



September 2023

## Europe's religious landscape: Faith and religious diversity in an era of rapid change

### Religion Monitor 2023 findings on religious diversity

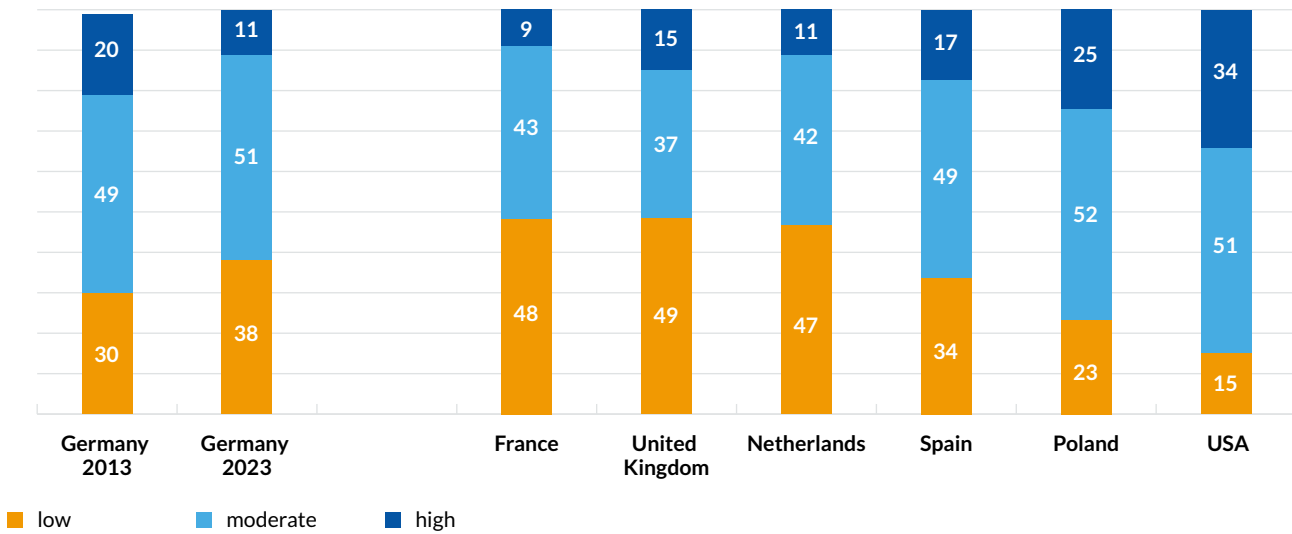
How important are religion and faith in today's world, especially in the midst of ongoing crises? How diverse is Europe's religious landscape, and what do people think about this diversity? These are the questions addressed by the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Religion Monitor 2023. Since 2008, the Religion Monitor has been conducting cross-national studies on the role and evolution of religion in its various forms and in relation to social cohesion. More than 10,000 people in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States were surveyed for the Religion Monitor 2023.

In the following, we present a summary of our key findings. In-depth analyses of the survey results will be presented in a series of individual studies that will cover topics such as social cohesion in a multifaith society and the role played by religion in fostering social solidarity as well as crisis management.

### Increase in secularization, religious diversity and criticism of religious institutions, but religion still highly valued

The Religion Monitor shows that the trend toward secularization observed over the past ten years extends across national borders. Over the last decade, the share of respondents who could be categorized as "moderately" or only "a little" religious has increased significantly. However, there are still significant differences among the surveyed countries. In the United States, only about one in six respondents are "a little" or not at all religious. In predominantly Catholic Poland, however, this applies to one in every four people. In Spain, this applies to roughly a third of the population, while in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and France, nearly half of those surveyed fall into either of these categories. In Germany, 38% are either "a little" or not at all religious. To place this in context, ten years ago, this figure was still 30%.

FIGURE 1 Religiosity in cross-national comparison (%)



**Note:** The assessment of religiosity relies on the so-called Centrality Index, which combines various aspects of religious expression and experience, belief in God, prayer frequency and attendance at religious services.  
**Source:** Religion Monitor 2023

BertelsmannStiftung

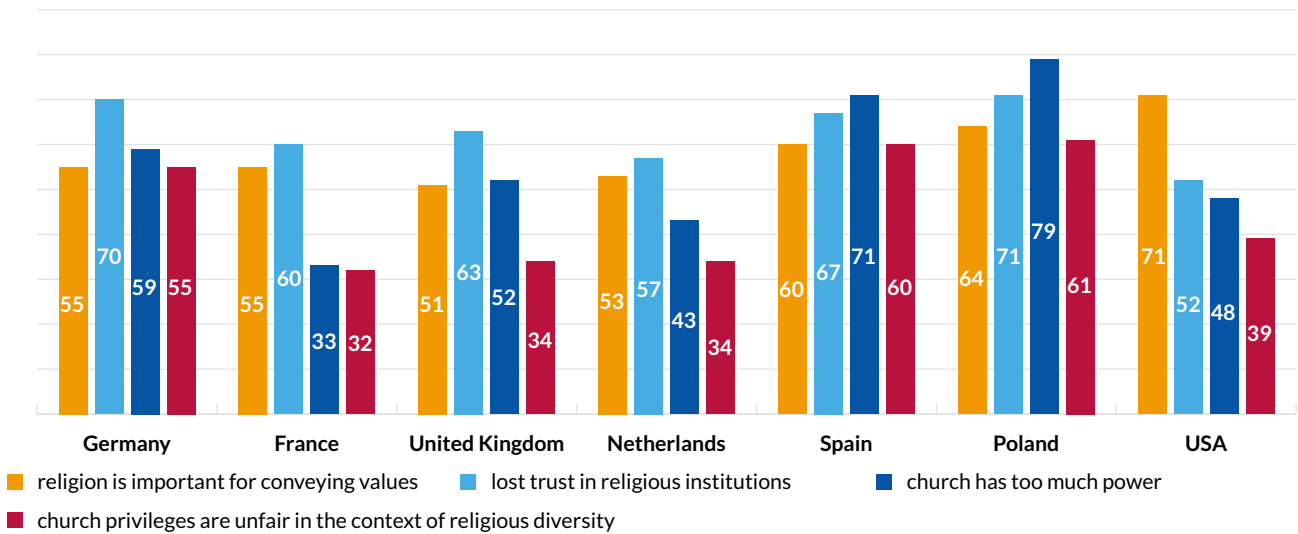
The findings of the Religion Monitor 2023 show that criticism of religious institutions is widespread, but they also highlight a broad recognition of the societal significance of religiosity. Large segments of the population in all the surveyed countries have lost trust in religious institutions. Trust levels vary, with figures for European countries ranging from 57% (Netherlands) to approximately 70% (Germany and Poland). Many citizens view the Church as wielding excessive power, particularly in traditionally Catholic-dominated countries like Spain (71% agreement) and Poland (79%). Furthermore, many Europeans view existing church privileges as unjust toward other religious communities, with Spain and Poland topping the list at 60% and 61%, respectively.

However, despite the critiques leveled at religious institutions, a majority of people in all seven surveyed countries recognize the importance of religion when it comes to conveying values. This sentiment is shared by 51% to 55% of respondents in Western European countries such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Moving further south and east, an even larger proportion of people regard religion as crucial for transmitting essential values, with Spain at 60% and Poland at 64%. In the United States, this approval rate is even higher, at 71%.

Criticism of churches thus does not necessarily signify a renunciation of religiosity. This is evident, for instance, in Germany. Religion Monitor data shows that one in five members of a given Christian denomination in Germany plan to leave their church. This does not imply, however, that these church members no longer consider themselves religious. In fact, 92% of Germans who say they intend to leave the church agree with the statement, “One can be a Christian without belonging to a specific church.” Here we see that “being religious” is no longer to be equated with “belonging to a church.”

In addition to secularization and widespread criticism of religious and church institutions, another significant trend observed in Europe is its increasing religious diversity. Once again, a look at Germany shows just how much the denominational composition has changed in recent decades. In 1950, nearly 96% of Germans identified with Christian denominations, primarily Catholicism and Protestantism. Those of different faiths or nonreligious individuals made up only 4.4%. According to the 2023 Religion Monitor, the picture today is entirely different. Only 50% of Germans now identify as Christian. The largest non-Christian religious community in Germany is Islam, accounting for 8.5%. Conversely, a substantial number of Germans – over one third (35.9%) – do not align themselves with any religious community at all.

FIGURE 2 Religion’s relevance in conveying values – criticism of religious institutions (%)



Source: Religion Monitor 2023

BertelsmannStiftung

The Religion Monitor also highlights the religious diversity present in other surveyed European countries. The proportion of people identifying with the Christian faith in the Netherlands is 36%, in the United Kingdom, it’s 43%, and in France, it’s 48%. In Spain (60%) and Poland (73%), Christians are clearly the majority. In these two countries, as well as in France, Catholicism remains the predominant form of Christianity (90% or more of Christians). In Germany, the Catholic and Protestant denominations are roughly equally represented. In the Netherlands, too, the Christian landscape is not dominated by any one denomination, although Catholics represent the largest group at 52% of Christians. In the United Kingdom, 53% of Christian believers identify with the Anglican Church.

The proportion of citizens adhering to the Muslim faith remains low in the Catholic-dominated countries of Poland and Spain (0.2% in Poland and 1.3% in Spain). According to the 2023 Religion Monitor, 3.6% of people in the United Kingdom identify as Muslim, about 5% in the Netherlands, and 6% in France.

Religion Monitor findings also underscore just how large the group of those without religious affiliation has become, especially in Western Europe and not just in Germany. For example, in France, 36.5%, in the United Kingdom, 45.9%, and in the Netherlands, even

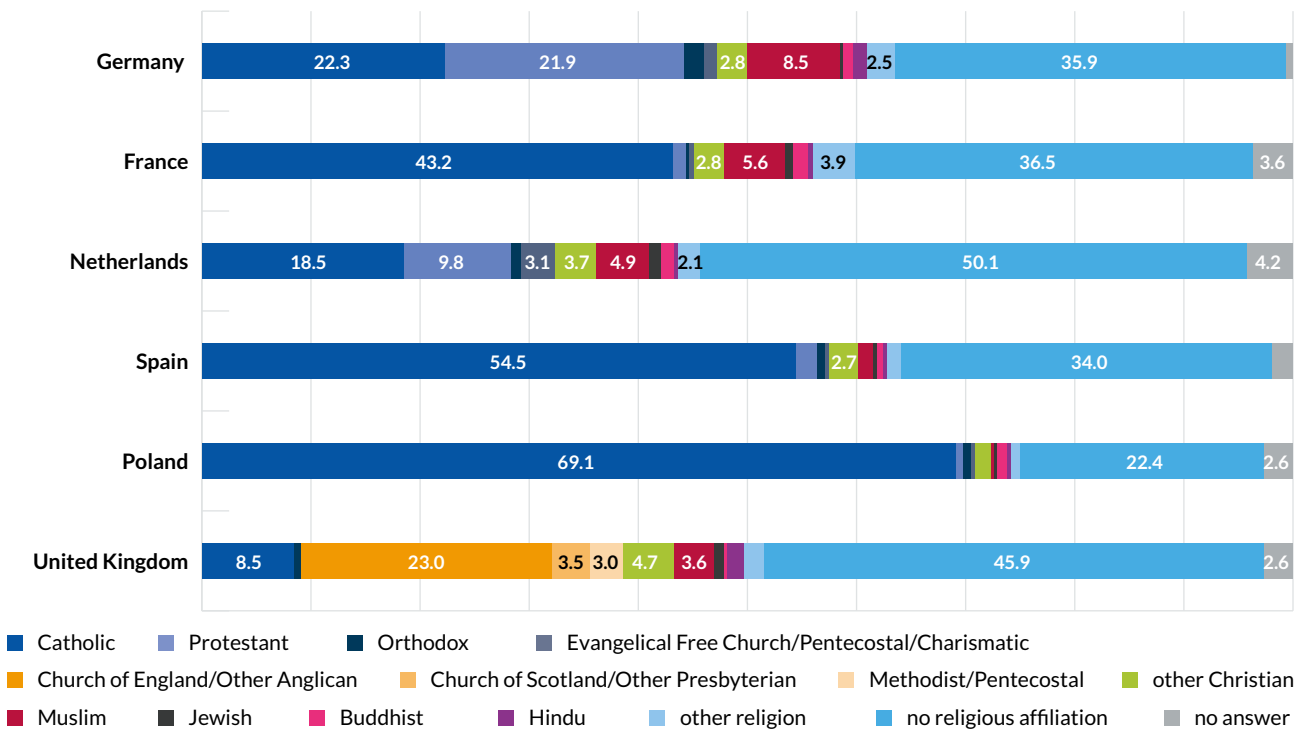
50.1% of the population do not belong to any religious community. This does not necessarily mean that these individuals lack faith or religious convictions, simply that if they do hold such beliefs, they do not align with any of the established denominations.

### Religious freedom is universally acknowledged, but genuine appreciation for other religions lags behind

How do people feel about the fundamental right to religious freedom? Religion Monitor findings show that religious freedom enjoys widespread support. A clear majority of respondents in all surveyed countries agree with the statement that everyone should have the right to change or abandon their religious beliefs. The shares of respondents in agreement with this statement range from 85% in the Netherlands to 92% in the United Kingdom and 93% in Germany. Religion Monitor findings thus point to a continued high level of religious tolerance. However, upon closer examination, we see that in some cases, especially when assessing openness and appreciation rather than general fundamental rights, this tolerance has diminished since the 2013 Religion Monitor.

Today, 80% of Germans believe in maintaining an open attitude toward other religions. A decade ago, this figure

FIGURE 3 The religious makeup of individual countries in Europe (%)



**Note:** The numbers for smaller religious communities are approximations and difficult to estimate due to the limited number of respondents for these groups.  
**Source:** Religion Monitor 2023

BertelsmannStiftung

stood at 89%. Moreover, when asked whether every religion has a “true core,” only 59% of respondents in Germany affirm this statement today. In contrast, in 2013, the approval rate was at 72%, which is significantly higher. It is worth noting that this attitude is primarily

supported by Christians and Muslims. Among the nonreligious, only 38% share this viewpoint.

In the other countries surveyed, the call for religious openness meets with approval across a relatively wide

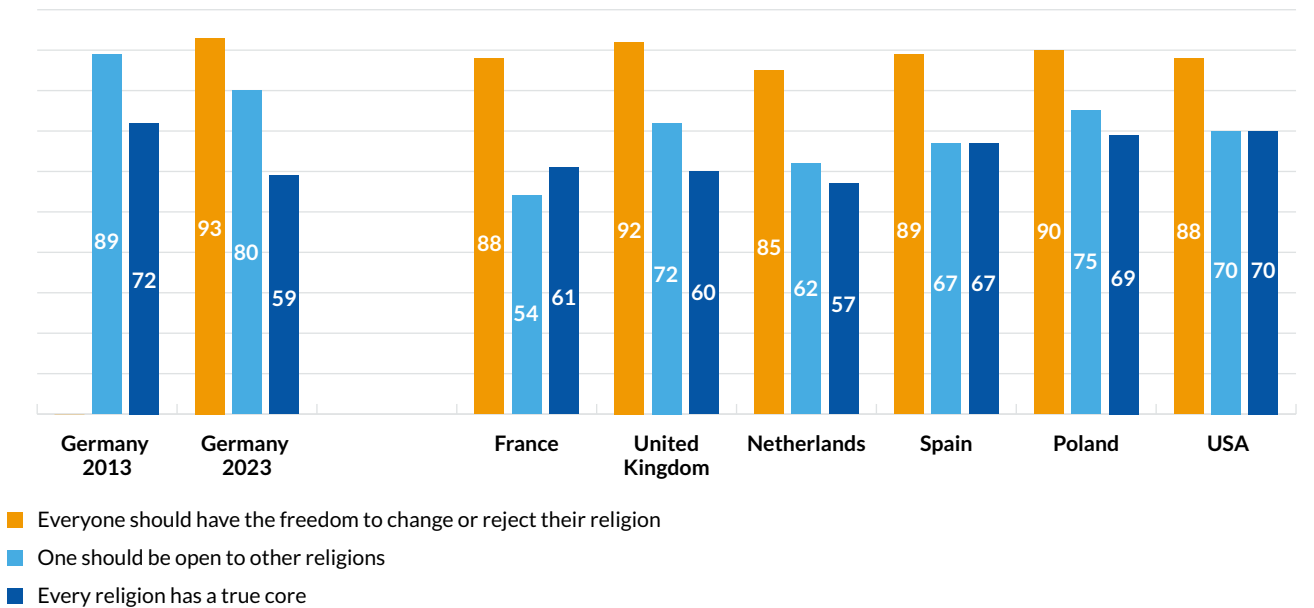
### Religion Monitor – notes on methodology

The data for the Religion Monitor 2023 was collected by *infas Institut für angewandte Sozialwissenschaft GmbH* on behalf of the *Bertelsmann Stiftung*. For the survey in Germany, we employed a registration-based sample for the survey, supplemented by an additional sample from an online access panel, which were then linked together. The 2023 Religion Monitor builds upon previous survey waves conducted in 2009, 2013 and 2017 and focuses on the population in Germany aged 16 and above.

Further surveys were conducted in France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the United States using online access panels. The target population for the international study modules consisted of individuals living in the respective countries with internet access aged 16 and above.

The overall dataset encompasses a total of 10,657 respondents, distributed as follows: Germany = 4,363 respondents, France = 1,065, the United Kingdom = 1,045, the Netherlands = 1,051, Spain = 1,046, Poland = 1,046, and the USA = 1,041. These surveys were carried out in June and July 2022.

FIGURE 4 Religious tolerance and openness (%)



Source: Religion Monitor 2023

BertelsmannStiftung

spectrum, ranging from 54% (France) to 75% (Poland). The belief that every religion has a true core is held by only 57% of people in the Netherlands, with the highest percentage found in Poland (69%) and the United States (70%). All in all, these figures suggest that religious diversity is not viewed positively across all segments of society.

### A threat or an enrichment? Views on religious diversity are mixed

Religious diversity is, in principle, a key aspect of European identity. Religious freedom is firmly anchored in the EU Constitution as a fundamental human right. However, this does not mean that religious pluralism is always embraced without reservations or conflict. The Religion Monitor findings also show a mixed picture of how citizens perceive religious diversity, thus pointing to societal divisions. In the United Kingdom, Spain, Poland and Germany, this question roughly divides the population into equal parts: in each case, about one-third of respondents consider religious diversity a threat, an enrichment, or “neither.” In France and the Netherlands, the perception of diversity as a threat is more pronounced (43% and 42%, respectively). In contrast, the United States has a relatively positive

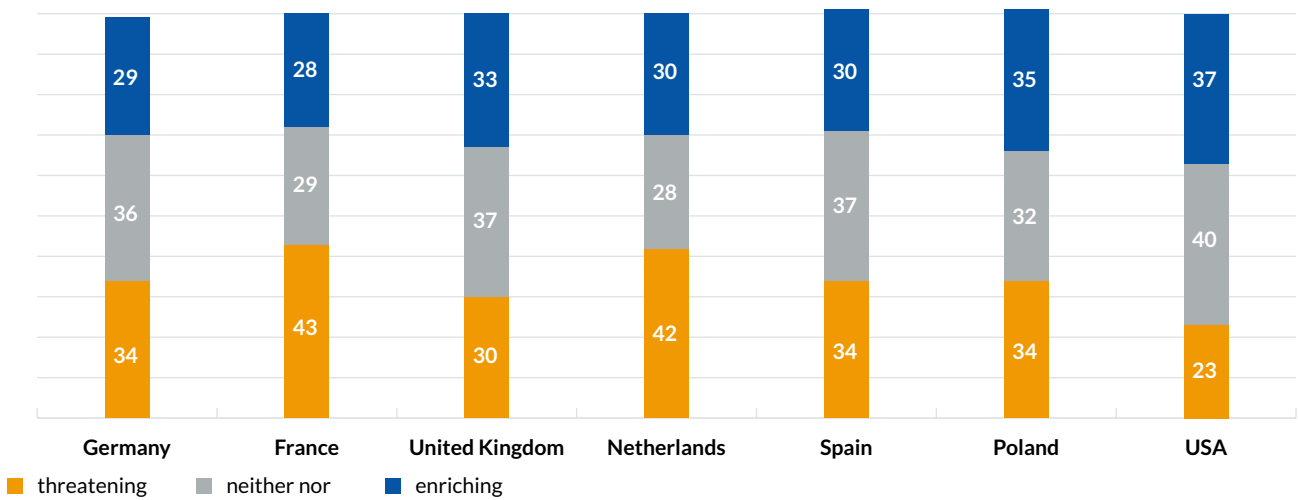
outlook: there, 37% of people consider the diversity of faiths as enriching.

Despite the variations among countries, we see a common thread: only a minority of people in all the countries surveyed by the Religion Monitor view religious diversity as distinctly positive and enriching. This prevailing critical perspective on diversity also carries implications for societal interactions. After all, as the Religion Monitor studies demonstrate, a favorable outlook on religious diversity is linked to increased interpersonal trust, and trust, in turn, plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion.

### Personal contacts are key to battling bias and embracing diversity

Interacting with individuals from diverse faith backgrounds helps build bridges and broadens one’s perspective on the enriching aspects of religious diversity. This phenomenon, often referred to as the “contact hypothesis,” finds confirmation in the findings of the Religion Monitor. According to the research conducted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, personal interactions in various settings, such as the workplace or leisure activities like sports clubs and cultural gatherings, play a pivotal role in diminishing prejudices

FIGURE 5 Perception of religious diversity (%)



Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding  
 Source: Religion Monitor 2023

BertelsmannStiftung

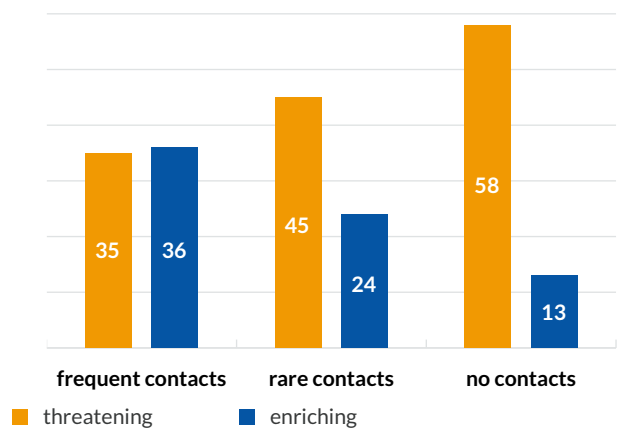
between members of different religious communities. The pattern of more frequent contact leading to a more positive perception of diversity is evident across all the countries examined by the Religion Monitor. Let’s consider Germany and France as illustrative examples.

In Germany, approximately 80% of Muslims engage in regular leisure activities with individuals of different faiths, while among Christians, this figure stands at just under 37%. Among those who have no interfaith contacts, less than one-fifth hold a positive view of religious diversity. Conversely, among those who frequently engage in interreligious interactions, 40% regard diversity as enriching. In France, the positive impact of personal contact is similarly significant. Among people in France who maintain extensive interfaith connections, 36% view religious diversity as enriching. However, the situation is notably different for those in France who never interact with individuals of different faiths in their personal lives. In this group, only 13% see religious plurality as enriching, while 58% perceive it as a threat.

These numbers clearly indicate that interfaith encounters can indeed bolster trust and social cohesion. Nevertheless, broader research in this field makes it evident that this process is not a straightforward, automatic one. Personal interactions, as per research findings, only diminish prejudices and reservations when they fulfill at least two conditions:

they must occur on an equal footing and involve genuine collaboration. Contacts in one’s personal life serve this purpose particularly effectively – whether they entail friendships, shared leisure activities, or cooperation as parents in childcare centers and schools. However, Religion Monitor findings demonstrate that, in all the surveyed European countries, most people have infrequent or no contact with individuals of other faiths in their personal lives. Frequent interfaith contact is most prevalent in France (47%), as well as in Germany and the United

FIGURE 6 The French case: interreligious contacts and perception of religious diversity (%)

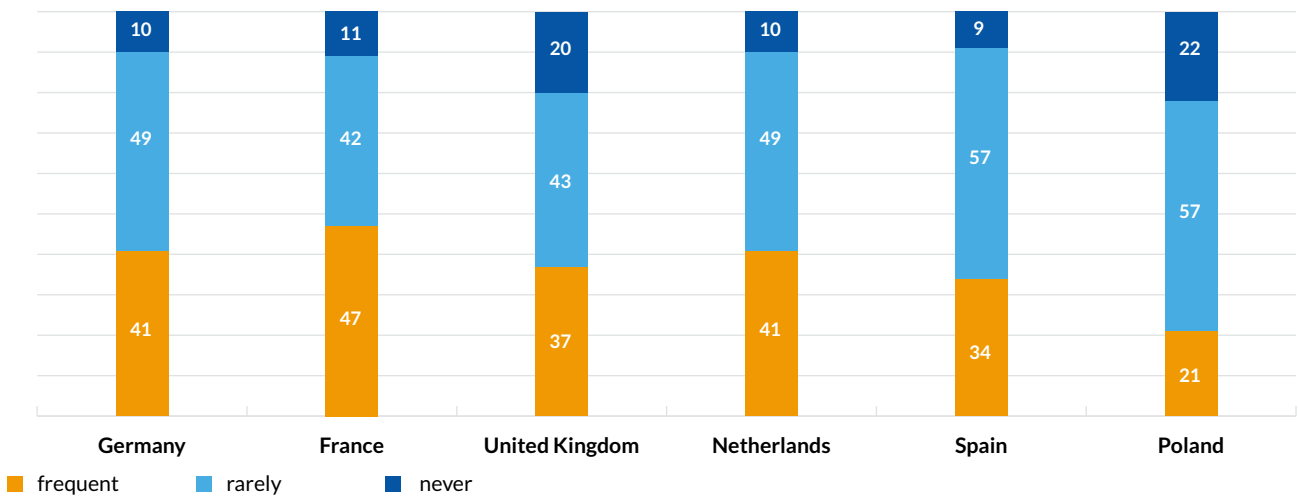


Source: Religion Monitor 2023

BertelsmannStiftung



FIGURE 7 Interfaith contact during free time (%)



Source: Religion Monitor 2023

BertelsmannStiftung

Kingdom (both at 41%). It is least common in Poland, where only about one-fifth of the population regularly engages with individuals of different faiths.

### In-depth knowledge about religions is crucial to fostering a more positive view of religious diversity

What other factors, besides personal contact, influence how people evaluate religious diversity? For instance, does knowledge of religious topics help dispel negative perceptions? And how widespread is this knowledge to begin with?

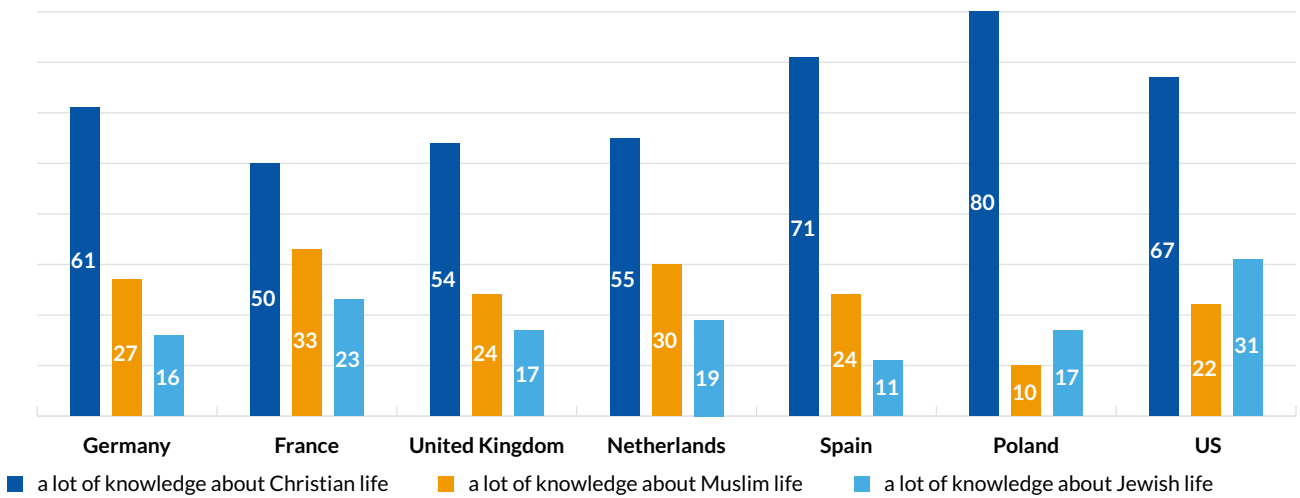
A look at the countries surveyed by the Religion Monitor reveals that a significant proportion of the population in each country believes they possess substantial knowledge about Christian life in their own country. However, in France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, these values range only between 50% and 55%. These figures are relatively low for countries with a strong historical influence of Christianity. In terms of knowledge about Islam, only a tenth (Poland) to a third (France) consider themselves well-informed. Knowledge levels are even lower in Europe when it comes to Jewish life in their own country: only about one in ten (Spain) to just under one in four (France) claim to be well-informed. In the United States, this percentage is significantly higher at 31%.

How does this knowledge influence perceptions of religious diversity? The 2023 Religion Monitor has explored the connection between one’s perception of diversity and their (self-attributed) knowledge about religious life. Here it becomes clear that there is no straightforward formula like “More knowledge equals a positive view of diversity.” Instead, it’s apparent that the subjective level of knowledge can sometimes act as a polarizing factor. The more a person believes they understand about religious life, the more defined their stance becomes, either in favor of or against religious diversity.

This is exemplified by the figures for Germany: Among those who profess to have a great deal of knowledge about religious life in their country, both the percentage of those who consider diversity as a threat (34% in this group) and the percentage of people who view diversity as enriching (39%) are notably high.

It appears that the nature of self-perceived knowledge plays a crucial role. Many people obtain their information through mainly one-sided and negative media reports, which can reinforce negative stereotypes. Instead, nuanced educational and media resources are essential to fostering mutual respect. Findings from the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s assessment of other nations suggest a consistent correlation between knowledge and how diversity is evaluated.

FIGURE 8 Knowledge of Christian, Muslim and Jewish life in own country (%)

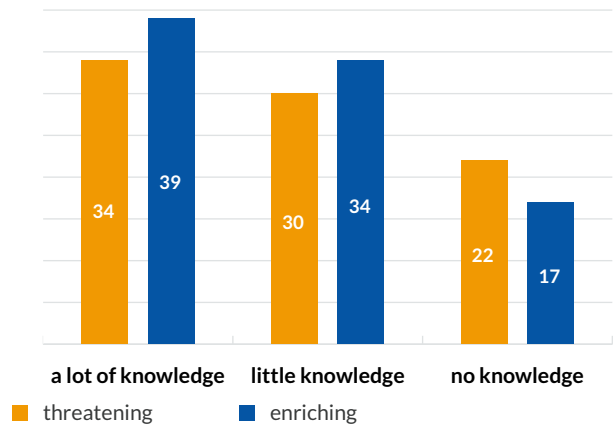


Source: Religion Monitor 2023

BertelsmannStiftung

The findings from the Religion Monitor suggest that both personal interactions and comprehensive interfaith education can contribute to fostering openness to beliefs and rituals that differ from one’s own. In addition, these survey findings point to the positive contribution personal contacts and in-depth knowledge can make to living together in diversity.

FIGURE 9 The German case: knowledge about religious life and perception of religious diversity (%)



Source: Religion Monitor 2023

BertelsmannStiftung

**Legal notice**

© Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh  
 Bertelsmann Stiftung  
 Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256 | 33311 Gütersloh  
 Phone +49 5241 81-0  
 www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de  
**Responsible for content** Dr. Yasemin El Menouar  
**In collaboration with** Armin Erkens,  
 navos – Public Dialogue Consultants GmbH

**Translation** Barbara Serfozo, Berlin  
**Photo credits** © Monkey Business – stock.adobe.com  
**Design** Nicole Meyerholz, Bielefeld

**Contact**  
 Dr. Yasemin El-Menouar, Senior Expert  
 Phone +49 5241 81-81524  
 yasemin.el-menouar@bertelsmann-stiftung.de