The situation of religion in modern European society can be characterized by the processes of religious deinstitutionalization and pluralization. The study investigates to what extent the individual's attitude towards these phenomena is related to a certain style of belief. We assume that the attitude towards compatibility of religion and modernity, the acceptance or rejection of religious pluralism, and the dealing with religious truth claims affects the individual belief. The Post-Critical-Belief Scale (Hutsebaut 1996) was used to measure the stages of belief. It allows a multidimensional approach by taking the two dimensions of Literal vs. Symbolic understanding of religion and Inclusion vs. Exclusion of Transcendence into account. A survey among 1636 catholic teachers of religion from seven European countries shows that the individual's perception of religion and religious plurality in modern society and his/her religious belief are significantly related. Furthermore, the results confirm that the distinction of belief and disbelief and literal or symbolic thinking is important, though partly in a sense other than we had expected.

1. Theoretical Framework: Religion in Modern Europe

The Christian Heritage of Europe and its Loss of Significance in Modern Times

Geographically Europe is an alliance of adjoining states. However, it represents more than a territorial unity; the cultural “European” imprint signifies that all European countries have something in common that distinguishes them from Non-European nations. Of course, the discussion about the relationship of national and European identity is as old as the idea of Europe itself. It arouses more and more awareness especially regarding the process of the European unification and the problem of its competitiveness amid globalization (Smith 1992). However, besides the reality of national histories and traditions, politics and economics, what is the common heritage that binds those different nations together? Is it really Christian religion, that is often considered as the legacy unifying Europe as a cultural unity? There is no doubt that Christian religion has crucially shaped the worldview of Europeans for centuries, that Christian churches have not only
promoted great architecture and art, but also influenced the legal system and moral concepts and founded many charitable institutions. Until today the majority of the European population officially belongs to one of the Christian Mainstream-Churches (Davie 2002). The term “Christian biased heritage” is widely used, not just by conservative observers, and confessional religious education is established at public schools in many European countries (Schreiner 2000). However, we do observe a decline of the overall significance of the Christian religion since the 1960s. Modernization has resulted in fundamental social changes of deinstitutionalization and detraditionalization, tremendously affecting the religious situation in Europe. Institutionalized religion has lost its dominant role in society, and religious tradition seems to be no longer binding. The once unquestioned authority of the Christian Churches has been considerably weakened. Phenomena expressing these changes are the declining number of church-members and church-goers and the diminishing participation in religious rituals. Regarding the institutional decline of religion the sociologist Grace Davie even speaks of an “unchurched Europe” (Davie 2002), meaning that, although Europe has been historically shaped by Christian religion, the European society has become increasingly secularized over the last decades. Religion in general – and Christian religion in particular – has lost its public significance and is often treated as a private issue. The political discussion about the European Constitution and the dispute whether and how Europe should avow its Christian roots affects the heterogeneously regulated relationship of religion and state in European countries and reflects the disagreement on the public function of religion. Considering this, one is bound to ask whether religion and modernity will be compatible in the future. According to the traditional understanding of secularization, the more modern a society, the less important religious matters: scientific explanations of the world replace religious approaches of interpretation, the individual’s quest for autonomy seemingly contradicts the claim of religious obedience, just as the modern preference for events contrast with the binding commitment to a religious community. Nevertheless, there are some phenomena that refute a general decay of religion.

Pluralization of Religion

Plurality, as keystone of modernity, is one of the main characteristics of modern society. Besides value plurality, social plurality, and political plurality, the religious field of Europe has become strikingly pluralistic