

From “Enemies of the Cross” To “Brethren in Faith”: Empire, Decolonization, and the Curious End of Europe’s Religious Wars

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Udi Greenberg is an associate professor of European history at Dartmouth College. His work focuses on the intersection of ideas and international politics in modern Europe. His first book, *The Weimar Century: Germany Emigres and the Cold War* (Princeton UP), was published in 2014 and was awarded the Council of European Studies' book prize (for best book in European studies 2014-2015). He currently works on the transformation of European Christianity during the era of high imperialism and decolonization.

The paper:

This paper explores the surprising end of Europe’s Catholic-Protestant conflict. For centuries, European Christian religious, political, and cultural life had been divided along denominational lines; political parties, schools, and labor unions were often strictly Catholic or Protestant, with each group decrying the other as heretical. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, Europe experienced a radical revolution in intra-Christian relations. After centuries of mutual hostility, Catholics and Protestants across the continent increasingly began making peace with each other; they founded common social associations, cooperated in lay organizations, and declared they were “brethren in faith.” While scholars have largely attributed this unanticipated shift to the trauma of Nazi persecution or the Cold War, this paper argues that a major motor behind it was the collapse of Europe’s colonial project. For centuries, both Catholic and Protestant organizations had been active participants in European imperial expansion. Much of the hostility between them therefore stemmed from a sense of global competition: the belief that only they truly represented the West’s “civilizing mission.” Yet the challenges of postwar decolonization changed their calculations. A growing sense that European—and Christian—expansion was ending and that Europe’s cultural and religious influence was on the decline led Protestants and Catholics to view each other as necessary partners in the fight against Islam, Communism, and nationalist revolutionary ideologies in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. This cooperation, the paper shows, in turn laid the groundwork for their shifting views in Europe.