



A Smaller Pie with a Different Taste: The Evolution of the Western-European Religious Landscape (European Values Study, 1981–2017)

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Abstract

Background 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 landscape 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*.

Purpose In this research note, we address this ongoing debate among sociologists of religion by studying whether traditional Christian religiosity has declined in Western Europe over the past four decades, and whether the same applies to religiosity more broadly conceived.

Methods To examine these trends over time, we analyze data from the European Values Study (1981–2017) for nineteen Western-European countries. More specifically, we carry out multi-level linear- and multi-level logistic regression analyses.

Results We demonstrate that both traditional Christian religiosity and religiosity more broadly conceived have declined, with the former declining at a much higher pace than the latter. We also find that those who continue to be religious and/or spiritual deviate increasingly from the traditional Christian model. Thus, when one does encounter religiosity, it is much more likely to be non-traditional religiosity than was true in the past.

Conclusions and Implications We conclude that religion has declined, whether one understands it narrowly as traditional Christian religiosity, or more broadly. Even though new forms of religiosity and spirituality cannot compensate for the loss in traditional Christian religiosity, they do make up an increasing portion of the overall declining religious pie. Finally, we reflect on the limitations of the data from the European Values Study (1981–2017) and make an urgent call for better survey data, especially by including more suitable questions with which to measure types of religiosity and/or spirituality that deviate from the traditional Christian model.

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Keywords Religious decline · Religious change · Secularization · Traditional Christian religiosity · Religiosity broadly conceived · European Values Study

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 landscape 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*.

Various scholars have meanwhile influentially critiqued the thesis of religious decline. Whereas Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005, 7) suggest that a 'spiritual revolution' may be unfolding, one in which 'life-as religion' (i.e. "those forms of religion that tell their followers to live their lives in conformity with external principles to the neglect of the cultivation of their unique subjective-lives") is increasingly giving way to 'subjective-life spirituality' (i.e. "those forms of spirituality [...] that help people to live in accordance with the deepest, sacred dimension of their own unique lives"), Colin 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 *dualistic* religious worldview that has historically characterized the West is increasingly being replaced by its eastern *monistic* counterpart.

While the above-mentioned authors understand processes of religious transformation as epitomized by the spread of spiritualities of life of the 'New Age' variety, Grace Davie is more cautious in pinpointing the precise features of the newly disseminated varieties of religion in Western Europe. Her '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). Somewhat more specifically, Davie holds that "religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment display an undeniable degree of secularization", while "feelings, experience[s] and the more numinous aspects of religious belief" persist to a remarkable degree (Davie 1994, 4–5). Suggesting that many of those who consider themselves religious and/or spiritual nowadays increasingly prioritize feelings and experiences of the sacred while simultaneously relativizing (or even rejecting) Christianity's traditional institutional, ritual, and doctrinal aspects,¹ she largely bypasses the difficult question to what extent this embrace of religion's numinous aspects (i.e. those features suggesting

¹ Note that this rendition of Davie's 'believing without belonging' thesis is distinct from its 'standard' interpretation, according to which people continue to hold on to traditional Christian beliefs without attending church services (i.e. a de-institutionalization of Christianity). See Tromp, Pless and Houtman (2020) and Cortois and Tromp (2021) for a decomposition of Davie's argument into two different theses.

the presence of the divine) can still be meaningfully understood as Christian and/or should basically count as post-Christian ('spiritual, but not religious'). Her analysis is however quite explicit about how those concerned are certainly not religious in a traditionally Christian sense.

Taken together, the authors mentioned above suggest four different but interconnected changes in the religious landscape of Western Europe. First, the traditional Christian conception of the sacred as a transcendent personal God has allegedly ceased to be the only way in which people conceive of the divine, because more immanent conceptions of the sacred such as an omnipresent spirit or life force that exists and operates 'within' have become increasingly widespread. Second, the traditional Christian epistemologies of faith are held to no longer be the only ways through which people arrive at the religious truth (be it through the acceptance of God's Word as revealed in the Bible, as in Protestantism, or through its Catholic counterpart which provides more leeway for the authority of the Church). This is because an experiential epistemology of direct personal and spiritual experience of the sacred has allegedly become increasingly common. This applies not only to today's Charismatic/Pentecostal/Evangelical churches, which all foreground the significance of direct contact with the Holy Spirit, but also to basically post-Christian spiritualities of life. Third, it is suggested that a moral individualism that grants moral primacy to individual liberty, autonomy, personal authenticity, and self-determination, nowadays exists alongside a Christian moral traditionalism that is informed by a higher divine authority and in that sense 'external' to the individual. Fourth, it is suggested that the traditional Christian organizational form of a church that unites believers who attend its services is accompanied by (or competing with) less institutionalized religious or spiritual movements and networks in which the boundaries between insiders (members) and outsiders (non-members) are harder to denote.

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 (with its characteristic conception of the sacred, epistemology, moral traditionalism, and social organization), but not the decline of religiosity more broadly conceived (which also takes alternative ways of being religious and/or spiritual into account). Therefore, in what follows we study *whether traditional Christian religiosity has declined in Western Europe, and whether the same applies to religiosity more broadly conceived.*²

Conceiving of religion in a general and non-specific way, we adopt Davie's cautious approach that refrains from making distinctions between specific manifestations of religion like New Age, (neo)paganism, Charismatic Christianity, and other strains of non-traditional Christianity. A more practical reason for opting for 'the big

² By focusing on these two research questions, we simultaneously address the imbalance in the scientific study of religion, as observed by Marion Burkimsher, that "considerably more effort has been put into trying to explain the trends than in critically assessing what the trends actually are" (2014, 433, emphasis in original).

picture' is that working with more fine-grained religion measures is not possible due to a lack of sufficiently specific data (more on this in the next section).

Methods

Data

We make use of the European Values Study (EVS), a repeated cross-sectional dataset with currently five available waves (1981, 1990, 1999, 2008, and 2017), covering a time period of nearly four decades (EVS 2011). Our sample comprises nineteen countries, all of which have a Christian heritage, and in none of them did Communist rule suppress religion at any time during the period under study. Concerning the case of Germany, only respondents from West-Germany are included. An overview of included country-wave combinations together with their sample sizes can be found in Supplementary Table 1.

Studying the evolution of the Western-European religious landscape is obviously complicated by the arrival of non-European migrants with non-Christian religious identities in the period under study. We deal with the resulting bias pragmatically by excluding Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, or 'Other' according to their responses to the question *What is your religious denomination?* This comes down to excluding 3925 respondents (3.7%) from our sample (valid N = 105,229) that we in effect limit to those who are affiliated with Free church/Non-denominational church/Non-conformist/Evangelical, Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic, or have no religious denomination. Excluding the aforementioned religious categories does not change anything substantially to our findings, which are as such robust.

Operationalization

Traditional Christian Religiosity

To study whether traditional Christian religiosity (with its characteristic conception of the sacred, epistemology of belief, moral traditionalism, and social organization) has declined in Western Europe, we measure it with a scale that consists of four components.

First, its conception of the sacred is measured with the question: *Do you believe in God?* The response options comprise: 0 'No' and 1 'Yes'.

Second, adherence to the traditional Christian epistemology of belief is measured with questions about whether or not one believes in (1) hell, (2) heaven, and (3) life after death. The response options comprise: 0 'No' and 1 'Yes'. We performed a principal component analysis to find out whether these three items could be transformed into a single scale that still contains most of their information. This proved possible, with one single principal component that was strongly correlated with the three items (factor loadings of respectively 0.85, 0.89 and 0.80) capable of capturing no less than 72.0% of their variance. We therefore constructed a reliable

scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.802$) by assigning mean scores on the three items to all respondents with valid scores on at least two of them.

Third, adherence to moral traditionalism is measured through the evaluation of five types of behavior traditionally understood as transgressing traditional Christian moral principles concerning how to live (and die) properly as specified by a higher divine authority. The following operationalization of moral traditionalism is consistent with other studies in the field (e.g. Pless, Tromp & Houtman 2020, 2021). Respondents are asked the extent to which they deem (1) homosexuality, (2) abortion, (3) divorce, (4) euthanasia, and (5) suicide justifiable. Response categories were mirrored into 1 'always justified' to 10 'never justified'. A principal component analysis showed that these five items could be subsumed under one component, explaining 61.3% of the variance. The factor loadings of the five items are respectively 0.79, 0.85, 0.85, 0.76 and 0.66. Subsequently, a reliable scale was constructed (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.839$) and scale scores were assigned as means to all those with valid scores on at least four of the five items.³

Fourth, acceptance of traditional Christianity's social organization is measured with the question: *Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?* We recoded the response categories into a variable ranging from 1 'never, practically never' to 7 'more than once a week'.

Finally, a principal component analysis showed that these four aspects of traditional Christian religiosity (i.e. belief in God, traditional Christian beliefs, moral traditionalism, and church attendance) could be subsumed under one component, explaining 61.0% of the variance. All four items/subscales had high and positive loadings on the first factor (0.79, 0.80, 0.72 and 0.82, respectively) and could be combined to form a reliable scale (Cronbach's α based on standardized items = 0.786). The final traditional Christian religiosity scale is constructed by taking the mean of the four standardized items/subscales. We set the minimum requirement to receive a scale score at three valid answers.

Religion Broadly Conceived

To study whether religiosity more broadly conceived has declined in Western Europe, we need a measure that is general and non-specific enough to accommodate traditional types of Christianity alongside reconstructions that have shifted away from the latter. The advantage of such a general and non-specific religiosity measure is that it allows us to capture as many ways of being religious and/or spiritual as possible, while simultaneously minimizing the risk of overlooking some of these. Such a measure also solves the problem of the lack of data sources that are sufficiently rich to enable precise distinctions between various alternative ways of being religious and/or spiritual (e.g. between Charismatic Christianity and New Age spirituality (Campbell 2007; Heelas 2002))—a problem that does not remain limited to the

³ The question on homosexuality was not asked in Malta (1981) and Italy (2008), and the one on abortion not in Denmark (1990). This is not a major issue because a respondent does not need valid scores on all five items in order to receive a scale score.

European Values Study, to be sure, but also applies to the other large international survey programs (Houtman, Heelas & Achterberg 2012).

Because we do not want our general religiosity measure to be either too broad or too narrow,⁴ we measure religion broadly conceived with the following three questions. The first one reads: *which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs?* 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 conceptions of the sacred as a personal God and some sort of spirit or life force as ‘1’ and the other two responses as ‘0’. The second question 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?* Those who consider themselves religious were coded as 1 ‘religious’, and the two remaining categories were coded as 0 ‘being not religious’. The third question reads: *do you believe in re-incarnation?*⁵ The response options comprise: 0 ‘No’ and 1 ‘Yes’. Responses to the latter two questions (i.e. a religious self-identification and a belief in re-incarnation) are added to the first question about one’s conception of the sacred to also capture those who neither believe in a personal God nor in some sort of spirit or life force but nevertheless self-identify as a religious person and/or belief in re-incarnation. People who answer at least one of these three questions in the affirmative are categorized as being ‘religious in a general and non-specific sense’. This results in a dichotomous variable with 0 ‘neither religious nor belief in re-incarnation nor belief in a personal God, spirit or life force’ and 1 ‘religious and/or belief in re-incarnation and/or belief in a personal God, spirit or life force’.

In order to test whether religiosity (either traditional Christian or more broadly conceived) has declined, we use *time* as our main explanatory variable. In order to keep our models as parsimonious as possible, we treat *time* as a continuous variable with 0 ‘1981’, 1 ‘1990’, 2 ‘1999’, 3 ‘2008’, and 4 ‘2017’ rather than computing dummy variables for the five waves of the EVS.

Control Variables

Finally, to make sure that the observed trends are not due to the changing composition of the population in the different contexts under study, we statistically control for age, gender, and education. *Age* is a continuous variable that ranges from 15 to 82 years and older. *Gender* is a nominal and dichotomous variable with 0 ‘men’ and 1 ‘women’. *Education* is measured with a question that asks respondents about their age when they completed their education. This variable ranges from 0 ‘no formal education’ to 10 ‘21 years and older’ (with 1 ‘less than 12 years’; 2 ‘13 years’;

⁴ See Davie (1990, 462), Bruce (2002, 199–203), and Voas and Crockett (2005, 12–13) for a discussion of this matter.

⁵ This question was not asked in Great Britain 1999, giving respondents in that particular country-wave combination less of an opportunity to be ‘religious in a general and non-specific sense’. For that reason, we also ran the analyses without Great Britain 1999. This does not change anything substantially to our findings, hence the results are robust.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

	N	MIN	MAX	M	SD ^a
Traditional Christian religiosity (scale)	100,999	0	1	0.49	0.24
Traditional Christian ontology of the sacred					
Belief in God	97,319	0	1	0.73	
Traditional Christian epistemology of belief (scale)	94,693	0	1	0.40	0.41
Belief in hell	94,289	0	1	0.25	
Belief in heaven	93,791	0	1	0.44	
Belief in life after death	89,721	0	1	0.53	
Traditional Christian morality (scale)	100,189	1	10	5.96	2.46
Justifiable: homosexuality	98,498	1	10	5.44	3.56
Justifiable: abortion	101,132	1	10	5.88	3.17
Justifiable: divorce	102,515	1	10	4.86	2.99
Justifiable: euthanasia	100,153	1	10	5.78	3.24
Justifiable: suicide	99,805	1	10	7.85	2.70
Traditional Christian social organization					
Church attendance	104,650	1	7	3.19	2.04
Religion broadly conceived (scale)	104,903	0	1	0.79	
Religious person	100,110	0	1	0.61	
Belief in re-incarnation	89,688	0	1	0.24	
Belief in a personal God/some sort of spirit or life force	101,715	0	1	0.71	
Time	105,229	0	4	2.20	1.38
Age	104,839	15	82	46.7	17.8
Women	105,173	0	1	0.53	
Age when education completed	101,809	0	10	6.54	2.99

^aStandard deviations are not shown for dichotomous items

3 ‘14 years’; 4 ‘15 years’; 5 ‘16 years’; 6 ‘17 years’; 7 ‘18 years’; 8 ‘19 years’; 9 ‘20 years’ in between) and we treat it as continuous.

The descriptive statistics of all the variables that will be included in our models can be found in Table 1.

Analyses

The respondents were surveyed in different countries and in different years, hence we use multilevel analysis to account for the hierarchical nature of the data and for possible similarities between different respondents from the same context. On the individual-level, we have 105,229 respondents that are nested in eighty-one country-wave combinations on the contextual-level. To answer our first research question, whether traditional Christian religiosity has declined in Western Europe, we use multilevel linear regression analysis with respondents’ levels of *traditional Christian religiosity* as the dependent variable. To answer our second research question, whether religiosity more broadly conceived has declined in Western Europe, we use

Table 2 Multi-level linear regression analysis for variables predicting respondents' traditional Christian religiosity for nineteen European countries (EVS 1981–2017)

		Model 1	Model 2
		<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
Fixed effects coefficients	Time		−0.0473*** (0.0091)
	Woman		0.0539*** (0.0025)
	Age		0.0028*** (0.0001)
	Education		−0.0059*** (0.0005)
	Intercept	0.5052*** (0.0151)	0.4828*** (0.0278)
Random effects variances	Country-Wave	0.0184	0.0140
	Residual	0.0421	0.0381
−2 Log Likelihood		−32,910	−41,303
Sample size (N)		100,999; 81	97,608; 81

Standard errors in parentheses. Ns are for respondents and country-waves, respectively

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

multilevel *logistic* regression analysis with respondents' levels of *religiosity more broadly conceived* as the dependent variable. In both analyses, our main explanatory variable is *time* and we statistically control for respondents' *age*, *gender*, and *educational level*. Both analyses are carried out with IBM SPSS Statistics 27, running a generalized linear mixed model with robust covariances, and the default covariance structure for random effects, i.e. variance components. The probability distributions for the linear and logistic models are respectively normal and binomial. The link functions are respectively identity and logit. For the models predicting respondents' levels of *traditional Christian religiosity* and *religiosity more broadly conceived*, the algebraic representations are respectively:

$$Y_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10}(\text{time})_{ij} + \gamma_{20}(\text{women})_{ij} + \gamma_{30}(\text{age})_{ij} + \gamma_{40}(\text{educational level})_{ij} + u_{0j} + \epsilon_{ij}.$$

$$\text{logit}_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10}(\text{time})_{ij} + \gamma_{20}(\text{women})_{ij} + \gamma_{30}(\text{age})_{ij} + \gamma_{40}(\text{educational level})_{ij} + u_{0j}.$$

Results

Trends in Traditional Christian Religiosity

The first model in Table 2 is a null model with three estimated parameters, i.e. a fixed intercept, a random intercept (i.e. the between-context variation in intercepts), and a residual (i.e. the variation in individual scores within contexts). This way we partition the variance in traditional Christian religiosity into its within- and between-context components. The information in the null model enables us to calculate the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) which tells us how much of the variance in traditional Christian religiosity lies between contexts. If the ICC is smaller than 0.05, then there is no real need to perform a multilevel analysis.

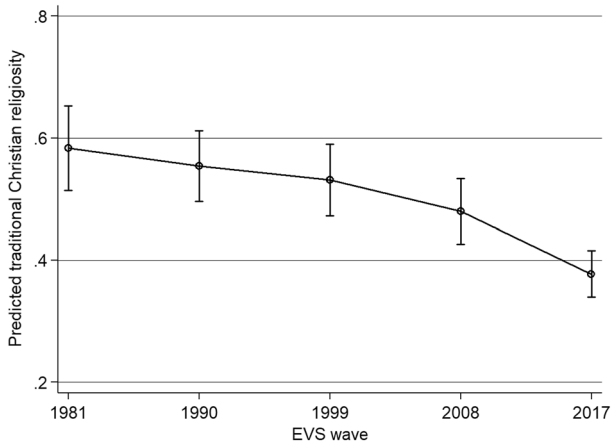


Fig. 1 Predicted marginal means of traditional christian religiosity by EVS wave, controlling for age, gender, and education. Data source: European Values Study 1981–2017. *Note:* Traditional Christian religiosity is measured with a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 1 and is constructed by taking the mean of four standardized items/subscales (i.e. belief in God, traditional Christian beliefs, moral traditionalism, and church attendance)

In that case, a single-level analysis conducted at the individual level would suffice (Heck et al. 2014). Our results demonstrate that a multilevel analysis is preferred over a single-level analysis as the ICC is approximately 0.30 (i.e. $0.0184/ (0.0184 + 0.0421)$).

In the second model and concerning our first research question, we find that, on average, traditional Christian religiosity has declined in Western Europe. The effect of time on traditional Christian religiosity is negative and highly significant ($b = -0.0473$, $p < 0.001$). In other words, with each wave, people are becoming less religious in a traditional Christian way.

For illustrative purposes, we created a graph with the five waves of the EVS on the horizontal axis, and the level of traditional Christian religiosity on the vertical axis, statistically controlling for the effects of age, gender, and education (see Fig. 1). As a reminder, traditional Christian religiosity is measured with a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 1 and is constructed by taking the mean of four standardized items/subscales (i.e. belief in God, traditional Christian beliefs, moral traditionalism, and church attendance). What stands out in this graph is that the pace of decline of traditional Christian religiosity has accelerated between 2008 and 2017.

Since “bundling countries together [...] may mask the different trajectories of individual countries” (Burkimsher 2014, 440), we graphed Fig. 1 for four groups of countries in which the trends of all the separate countries are visible and can be compared with each other (see Fig. 2). We combined the Scandinavian countries, the Catholic countries of the south, the English and Dutch speaking countries, and the German and French speaking countries. Although the trend lines turn out to be steeper for some countries than for others (compare for instance Spain and Northern-Ireland), it is clear that traditional Christian religiosity has declined in all the Western-European countries in our sample between 1981 and 2017.

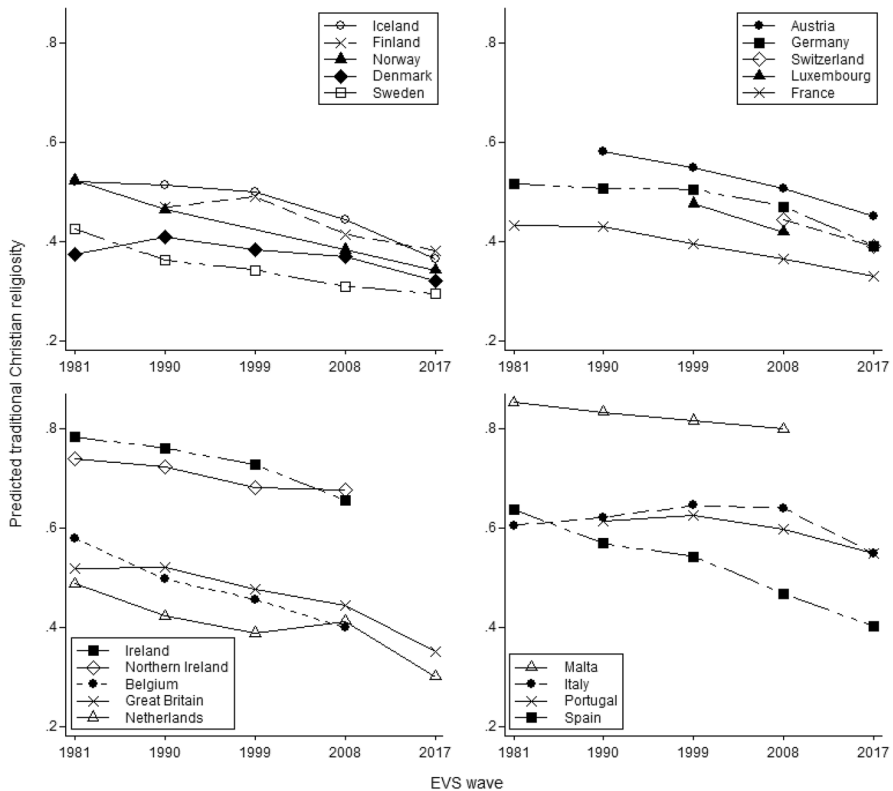


Fig. 2 Predicted marginal means of traditional christian religiosity for four groups of countries by EVS wave, controlling for age, gender, education. Data: EVS 1981–2017. *Note:* Traditional Christian religiosity is measured with a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 1 and is constructed by taking the mean of four standardized items/subscales (i.e. belief in God, traditional Christian beliefs, moral traditionalism, and church attendance)

Trends in Religion Broadly Conceived

The first model in Table 3 is again a null model in which the variance in *religiosity more broadly conceived* is partitioned into its within- and between-context components, and with which the ICC can be calculated. Calculating the ICC is somewhat different in a multilevel logistic regression analysis because only the contextual-level variance is estimated (Merlo et al. 2016). SPSS scales the individual-level variance to 1 and does not test it for statistical significance, but according to Heck et al. (2014) the variance of a logistic distribution with a scale factor of 1 is approximately 3.29 ($\pi^2/3$). Our results demonstrate that a multilevel analysis is again preferred over a single-level analysis as the ICC is approximately 0.16 (i.e. $0.6244 / (0.6244 + 3.29)$).

In the second model and concerning our second research question, we find that, on average, religiosity broadly conceived has also declined in Western Europe.

Table 3 Multi-level logistic regression analysis for variables predicting respondents’ religiosity (broadly conceived) for nineteen European countries (EVS 1981–2017)

		Model 1		Model 2	
		log-odds	Exp(B)	log-odds	Exp(B)
Fixed effects coefficients	Time			-0.2002** (0.0622)	0.8185
	Woman			0.7630*** (0.0226)	2.1447
	Age			0.0185*** (0.0011)	1.0187
	Education			-0.0156* (0.0063)	0.9845
	Intercept	1.508*** (0.0879)		0.8333*** (0.2047)	
Random effects variances	Country-wave	0.6244		0.6034	
	Residual	1		1	
-2 Log likelihood		499,854		489,878	
Sample size (N)		104,903; 81		101,242; 81	

Standard errors in parentheses. Ns are for respondents and country-waves, respectively
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

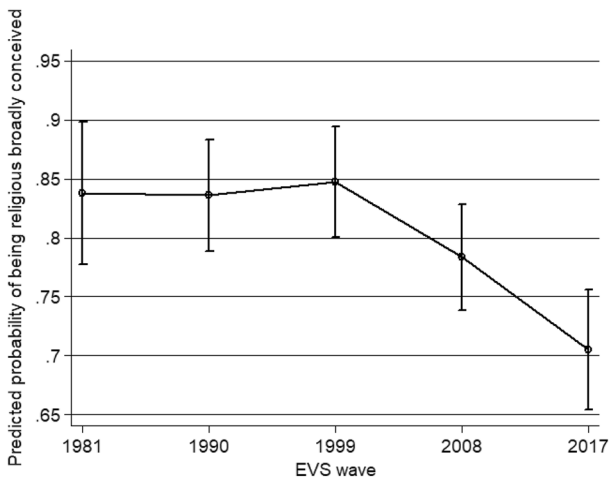


Fig. 3 Predicted probabilities of being religious (broadly conceived) by EVS wave, controlling for age, gender, and education. Data source: European Values Study 1981–2017. *Note:* Religiosity broadly conceived is a dichotomous variable, hence the units displayed on the vertical axis of the graph are predicted probabilities

The effect of time on our general religiosity measure is negative and highly significant ($b = -0.2002$, $p = 0.001$). In other words, the probability that a person is religious diminishes with each wave. As the former coefficient is in log-odds units, it is easier to interpret the odds ratio (see ‘Exp(B)’ in Table 3, model 2). Its value is 0.8185, meaning that with each wave the odds that one is religious in a general and non-specific sense diminishes with 18.5% ($1 - 0.8185 = 0.1815 * 100$).

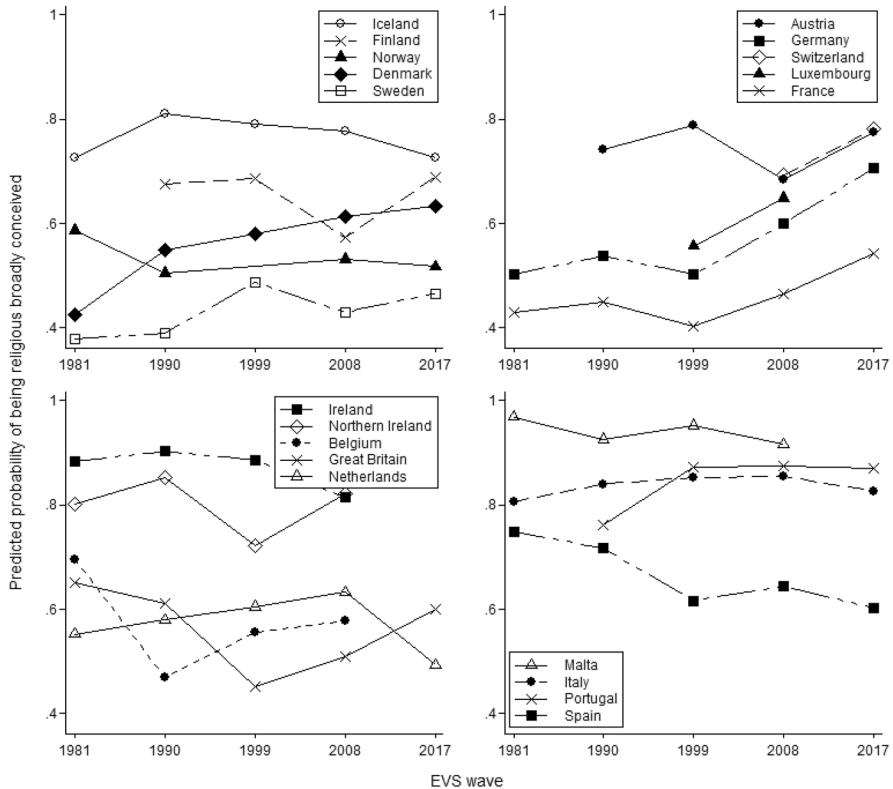


Fig. 4 Predicted probabilities of being religious (broadly conceived) for four groups of countries by EVS wave, controlling for age, gender, education. Data: EVS 1981–2017. *Note:* Religiosity broadly conceived is a dichotomous variable, hence the units displayed on the vertical axes of the graphs are predicted probabilities. Furthermore, a different vertical scale is used in this figure to Fig. 2

For illustrative purposes, we created a graph with the five waves of the EVS on the horizontal axis, and the level of religiosity (broadly conceived) on the vertical axis, statistically controlling for the effects of age, gender, and education (see Fig. 3). As a reminder, religiosity broadly conceived is a dichotomous variable, hence the units displayed on the vertical axis of the graph are predicted probabilities. What stands out in this graph is that it shows that the level of religiosity (broadly conceived) stayed about the same between 1981 and 1999 to then strongly decline in the subsequent two decades, i.e. between 1999 and 2017.

Again, to see whether all the Western-European countries are following the same trends or not, we graphed Fig. 3 for four groups of countries in which the trends of all the separate countries are visible and can be compared with each other (see Fig. 4, note that the groups of countries in Fig. 4 are the same as in Fig. 2). What stands out in these graphs is that, even though the average trend in religiosity broadly conceived in Western Europe is one of decline, a reasonable number of countries (i.e. Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland,

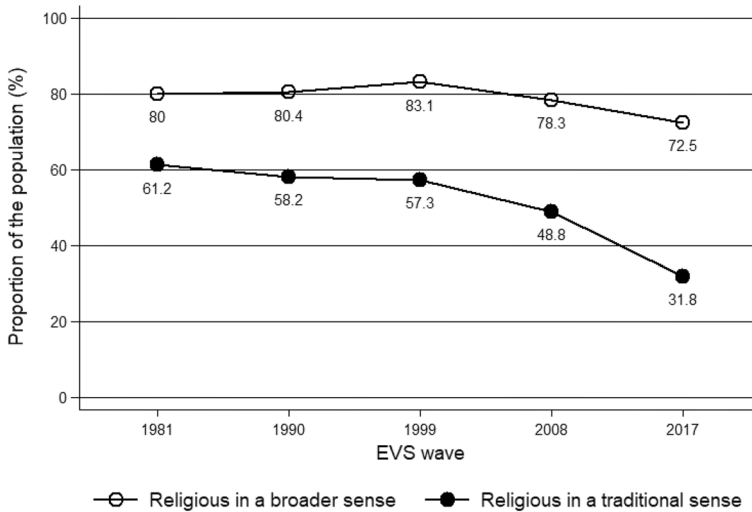


Fig. 5 Proportions of the population being religious in a broader sense and being religious in a traditional sense by EVS wave. Data: European Values Study 1981–2017. *Note:* Religiosity in a broader sense (i.e. religiosity more broadly conceived) and religiosity in a traditional sense (i.e. traditional Christian religiosity) are both dichotomous variables

and Portugal) actually experienced (slight) *increases* over time in religiosity more broadly conceived. Furthermore, Great Britain’s level of religiosity broadly conceived actually fluctuated pretty intensely over time (i.e. a steep decline followed by a steep upsurge), but the all-time low in 1999 should be interpreted with some caution as the question on belief in re-incarnation was not asked in Great Britain in 1999, giving respondents in that particular country-wave combination less of an opportunity to be ‘religious in a general and non-specific sense’.

Trends in Traditional Christian Religiosity and Religion Broadly Conceived Compared

Thus far, our analyses showed that both traditional Christian religiosity and religiosity more broadly conceived have declined in Western Europe. Additionally, it would be interesting and worthwhile to compare the two trajectories and examine whether they both have declined at the same pace. To find that out whether or not the two declines have occurred at the same pace, we dichotomize traditional Christian religiosity by coding scores below 0.50 into 0 ‘not religious in a traditionally Christian sense’ and scores equal to, or higher than, 0.50 into 1 ‘religious in a traditionally Christian sense’. This enables us to calculate for each of the five waves the proportions of the population that are religious in a traditionally Christian sense and religious more generally conceived (see Fig. 5). This graph shows that, even though both conceptualizations of religiosity show

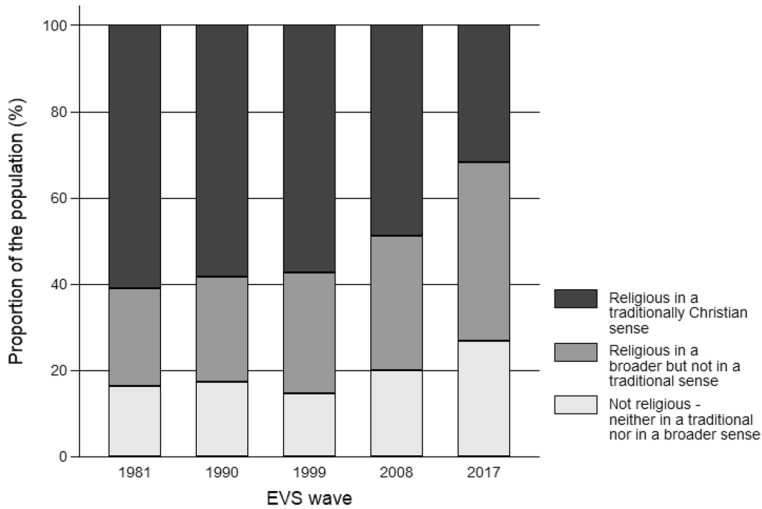


Fig. 6 Proportions of the population being religious in a broader sense and/or being religious in a traditional sense by EVS wave. Data: European Values Study 1981–2017. *Note:* Religiosity in a broader sense (i.e. religiosity more broadly conceived) and religiosity in a traditional sense (i.e. traditional Christian religiosity) are both dichotomous measures and were combined to create the threefold typology displayed above

declines in Western Europe, traditional Christian religiosity has declined at a much faster pace than religiosity more broadly conceived.

To visualize the bigger picture even clearer, we examine how the sizes of the three groups based on the two religiosity measures changed over time, i.e. (1) those who are religious in a traditionally Christian sense, (2) those who are religious in a broader but not in a traditionally Christian sense, and (3) those who are not religious—neither in a traditionally Christian nor in a broader sense (see Fig. 6). We omitted the fourth category from the analysis as it is theoretically impossible that those who are religious in a traditional sense are not religious in a broader sense. What the graph clearly shows is that the share of traditional Christians in Western Europe has diminished from 61.2% in 1981 to 31.8% in 2017. The wholly secular group, on the other hand, has grown—from 16.4% in 1981 to 26.7% in 2017—confirming the fact that religion has declined, and that 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 or spiritual. While the religious pie has thus clearly shrunk in size, today a much bigger portion of it consists of types of religion or spirituality that deviate from traditional Christian religiosity—from 22.5% in 1981 to 41.4% in 2017. So if one does encounter religiosity in Western Europe nowadays, it is much more likely to be of a non-traditional type than was true in the past. The theoretical implications of our findings are discussed in the next and final section of this note.

Discussion and Limitations

Our findings raise the important but difficult question whether the changes that have taken place within the shrinking religious population of Western Europe are either part of the process of religious decline itself or in fact evidence of a more persistent change in the nature of being religious? In other words, should we interpret the presence of these non-traditional types of religiosity and spirituality as a lasting replacement of traditional Christian religiosity, or merely as ‘fuzzy fidelity’ (Storm 2009; Voas 2009) that basically entails a first step in a one-way street from conventional religiosity towards outright secularity? As our findings do not lend themselves to answering this question, we are unable to put an end to this ongoing debate among sociologists of religion. Marshall and Olson (2018) have recently raised the same question, namely whether self-identifying as “‘spiritual but not religious’ is becoming a replacement for religion or is it more likely just one step on the path between religion and non-religion?”⁶ (516) Their analysis of cross-sectional survey data from the United States and Scandinavia led them to conclude that “both possibilities [...] seem somewhat plausible” (Idem). However, they were unable to say which of the two scenarios is more likely than the other. We concur with Marshall and Olson that “[p]anel data on individuals or parent–child differences in religion and spirituality would be needed to explore whether there is actual, systematic, movement over time” (Idem, 517).

This brings us to a discussion of the potential limitations of our study. The most important one pertains to the data that we used more or less out of necessity. 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 track the declines of traditional Christian religiosity and religiosity more broadly (and by implication vaguely) conceived, as we hope to have demonstrated, they are not suitable for tracking the development of specific types of religiosity and/or spirituality that deviate from the traditional Christian model. Because of this, contemporary theories about an increased prioritization of experiencing an immanently present divine spirit cannot be tested properly. So while our analysis demonstrates that if one does encounter religiosity in Western Europe nowadays, it is much more likely to be of a non-traditional type than was true in the past, what exactly this non-traditional religiosity looks like ultimately remains a matter of theoretical speculation. This is why we would like to make an urgent call for better survey data, especially by including more suitable questions in the large internationally comparative survey programs to measure types of religiosity and/or spirituality that deviate from the traditional Christian model.

One suggestion would be to include a recently developed seven-item scale to reliably measure the worldview of a post-Christian ‘New Age’ spirituality (see Supplementary Table 2) (Houtman and Tromp 2021), as outlined in specialized literature

⁶ Note that self-identifying as ‘spiritual but not religious’ is just one of the many alternative ways of being religious and/or spiritual nowadays in the West.

(e.g. Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996). Including such a scale in the large internationally comparative survey programs would enable scholars not only to systematically map the presence and development of this type of spirituality across place and time, it would also allow them to study the (possibly changing) relationship between such post-Christian ‘New Age’ spirituality and traditional Christian religiosity. Good religion questions that reach beyond traditional Christian religiosity are scarce, also in the EVS data used in this paper. We have considered a range of other EVS questions for the construction of our religiosity measures, but for various reasons found them wanting—they were either not available in all of the five waves or were of dubious face validity.⁷

Conclusions and Implications

Critics of the thesis of religious decline have pointed out that the decline of Christianity’s traditional institutional, doctrinal and ritual dimensions should not be mistaken for a decline of religion *tout court*. In this research note, we have addressed this ongoing debate among sociologists of religion by studying *whether traditional Christian religiosity has declined in Western Europe over the past four decades, and whether the same applies to religiosity more broadly conceived?* Our results indicate that both questions can be answered in the 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, traditional Christian religiosity has declined at a much higher pace than religiosity more broadly conceived, so that non-traditional religiosity has come to make up an increasing portion of the overall declining religious pie. Thus, if one does encounter religiosity in Western Europe nowadays, it is much more likely to be of a non-traditional type than was true in the past. So not only are there fewer religious people today than there were in the past, those who continue to be religious and/or spiritual increasingly relativize (or even reject) traditional Christian religiosity with its characteristic conception of the sacred, epistemology of belief, moral traditionalism, and social organization. That said, it is quite

⁷ Examples of questions that were not available in all of the five EVS waves are *how important is religion in your life?*; *how often do you pray to God outside of religious services?*; and *do you take some moments of prayer, meditation or contemplation?* The question of *how much confidence do you have in the church* was available in all of the five waves, but was deemed less valid than frequency of church attendance to measure endorsement of traditional Christian religion’s organizational form. An alternative for asking whether one believes in God would have been the question *how important God is in your life?* The latter is available in all five waves, too, and could possibly serve as a suitable substitute for the former question. Other questions address *involvement in a humanitarian or charitable organization and feeling concerned about the living conditions of human kind, elderly people, unemployed people, immigrants, sick and disabled people*, but it is of course a matter of debate whether *care and concern for others* are exclusively Christian, indeed whether they are typical for Christians at all. Identical problems, arguably even more so, exist for questions about the *justifiability of unlawfully claiming state benefits, cheating on tax, accepting a bribe, and avoiding paying a transport fare, and intolerance to having people of a different race as neighbors*.

clear that these new forms of religiosity and spirituality cannot compensate for the loss in traditional Christian religiosity. The religious part of the pie is shrinking and the secular part of it is growing. So contrary to Davie's (1994, 43) predictions, the sacred *does* disappear and in many ways it is becoming *less* rather than more prevalent in contemporary Western Europe.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-021-00479-6>.

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