in any other country in the region.

Among both Protestants and Catholics, people tend to say both faith and good works are necessary to get into heaven

Since the Protestant Reformation, sola fide, or salvation by “faith alone,” has been a distinguishing feature of Protestant theology.

Historically, Protestants have emphasized that people are saved not by their own good works or by penance, but by faith in the sacrifice of Jesus, through which God chose to forgive the sins of all humans. In Luther’s words: “It is faith alone which worthily and sufficiently justifies and saves the person.”¹ This was a major departure from the Catholic Church’s emphasis on the need for Christians to make amends for their sins through confession and penance.

Today, however, Western European Catholic and Protestant laity are no longer starkly divided by this theological issue: More Catholics and Protestants say both faith and good works are necessary to get into heaven than say faith alone leads to salvation. And considerable shares of both groups do not take a clear position on this issue, perhaps reflecting a lack of familiarity with the theological intricacies.

Catholics more likely than Protestants to view both good deeds and faith as necessary to get into heaven

% who say ____ to get into heaven

	Both good deeds and faith in God are necessary	Faith in God alone is needed (<i>sola fide</i>)	Other/DK/ref.
Among Protestants	%	%	%
United Kingdom	62	27	11
Germany	61	21	18
Switzerland	57	30	13
Finland	47	36	17
Netherlands	47	38	15
Sweden	47	17	35
Denmark	45	26	29
Norway	30	51	19
MEDIAN	47	29	18
Among Catholics	%	%	%
Netherlands	66	12	22
Spain	64	17	19
Portugal	63	22	15
Italy	61	26	13
Austria	60	21	19
Ireland	59	30	12
Germany	58	26	16
Belgium	55	19	26
Switzerland	53	33	13
France	51	31	18
United Kingdom	41	35	24
MEDIAN	59	26	18

Note: Totals for each country may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted April-August 2017 in 15 countries. See Methodology for details.

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¹ Eire, Carlos M.N. 2016. “Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650.”

To be sure, Catholics in Western Europe (median of 59%) are more likely than Protestants (median of 47%) to take the traditionally Catholic position that both good deeds and faith in God are necessary for salvation. But even Protestants in every country surveyed except Norway are more likely to say that both elements are necessary for salvation than to take the traditionally Protestant sola fide position. For example, nearly three times as many German Protestants say faith and good works are necessary to get into heaven (61%) as say faith alone is the way to heaven (21%).

In fact, in countries that have substantial shares of both Catholic and Protestant populations, only in the Netherlands are Catholics (66%) more likely than Protestants (47%) to say salvation comes from faith and good works. In Germany, Switzerland and the UK, Protestants are just as likely as Catholics – if not more likely – to espouse this traditional Catholic belief.

Among both Catholics and Protestants, those who say religion is “very” or “somewhat” important in their lives are more likely than those who say religion is less important to take their own tradition’s position on salvation.

Religious Catholics and Protestants more likely to identify with their own church’s salvation teaching

% who identify with their church’s teaching on salvation, among those who say religion is ___ in their lives

	Very/somewhat important	Not too/not very important	Diff.
Among Protestants	%	%	
Sweden	31	10	+21
Norway	55	40	+15
Finland	43	30	+13
Germany	26	13	+13
Denmark	34	22	+12
Switzerland	29	32	-3
United Kingdom	25	28	-3
Netherlands	42	n/a	n/a
Among Catholics	%	%	
Italy	70	45	+25
United Kingdom	54	29	+25
Germany	67	44	+23
Austria	69	47	+22
Ireland	65	48	+17
Switzerland	60	43	+17
France	58	43	+15
Portugal	65	53	+12
Spain	67	57	+10
Netherlands	69	61	+8
Belgium	58	52	+6

Note: Statistically significant differences are in **bold**. In the Netherlands, sample size of Protestants who say religion is not too or not at all important in their lives is too small for analysis. Source: Survey conducted April-August 2017 in 15 countries. See Methodology for details.

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Sidebar: Religious reformations and religious wars in Europe

If one date must be picked as the starting point of the Protestant Reformation, the conventional choice would be Oct. 31, 1517, when Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and university professor in Wittenberg, Germany, publicly posted a lengthy list of academic arguments against Catholic Church practices. That is the event widely being marked in this year's 500th anniversary commemorations of the Reformation, which eventually split Western Christianity and led to more than a century of religious warfare across Europe.²

Rather than describing a single Reformation that suddenly divided the Western church into two very different parts, however, many historians now speak of multiple reformations and emphasize the continuities as well as the differences between medieval Catholicism and Protestantism.³ Increasingly, scholars trace the seeds of dissent to church reformers from previous centuries. Prior to Luther (who was born in 1483 and died in 1546), reformers in the Middle Ages included Peter Waldo in northern Italy (circa 1140-1205), John Wycliffe in England (circa 1330-1384) and Jan Hus in what is now the Czech Republic (circa 1370-1415).

Still, Luther and the year 1517 play a pivotal role in the historical narrative. Initially, Luther railed mostly against one Catholic Church practice – the sale of indulgences – which he viewed as a form of corruption.⁴ Shortly thereafter, he also questioned the integrity of the papacy and the priesthood, arguing that ordinary Christians could have a more direct, unmediated relationship with God. He soon was arguing that popes and grand councils were fallible, and only the Bible was infallible. Pope Leo X excommunicated him, but Luther's arguments spread throughout Europe and found many echoes and variants. Other reformers active during his lifetime included Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich (1484-1531) and John Calvin in Geneva (1509-1564), whose strands of the Reformation came to be known as Reformed Christianity.

While various reformers and Protestant churches vehemently disagreed on theological issues, several doctrines were adopted by most Protestants, with slight variations. Among the most consequential were “scripture alone” (in Latin, *sola scriptura*), which held that the Bible, not the accumulated teachings of popes and church councils, was the ultimate source of authority for Christians; “faith alone” (*sola fide*), which held that salvation cannot be earned through good deeds – much less purchased through indulgences – but rather is freely granted by God to those who have faith in Jesus Christ; and “grace alone” (*sola gratia*), the idea that salvation comes directly from

² The term “Protestant” did not emerge until 1529, as a result of the Diet of Speyer. At this meeting, Lutheranism was outlawed within the Holy Roman Empire (including modern Germany), but a significant number of cities and regional princes protested this action. This is the protest referred to by the term “Protestant.” Examples of today's many Protestant denominations include: Anglican/Episcopal, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian. (See McGrath, Alister E. 1997. “Christian Theology: An Introduction.”)

³ Eire, Carlos M.N. 2016. “Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650.”

⁴ Luther's 95 Theses focused on indulgences, something many in the Catholic Church had wanted to reform. Indulgences were payments made to the church by sinners both to avoid time in purgatory and to demonstrate thankfulness to God and the church after they had been forgiven. Over time, however, the public began to view indulgences as a means of buying forgiveness. Luther argued that financial payments did not help people escape purgatory, and that forgiveness was based solely on a direct relationship between God and sinner. (See McGrath, Alister E. 1997. “Christian Theology: An Introduction”; and Marshall, Peter. 2009. “The Reformation: A Very Short Introduction.”)

God to each person, without any intermediaries such as priests, and hence the role of clergy is simply to be ministers in service to others.

In response to Protestantism's spread, reform efforts within the Catholic Church gained ground, including the founding of the Jesuit order. Many changes followed the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which condemned Protestant teachings as heresies but also sought to clarify Catholic teachings and led to codified versions of the Mass and Catholic breviary (prayer book) that lasted for centuries.

In an era when religion was interwoven with all aspects of life, including politics, the Reformation also set off religious violence across Europe, culminating in the Thirty Years' War, which lasted from 1618 to 1648. The Treaty of Westphalia finally ended that devastating war and granted minority rights for Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists in many parts of Europe. Still, religiously based wars continued until the early 18th century, and Catholic-Protestant tensions have extended into the modern era in places like Northern Ireland.

Even among more religious Catholics and Protestants, high levels of acceptance of one another

Despite the long history of Catholic-Protestant conflict in the aftermath of the Reformation, Western Europe's Catholics and Protestants are now very accepting of each other. In every country surveyed, roughly nine-in-ten or more Catholics and Protestants say they are willing to accept members of the other tradition as neighbors. And large majorities of both groups say they would be willing to accept members of the other religious group even as family members.

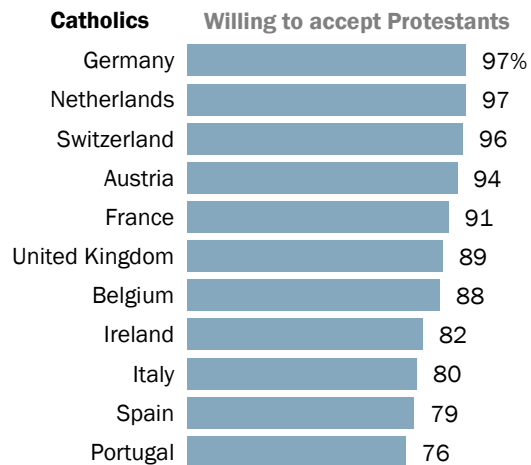
In two countries, Ireland and Italy, Catholics who say religion is at least somewhat important in their lives are considerably less likely than those who consider religion less important to say they would be willing to accept Protestants as family members or as neighbors. Still, majorities among both groups say they are willing to accept Protestants into their families. In Ireland, for example, 76% of Catholics for whom religion is very or somewhat important say they would be willing to accept Protestants as family members, compared with 93% of Irish Catholics who say religion is less important in their lives.

Among Protestants, those who are highly religious and less religious are about equally likely to say they would be willing to accept Catholics as neighbors or as family members.

College-educated Catholics are especially willing to accept Protestants as family members and neighbors, though majorities among those with less education also say this.

Vast majority of Protestants, Catholics willing to accept each other into family

% who say they would be ___ as family members



Source: Survey conducted April-August 2017 in 15 countries. See Methodology for details.

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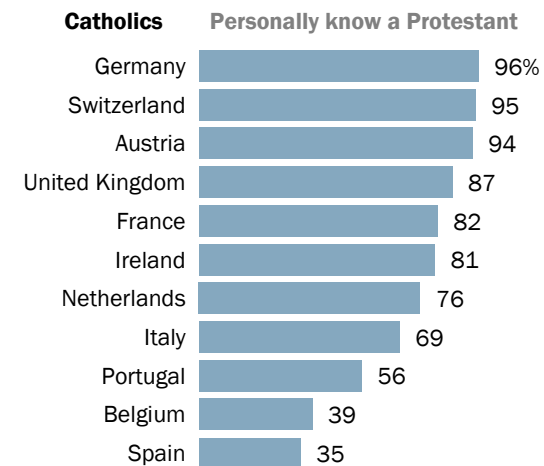
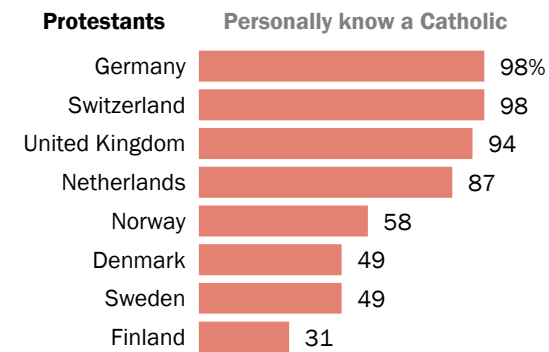
College-educated Catholics, Protestants more likely than others to know a member of the other faith

In most countries, majorities of Catholics and Protestants say they personally know a member of the other faith, but Protestants living in Nordic countries are less likely to have personal connections with Catholics. For example, just 31% of Finnish Protestants say they know a Catholic, as do roughly half of those living in Denmark (49%) and Sweden (49%). Among Catholics, people in Belgium (39%) and Spain (35%) are the least likely to say they personally know a Protestant.

Among both Catholics and Protestants, college-educated adults are more likely than those with less education to say they personally know a member of the other tradition. This is true in all Nordic countries. For example, in Norway, a majority (72%) of Protestants with a college education personally know a Catholic, compared with roughly half (51%) of those who have less education. A similar pattern is seen among Catholics in several countries, including Belgium (53% among college-educated adults vs. 34% among those with less education) and Spain (46% vs. 32%).

With some exceptions, most Protestants and Catholics personally know people of the other tradition

% who say they personally know anyone who is Catholic/Protestant



Source: Survey conducted April-August 2017 in 15 countries. See Methodology for details.

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More people see Catholics and Protestants as religiously similar

Majorities or pluralities of adults (including Catholics, Protestants and people with no religious affiliation) in all 15 countries surveyed across Western Europe say Catholics and Protestants today are “religiously more similar than they are different.”

Still, sizable minorities in several countries see Catholics and Protestants as “religiously more different than they are similar.” Nearly four-in-ten adults take this position in Ireland (39%), Italy (39%) and the United Kingdom (37%).

Generally, people in predominantly Catholic countries are more likely than those elsewhere to say the two groups are religiously different today. In most predominantly Catholic countries surveyed, roughly one-third or more adults take this position.

Elsewhere, smaller shares see differences between the two groups, including 18% in Norway and 19% in Sweden.

People in predominantly Protestant countries also are somewhat more likely than those in Catholic countries to not take a position on the issue. Among both Catholics and Protestants across the region, the prevailing view is that the two traditions of Western Christianity are more similar than different (see page 4).

Substantial minorities, especially in predominantly Catholic countries, see religious differences between Catholics and Protestants

% who say Catholics and Protestants TODAY are religiously ...

	More similar than they are different	More different than they are similar	Other/DK/ref.
More Protestant than Catholic	%	%	%
Norway	59	18	23
Finland	58	23	20
United Kingdom	54	37	9
Sweden	54	19	27
Denmark	52	28	20
MEDIAN	54	23	20
More Catholic than Protestant	%	%	%
Germany	62	30	8
Austria	62	32	6
Belgium	56	26	18
Switzerland	56	36	8
France	49	34	17
Ireland	49	39	11
Italy	48	39	13
Spain	44	28	28
Portugal	41	32	28
MEDIAN	49	32	13
Predominantly religiously unaffiliated	%	%	%
Netherlands	64	24	12

Note: Totals for each country may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted April-August 2017 in 15 countries. See Methodology for details.

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People who say they are personally acquainted with a member of the other Christian tradition are especially likely to see religious similarities between Catholics and Protestants. On the other hand, across the region, those who consider religion important in their lives are more likely than those to whom religion is not important to say the two groups are more different than similar religiously. In Ireland, for example, 43% of those who say religion is very or somewhat important in their lives see the two groups as different, compared with 35% of those who say religion has a less important place in their lives.

Methodology

Pew Research Center conducted surveys among 24,599 adults across 15 countries in Western Europe. Interviewing was carried out under the direction of GfK through telephones (both cellphones and landlines) from April to August 2017. The questionnaire administered by survey interviewers was designed by Pew Research Center staff in consultation with subject matter experts and advisers to the project. The wording of several questions was tested cognitively, and the full survey questionnaire was pretested in all countries prior to fieldwork.

The surveys are nationally representative, with samples of about 1,500 or more respondents in each country, allowing researchers to analyze the opinions of Catholics in 11 countries and of Protestants in eight countries. The weighted datasets in each country match national benchmarks on the population's age distribution, gender, education and region of residence.

The study, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation, is part of a larger effort by Pew Research Center to understand religious change and its impact on societies around the world. The Center previously has conducted religion-focused surveys across [sub-Saharan Africa](#); the Middle East-North Africa region and many [other countries with large Muslim populations](#); [Latin America and the Caribbean](#); [Israel](#); [Central and Eastern Europe](#); and the United States.

More details about our international survey methodology, including country-specific sample designs for this study, are [available here](#).

[General information on international survey research.](#)

Sample sizes and margin of error

	Total	Catholics	Protestants	Margin of error (pctg. pts.)
Austria	1,791	1,296	71*	±3.1
Belgium	1,500	743	54*	±3.1
Denmark	1,493	51*	925	±2.9
Finland	1,498	0*	1,134	±3.0
France	1,788	1,125	43*	±2.8
Germany	2,211	866	652	±2.7
Ireland	1,499	1,101	84*	±3.1
Italy	1,804	1,395	27*	±3.1
Netherlands	1,497	297	281	±2.9
Norway	1,498	19*	754	±3.2
Portugal	1,501	1,086	63*	±3.2
Spain	1,499	879	38*	±3.2
Sweden	1,493	34*	720	±3.0
Switzerland	1,686	958	312	±3.4
United Kingdom	1,841	281	989	±2.9

* Indicates that the sample size is too small for analysis of this group in the given country.

Source: Survey conducted April-August 2017 in 15 countries. See Methodology for details.

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