

Research Note: Religious Decline or Religious Change?

Evidence from Thirteen Western-European Countries (1981-2008)

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ABSTRACT

The tenability of the thesis of religious decline has become increasingly contested, with critics pointing out that religion has changed rather than declined, maintaining in effect that the decline of traditional Christian religiosity should not be mistaken for a decline of religion *tout court*. To test this claim, we investigate whether in Western-Europe traditional Christian religiosity and religiosity more broadly conceived have both declined over time. Analysing data from the European Values Study (1981-2008) we demonstrate that while both have indeed declined, the remaining religious deviate increasingly from traditional Christian religiosity. Religion has hence not only declined, but changed as well.

KEYWORDS religious decline; religious change; secularization; traditional Christian religiosity; spiritual revolution; Easternization of the West

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Introduction

The thesis of religious decline, central to secularization theory, has become massively contested among social-scientific students of religion. Its critics observe not so much decline, but rather change in the religious landscapes of Western-Europe, in effect pointing out that the decline of Christianity's traditional institutional, doctrinal and ritual dimensions should not be mistaken for a decline of religion *tout court*.

One of the most influential critical voices is Grace Davie, whose 'believing without belonging' thesis asserts that in Britain, and more generally in Western-Europe, "some sort of religiosity persists despite the obvious drop in practice. The sacred does not disappear – indeed in many ways it is becoming more rather than less prevalent in contemporary society." (Davie 1994, 43) Elsewhere she is more specific regarding the aspects of religion that do actually persist, namely "feelings, experience[s] and the more numinous aspects of religious belief" whereas "religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment display an undeniable degree of secularization." (Idem, 4-5) This suggests that many who consider themselves religious and/or spiritual nowadays increasingly prioritize feelings and experiences of the sacred while simultaneously relativizing (or even rejecting) religion's institutional, ritual, and doctrinal aspects. While Davie largely leaves open whether those concerned can still reasonably be referred to as 'Christian', her analysis suggests that they are certainly not Christian in a traditional sense.

Others who have influentially critiqued the thesis of religious decline are Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead, and Colin Campbell. Whereas Heelas and Woodhead (2005) suggest that a 'spiritual revolution' may be unfolding, one in which 'life-as religion' is increasingly giving way to 'subjective-life spirituality', or 'theistic and non-theistic spiritualities of life' (Heelas 2002),

Campbell (2007, 41) even goes so far as to observe “a fundamental revolution in Western civilization, one that can be compared in significance to the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the Enlightenment.” He understands the latter as an ‘Easternization of the West’, observing that the religious worldview that has historically characterized the West is increasingly being replaced by its Eastern counterpart. While these authors understand spiritualities of life of the ‘New Age’ variety as epitomizing this process of religious transformation, they also point to more de-traditionalized forms of Christianity such as Pentecostalism, the evangelical charismatic movement, the neo-charismatic movement, and the like (Campbell 2007; Heelas 2002; Heelas et al. 2005).

They in effect point at four different but interconnected changes that have to do with religion’s ontology, epistemology, soteriology, and its social organization. First, the traditional Christian ontology of the sacred as a transcendent personal God is increasingly making way for an immanently present divine spirit. Second, the traditional Christian epistemology of faith, i.e., the acceptance of God’s revealed word as truth, is increasingly giving way to an experiential epistemology of direct personal and spiritual experience of the sacred. Third, the traditional Christian soteriology of gaining admission to God’s heavenly kingdom by abstaining from sin is increasingly making way for overcoming alienation and suffering in the here and now by ‘listening to one’s heart’, i.e., by taking spiritual experiences seriously in deciding what to do and what to abstain from. Fourth, the traditional Christian social organization of churches that unite believers and expect them to attend their services is increasingly giving way to less institutionalized religious or spiritual movements. With such more loosely organized networks or small groups becoming more important, the boundary between insiders (members) and outsiders (non-members) increasingly fades away.

In summary, the general point that critics of the decline of religion thesis make is that what we have been witnessing in Western-Europe over the past decades is a shift away from the traditional Christian religious model, but not the disappearance of religiosity more broadly conceived. We investigate, therefore, *whether traditional Christian religiosity has indeed declined over time in Western-Europe, and whether the same applies to religiosity more broadly conceived.*

Data and Operationalization

We make use of the European Values Study, a repeated cross-sectional dataset with currently four available waves (1981, 1990, 1999, and 2008) (EVS 2015). We confine our sample to those thirteen European countries that have data available for all four waves: Belgium, Denmark, France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Great Britain, Northern Ireland, and West-Germany. This results in a dataset with 64,792 individuals distributed over fifty-two country-year combinations. The average number of respondents per country-year combination is 1,246 with a minimum of 304 in Northern Ireland (1990), and a maximum of 2,792 in Belgium (1990). All of these countries have a Christian heritage, and in none of them did Communist rule suppress religion at any time during the period under study.

Traditional Christian religiosity (with its characteristic ontology, epistemology, soteriology, and social organization) is measured with a scale that consists of four components. First, its ontology of the sacred is measured with the question: Which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs?ⁱ The response options comprise: 1 'There is a personal God', 2 'There is some sort of spirit or life force', 3 'I don't really know what to think', 4 'I don't really think there is any sort of spirit, God or life force'. We dichotomize this variable by recoding the latter

three responses as '0', and a conception of the sacred as a transcendent personal God as '1'.

Second, adherence to the traditional Christian epistemology of belief is measured with questions about whether or not one believes in (1) hell; (2) heaven; (3) sin; (4) life after death. The response options comprise: 0 'No', and 1 'Yes'. Factor analysis demonstrated that these four items indeed could be subsumed under one component, explaining 68% of the variance.

Subsequently, a reliable scale was constructed (Cronbach's alpha = .845) and scale scores were assigned as means to all those with valid scores on at least three of the four itemsⁱⁱ. Third, adherence to traditional Christian soteriology is measured through the evaluation of five types of behaviour traditionally understood as sins that stand in the way of salvation, i.e., the extent to which one deems (1) homosexuality; (2) abortion; (3) divorce; (4) euthanasia; and (5) suicide justifiable. Response categories were mirrored into 1 'always justified' to 10 'never justified'. Factor analysis showed that these five items could be subsumed under one component, explaining 60% of the variance. Subsequently, a reliable scale was constructed (Cronbach's alpha = .832) and scale scores were assigned as means to all those with valid scores on at least four of the five itemsⁱⁱⁱ.

Fourth, its social organization is measured with the question: Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?^{iv} Response options comprise 1 'more than once a week', 2 'once a week', 3 'once a month', 4 'only on special holy days/Christmas/Easter days', 5 'other specific holy days', 6 'once a year', 7 'less often', and 8 'never, practically never'. We mirrored all response options and merged both holy day categories, so that the recoded variable ranges from 1 'never, practically never' to 7 'more than once a week'.

Finally, factor analysis showed that these four aspects of traditional Christian religiosity could be subsumed under one component (Eigenvalue = 2.5, explaining 62.6% of the variance)^v.

All four items/subscales had high and positive loadings on the first factor (see Table 1) and could therefore reliably be combined to form one scale (Cronbach's alpha based on standardized items = .799). The final traditional Christian religiosity scale is constructed by taking the mean of the four standardized items/subscales. It ranges from 0 to 1 with mean .51 and standard deviation .26. We set the minimum requirement to receive a scale score at three valid answers, resulting in a valid N of 62,980 respondents (97.2%).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Operationalizing ways of being religious and/or spiritual that deviate from traditional Christian religiosity is a challenge, because suitable questions about spirituality and the like are virtually absent from today's large international survey programs, and the EVS is no exception to this [SELF-REFERENCE DELETED]. We deal with this problem of measuring religiosity more broadly conceived, albeit admittedly in a second-best fashion, by constructing, the other way around, a measure that is general and non-specific enough to accommodate traditional types of Christianity alongside reconstructions that have shifted away from the latter. We use two questions for this. The first one reads: independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are: a religious person; not a religious person; or a convinced atheist?^{vi} Those who consider themselves religious were coded as 1 'religious', and the two remaining categories were coded as 0 'being not religious'. To also capture those who think of themselves as 'spiritual but not religious', we add responses to the question, do you take some moments of prayer, meditation or contemplation or something like that?^{vii} Response options comprise 1 'yes', and 0

‘no’. People who answered either one or both of these two questions affirmatively were categorized as being ‘religious in a general and non-specific sense’^{viii}.

Finally, in order to test whether religiosity declined over time, we quite logically use *time* as our main explanatory variable. We make use of the four waves of the EVS (1981, 1990, 1999, 2008) and compute a dummy variable for each wave, correspondingly.

Method and Results

To answer our first research question, whether traditional Christian religiosity has declined over time in Western-Europe, we use linear regression analysis with time and traditional Christian religiosity as the independent and dependent variable, respectively. More specifically, we add three wave dummies to the model (1990, 1999, and 2008) and use 1981 as our reference category. We also add twelve country dummies to the model, one for each country, except for Sweden that we will use as our reference category. This way we take out all the between-country variance in traditional Christian religiosity. The results indicate that on average, traditional Christian religiosity has declined over time in Western-Europe with each wave having a stronger negative effect than the wave before. Furthermore, the effects of the country dummies tell us that respectively Malta, Ireland, and Northern-Ireland are the most traditional Christian religious countries in our sample whereas Sweden, Denmark, France, and the Netherlands are the least (see Table 2).

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

To answer our second research question, whether religiosity more broadly conceived has declined over time in Western-Europe, we use logistic regression analysis with time and religiosity more broadly conceived as the independent and dependent variable, respectively. Identical to the previous model, three wave and twelve country dummies are added, using Sweden and 1981 as our reference categories. The findings show that the answer to our second research question is affirmative as well: religiosity has declined over time in Western-Europe with each wave having a stronger negative effect than the wave before. Although 1990 does not differ significantly from 1981, the two most recent waves do. Especially the contrast between the first and the last wave is large with the odds that one is religious in 2008 being 24% lower compared to 1981^{ix}. Concerning the between-country differences, the odds that one is religious is lowest in Sweden, France, and Great Britain, and highest in Malta, Italy, and Ireland (see Table 3).

As this general and non-specific religiosity measure accommodates traditional types of Christianity alongside reconstructions that have shifted away from the latter, we now know that religiosity more broadly conceived has also declined. This leaves us with the question whether the same applies to non-traditional Christian religiosity, i.e., all religiosity and/or spirituality that deviates from traditional Christian religiosity. In order to find this out, we need to purge our general religiosity measure of traditional Christian religiosity so as to retain all that deviates from it. This can be done statistically by simply adding traditional Christian religiosity as an independent variable, so as to partial (or net) out its effect on religiosity more broadly conceived.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

Strikingly, the results in Table 3 indicate that the former trend of decline is now completely reversed. Although 1990 does not yet differ significantly from 1981, the two most recent waves clearly do. More precisely, the odds that one is religious in a non-traditional Christian way in 1999 and 2008 is respectively 30% and 26% higher compared to 1981^x. This indicates that religiosity has only declined to the extent that traditional Christian religiosity has declined, while net of the latter it has in fact *increased*. This means that the remaining religious and/or spiritual increasingly relativize (or even reject) traditional Christian religiosity with its characteristic ontology, epistemology, soteriology, and social organization. This pattern is strongest in those countries in which traditional Christian religiosity has declined most. For illustrative purposes, we created a plot for 2008 with country-level traditional Christian religiosity on the horizontal axis^{xi}, and for each country the odds that one is religious in a non-traditional Christian way on the vertical axis^{xii} (see Plot 1). On average, the lower the current level of traditional Christian religiosity in a country, the higher the odds that one is religious in a non-traditional Christian way in that country (and vice versa).

[INSERT PLOT 1 HERE]

Conclusion and Discussion

In this brief research note, we have addressed the ongoing debate among sociologists of religion on whether religion has been declining or changing in Western-Europe over the past decades. Specifically, we investigated *whether traditional Christian religiosity has declined over time, and whether the same applies to religiosity more broadly conceived?* Our results indicate that the answers to both questions are affirmative. So yes, religion has been declining and it does

not matter whether one understands it narrowly as only traditional Christian religiosity, or more broadly so that it also includes alternative ways of being religious and/or spiritual. Yet, this double decline does not tell the whole story, because it is also clear that the remaining religious deviate increasingly from the traditional Christian model. While this surely cannot compensate for the loss in traditional Christian religiosity, it is nonetheless clear that ways of being religious and/or spiritual that deviate from the latter have increased in relative terms, i.e., as a proportion of the remaining religious. So not only are there fewer religious people today than there were in the past, the remaining religious and/or spiritual increasingly relativize (or even reject) traditional Christian religiosity with its characteristic ontology, epistemology, soteriology, and social organization. In short: religion has not only declined, but changed as well.

This brings us to two remarks about the potential limitations of our study. The most important one pertains to the data that we were forced to use. Although the EVS contains useful questions to track changes in adherence to traditional Christian religiosity and its various dimensions, the same cannot be said for other forms of religion and spirituality. So while these data can be used to study the latter's increasing weight and presence, as we hope to have demonstrated, they are virtually useless for studying in any empirical detail what they look like. Because of this, contemporary theories about an increased foregrounding of experiences of an immanent divine spirit in seeking salvation from suffering cannot be tested properly. So while our analysis demonstrates that an increasing proportion of Western-European religion deviates from traditional Christian religiosity, what exactly their religion looks like remains ultimately a matter of theoretical speculation. This is why we would like to make an urgent call for better survey data, especially by including more useful questions in the large internationally comparative survey programs.

Secondly, it is important to underscore that the EVS's first wave dates from 1981, i.e., arguably after much religious decline and change had already taken place in Western Europe, so that we could only study the latter (and perhaps less intense) parts of these processes. There is no easy fix for this limitation of the data, as there are simply no repeated cross-sectional and internationally comparable datasets that start before 1981. On a positive note, one can also argue that precisely due to this restricted time period we were forced to put the theories to a stricter test, i.e., a test with a reduced probability of confirmation. Even under these disadvantageous circumstances we have still found evidence for religious decline and religious change in Western Europe.

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Disclosure Statement

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Table 1. Factor Loadings of Four Items Measuring Traditional Christian Religiosity (N = 52,683).

Items	Component 1
Traditional Christian social organization	.827
Traditional Christian ontology of the sacred	.771
Traditional Christian epistemology of belief	.828
Traditional Christian soteriology	.734
Eigenvalue	2.503
% of Variance	62.6%

Table 2. Summary of Linear Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Traditional Christian Religiosity, Controlling for Between-Country Variance (N = 62,980).

	Model 1		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Countries			
Belgium	0.12***	0.00	0.15
Denmark	0.01*	0.00	0.01
France	0.05***	0.00	0.05
Germany (West)	0.13***	0.00	0.14
Iceland	0.14***	0.01	0.12
Ireland	0.40***	0.00	0.38
Italy	0.28***	0.00	0.33
Malta	0.51***	0.01	0.43
Netherlands	0.08***	0.00	0.08
Spain	0.21***	0.00	0.26
Sweden	0.00		
Great Britain	0.13***	0.00	0.14
Northern- Ireland	0.36***	0.01	0.25
Waves			
1981	0.00		
1990	-0.02***	0.00	-0.03
1999	-0.04***	0.00	-0.07
2008	-0.07***	0.00	-0.12

Constant	0.37***	0.00
R^2		0.28
df		15

†p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

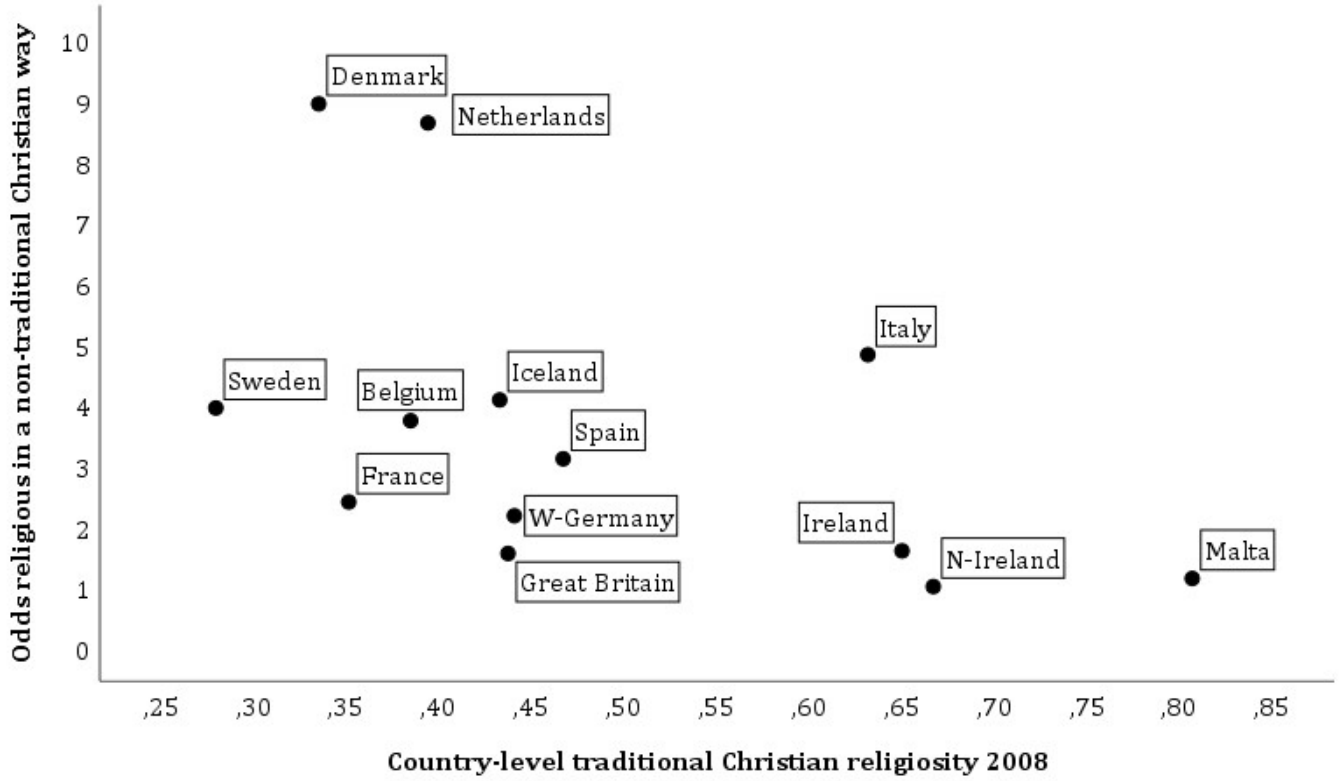
Table 3. Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Religiosity Broadly Conceived, Controlling for Between-Country Variance (N = 60,511).

	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Countries						
Belgium	1.13***	0.04	3.08	0.67***	0.05	1.96
Denmark	1.20***	0.05	3.31	1.36***	0.05	3.88
France	0.34***	0.04	1.40	0.11*	0.05	1.12
Germany (West)	1.14***	0.05	3.12	0.57***	0.05	1.77
Iceland	1.14***	0.05	3.12	0.39***	0.06	1.48
Ireland	1.92***	0.06	6.80	-0.46***	0.07	0.63
Italy	2.13***	0.05	8.42	1.00***	0.06	2.71
Malta	2.85***	0.08	17.24	-0.34**	0.10	0.71
Netherlands	1.32***	0.05	3.74	1.35***	0.06	3.84
Spain	1.14***	0.04	3.11	0.18***	0.05	1.20
Sweden	0.00		1.00	0.00		1.00
Great Britain	0.57***	0.04	1.78	-0.21***	0.05	0.81
Northern- Ireland	1.43***	0.07	4.17	-0.76***	0.08	0.47
Waves						
1981	0.00		1.00	0.00		1.00
1990	-0.04	0.03	0.96	0.06†	0.03	1.06
1999	-0.07*	0.03	0.93	0.26***	0.03	1.30
2008	-0.27***	0.03	0.76	0.23***	0.03	1.26

Traditional Christian Religiosity		7.50***	0.08	1805.05
Constant	0.13***	-2.48***		
χ^2		4295.9	20124.8	
<i>df</i>		15	16	

†p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Plot 1



Plot 1. Odds That One Is Religious in a Non-Traditional Christian Way by Country-Level Traditional Christian Religiosity 2008.

Notes

ⁱ 2,626 respondents (4.1%) did not answer this question.

ⁱⁱ 7,685 respondents (11.9%) did not receive a scale score (mean) as they had less than three valid scores.

ⁱⁱⁱ The question on homosexuality was not asked in Malta (1981) and Italy (2008), and the one on abortion not in Denmark (1990). 3,551 respondents (5.5%) did not receive a scale score (mean) as they had less than four valid scores.

^{iv} Only 350 respondents (0.5%) did not answer this question.

^v The three country-wave combinations with the lowest Eigenvalues and proportions explained variance are Iceland (1981), Malta (1981), and Malta (2008) with respectively an Eigenvalue of 1.75, 1.81, and 1.80 and proportion explained variance of 43.8%, 45.2%, and 45.0%. The factor loadings varied from .58 to .72 (Iceland, 1981), from .59 to .76 (Malta, 1981), and from .40 to .78 (Malta, 2008). Cronbach's alpha based on standardized items are .57, .59, and .57 for Iceland (1981), Malta (1981), and Malta (2008), respectively. Only in Malta (2008) will the alpha increase slightly if the item about a personal God is deleted.

^{vi} 5.6% missings.

^{vii} 2.8% missings.

^{viii} With 4.5%, the proportion of missing values for this measure is fairly low (valid N = 61,895).

^{ix} See Table 3, $e^B = .76$.

^x See Table 3, $e^B = 1.30$ and $e^B = 1.26$, respectively.

^{xi} This new variable is computed for each country separately by taking the average level of traditional Christian religiosity in that country in the year 2008. It ranges from .28 (Sweden) to .81 (Malta) with mean .48 and standard deviation .16.

^{xii} For Northern-Ireland the odds will be 1 as this is our reference category, hence the odds for the other twelve countries are compared to Northern-Ireland. The odds range from 1.00 (Northern-Ireland) to 8.94 (Denmark) with mean 3.62 and standard deviation 2.59.