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Religion in Europe: One theme, many variations?

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Introduction

Advocates of the secularization and religious economies models typically appeal to evidence from Europe and the United States respectively. Europe is increasingly secular; the US is persistently religious: the problem is to explain what makes them different and whether one set of circumstances might be temporary.

Faced with the fact that Europe (which includes three-quarters of modern societies) appears to fit the secularisation paradigm, opponents employ one of two arguments. The first is that Europeans are less religious than Americans because they live in more regulated societies where religious choice is restricted. (The same scholars sometimes assert that the weakness of conventional churches in Europe allows a host of cults to flourish, which seems to undermine their own thesis.) The second idea is that European countries are not really becoming more secular. Some show high levels of affiliation, other have high levels of participation, yet others may be low in both but have not abandoned religion. The whole continent is so diverse that no single description of the religious situation is adequate and hence its evolution defies any simple explanation.

The investigation that follows examines this second argument. If religious decline seems general, albeit from different national starting points, then there would seem to be grounds for talking about a process of secularization. If there is no clear or common trend, then perhaps the standard story of religious change is misleading. Based on an analysis of retrospective questions from the ISSP, Iannoccone (2003) suggests that the international diversity of religious trends implies that secularization theory applies to few countries. Another prominent exponent of what one might call the 'ragbag thesis' is Andrew Greeley, whose avowed aim in a recent book entitled

Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millennium is to dispute the ‘dogma’ of religious decline. He writes:

In fact, if one looks at Europe with a relatively open mind, prepared to be surprised by its complexity, one discovers a wide variety of religious phenomena. In some countries, religion has increased (most notably the former communist countries and especially Russia), in others it has declined (most notably Britain, the Netherlands, and France), and in still other countries it is relatively unchanged (the traditional Catholic countries), and in yet other countries (some of the social democratic countries) it has both declined and increased. A single, one-directional model does not begin to cope with the variety of religious phenomena in Europe. ... ‘secularization’ ... is patently a useless theory because it says too much and hence fails to subsume a wide variety of interesting data (Greeley 2003: xi).

Note that this approach does concede an important point: Europe is not a single entity but rather a collection of two dozen or more separate societies. If it is impossible to generalize about religious change in Europe, then the secularization thesis is indeed useless. If one can find a common account that works for these disparate countries, however, then it is not overly troubling if a single nation elsewhere – the United States – may be an exception. While the sheer variety of history and culture across Europe makes unitary explanation a challenge, any hypothesis that survives testing in this arena has a considerable advantage.

The European Social Survey

European Social Survey (ESS) is a new programme that currently covers 22 nations (see Appendix 1). The project is a multinational partnership co-ordinated by Roger Jowell (City University, London); funding comes from the European Commission’s 5th Framework Programme, supplemented by the European Science Foundation. The standards of design, execution and cross-national comparability are exceptionally high. The first round of data collection took place in 2002/2003 and the results have recently become available.

There are several aims of the ESS.

First, and foremost, it was meant to make available at no cost to social researchers across Europe and beyond a continuous high-quality data base both

in substantive and in methodological terms. Second, it should be composed of a core set of questions to be repeated in each consecutive round of the survey for longitudinal analysis. Third, it was supposed to stimulate cooperation between social researchers across Europe through an open competition for questionnaire space to be designed by trans-national teams and on varying topics. And last, but certainly not least the data collected should also help to inform policy makers about long-term changes in the tides of public orientations in a growing Europe (Kaase 2003).

The intention is to collect data every two years using personal interviews supplemented by short self-completion questionnaires. A great deal of expert attention has been devoted to sampling strategy, translation, methods, and quality assurance, with the highest possible level of cross-national comparability. In producing representative samples, obtaining a high response rate (the target is 70 percent) is a key objective.

Comprehensive documentation is available online at <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>
ESS data are archived in Norway, and are freely accessible at <http://ess.nsd.uib.no>.

Religion – questions and scale construction

Jaak Billiet (Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium), a member of the co-ordinating group for the ESS project, has written that

The European Social Survey is not a survey on religious beliefs, practice or religious belonging, but it contains a small set of questions that were selected in order to provide some crucial measurement of the religious aspect of social identity. These questions deal with the subjective feeling of actual or past belonging to a particular religion or denomination, with participation in public religious practices, and with the frequency of praying. In the rotating module on citizenship, additional questions on membership of religious organisations and on the importance of religion in one's life are included (Billiet 2003).

These questions are listed in Appendix 2. The ESS provides better coverage of religion than most general purpose surveys, notwithstanding the organisers' modest view that in this dataset religion is better used as an explanatory variable than as something to be studied in its own right. The survey questions cover the three main areas of affiliation, practice and belief, as follows:

Affiliation	current or past identification
Practice	attendance at religious services prayer participation/support
Belief	self-rated religiosity importance of religion

While the questions on how religious the respondent is and how important religion is to him/her do not measure beliefs directly, it seems likely that there is a strong association between these variables and strength of religious belief.

The questions on involvement in church or religious organisations were excluded from the analysis presented here on the grounds that they show little systematic relationship with each other or with the other variables. National culture may have a strong influence on the extent of membership, giving and volunteering; considerable numbers of people volunteered or made donations without being members and vice versa. Given that religious activity is already represented by attendance and prayer, these additional variables may be superfluous in any case.

The two questions on 11-point scales (self-described religiosity and importance of religion in life) produced response heaping on 0, 5 and 10, with 1, 4, 6 and 9 being low frequency categories (see Figure 1). To produce more bell-shaped curves, and also to give these variables equal weight in a raw score when combined with the 7-point religious practice variables, the 11 categories were collapsed into seven by combining responses 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 6 and 7, and 8 and 9.

For church attendance, the distribution is sharply skewed in the direction of 'never'. Prayer, on the other hand, produces a U-shaped pattern, with most people at one extreme (frequent prayer) or the other (seldom or never praying); see Figure 2. The category order for both variables was reversed to give a coding of 0 for 'never' through to 6 for 'more than once a day'. Note that all national samples are pooled without the use of population weights to produce Figures 1 and 2, and hence these distributions should not be regarded as representative of Europeans in general.

Affiliation is coded as 0 (never belonged), 1 (used to belong), or 2 (currently belong).

To recap, five variables are included in the analysis. In each the value 0 represents the least religious response and 6 (or 2 in the case of affiliation) the most religious.

- Religious affiliation
- Attendance frequency
- Prayer frequency
- Self-description as religious (or not)
- Importance of religion in life

The first methodological question to consider is whether these variables can be combined to form a single scale. It is by no means obvious that they do all result from one underlying construct; there might be, for example, a ‘private commitment’ dimension and a ‘public participation’ dimension. In fact careful analysis shows that they do meet the key criteria for combination into a scale.

The classical approach would be to test the reliability of the scale by examining the intercorrelation of the items composing it. Assuming the value of a standard statistic such as Cronbach’s Alpha is sufficiently high (and in this case it is .87, which is excellent), the sum of the variable values would be used as the index of religiosity (which is assumed to be the underlying construct being manifested through the responses). Such a procedure yields a fairly uniform distribution of scores over the range from least religious to most religious, or 0 to 26 (Figure 3a).

This method has various problems. In particular, it takes no account of the relative ‘difficulty’ of the various items. For example, if three variables apply to more than half the population (e.g. belief in a higher power, infant baptism, and attendance at least once a year), while a fourth applies to only a small fraction of it (e.g. self-description as highly religious), then it is misleading for most people to receive a score of 3 while the minority rates only a 4. At best the scores can be treated as ordinal measures of religiosity. If however we need an index that can be treated as an interval scale (for example because we wish to compare the average religiosity of different groups of people), then the classical approach is unsatisfactory.

Although sociologists have rarely ventured beyond the classical methods, researchers in psychology and education have developed an alternative approach to measurement known as item response theory (IRT). Here the basic idea is that each respondent has more or less of the latent attribute and each item (question) is more or less demanding of that attribute. Depending on your mathematical ability, you will have varying success in answering questions in arithmetic, intermediate algebra and differential calculus. Correctly solving one or two calculus problems may say more about your ability than doing dozens of easy sums. By looking at the interaction between items and respondents we can construct a scale that allows us to compare not only one individual with another but also one difference in scores with another.

The requirements for a constructing a successful scale of this kind are substantially more onerous than under classical measurement theory. For example, the items must form a hierarchy from ‘easy’ to ‘difficult’; the characteristic curves that represent the probability of someone with any given level of the attribute ‘passing’ each item should not cross. (For further details see Embretson and Reise 2000, Sijtsma and Molenaar 2002; for an application to religious belief, see Van Schuur 2003.)

The religiosity scale used here is a one-parameter IRT model, also known as a Rasch model. It was created using RUMM2020 software. The five polytomous variables described above formed a scale rated as ‘excellent’ according to the various tests in this package. The assignment of scores to each individual produces a scale that is more stretched than the ‘classical’ version (Figure 3b); the distribution that results is roughly bell-shaped rather than rectangular (Figure 3c). This picture is consistent with our intuition (and some evidence) that most people are not far from the religious norm (whatever that happens to be in a given time and place), while fewer are much more or much less religious than average. It seems less plausible that religiosity is uniformly distributed in the population so that approximately equal numbers of people are at each level, as implied by the classical scores (Figure 3a).

The use of IRT methods was motivated by the conviction that this measurement model is the best in this context. It is worth noting, however, that the results that follow do not depend upon this choice; the classical scores show the same trends and contrasts.

Findings

For ease of presentation, the 21 countries in the ESS (leaving out Israel, about which something will be said later) can be divided into three groups:

- the Franco-German core (France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg)
- the Catholic fringe (Spain, Portugal, Italy, Poland, Ireland, Slovenia, Greece [which though Orthodox is similar])
- the Northern/Eastern fringe (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Hungary, the Czech Republic).

We know that the Catholic group is relatively faithful, the northern/eastern group is relatively secular, and the European heartland offers a more mixed picture. Greeley and others also claim, though, that there is no common pattern of change across these countries. They assert that although there has been decline in a few countries, religiosity is static or even increasing in most.

It is instructive to examine the mean level of religiosity by five-year age group for each country in the sample. The first group encompasses all who were born prior to 1920; subsequent groups include those born 1920-24, 1925-29, etc., through to 1980-84. Figures 4, 5 and 6 show the generational differences for each set of countries. Figure 7 compares the three largest countries in each set.

The most striking observation is that not only is decline in religiosity across the birth cohorts universal in this set of 21 countries, the graphs are fairly linear and remarkably parallel. In other words, the rate of decline seems to have been essentially constant both over time and across Europe. (The argument that these patterns merely reflect increasing religiosity with age is considered in the next section.)

If we compare people born in the early 1980s with their grandparents' generation (born in the late 1920s), we find an average gap of exactly one scale point across the 21 countries. The same two-generation difference in the index is found in most of the countries individually: a range from 0.88 to 1.27 in the religiosity score gap includes two-thirds of the nations, the exceptions being Hungary, Ireland and Spain (higher) and Finland, Norway, Denmark and Slovenia (lower). To put it

another way, the pattern of decline has been similar everywhere, with the result that the overall rank order by religiosity has been largely preserved from the early to the late 20th century; there has however been some regression to the mean. The more religious countries (particularly in the Catholic group) have declined most; the more secular countries (especially in Scandinavia) have declined least.

In the most secular countries – the Czech Republic, Sweden and France – the curve appears to flatten out in the last couple of decades. People born in the early 1980s are much the same in religious terms as those born in the early 1960s. It is tempting to suppose that secularisation has run its course, leaving a certain amount of religion to fight another day. There may be some truth in this finding: no one expects atheism to become universal. It is important to appreciate, though, just how low these levels are. Even ignoring the exceptionally low scores in the Czech Republic, the mean levels amongst French and Swedish adults would equate to being in the next-to-lowest response category on each religion question: almost never attending or praying and choosing values just one step up from ‘extremely unimportant’ (about religion in life) and ‘extremely unreligious’ (as a self-description). Of course we know that some people are religiously active, which thus implies that many others are indeed at the extreme end of the scale.

There is also some evidence of levelling out elsewhere at more appreciable scores, notably in Slovenia, Greece and Finland. It remains to be seen whether this phenomenon will be enduring or transitory.

It is interesting (and reassuring) that in neighbouring or culturally similar countries the levels of religiosity and patterns of change correspond closely in these results. In Figure 4, there is evidently an ‘Alpine’ pattern (Switzerland and Austria) and a virtually standard Benelux pattern (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg). Likewise the curves for Norway and Denmark are difficult to distinguish in Figure 5, and the graphs for Italy, Portugal and Spain are similar in Figure 6.

Although there is obviously religious variety in Europe, the differences are as much generational as cultural. The oldest cohort in every country outside Scandinavia is more religious than the overall mean; the youngest cohort in every country outside Greece and Poland (and marginally Italy and Ireland) is less religious than average. In terms of religiosity, young Italians are more like older Swedes than they are like their own grandparents.

Age or cohort effects?

There are two possible interpretations of Figures 4-7. The first is that religion is in long term decline in northern, southern, western and eastern Europe, and that this decline is essentially generational: each birth cohort is somewhat less religious than the one before. The alternative interpretation is that in every country on the continent people become progressively more religious with age. On this view, there is no reason to expect decline, because the people who are highly secular today will be faithful tomorrow – or at any rate in 50 years.

Unfortunately for those who resist the secularisation thesis, the ‘age effect’ hypothesis receives little support from the evidence. The effects would need to be large, systematic and universal. Such effects are usually conjectured to come about as a result of major life stages such as marriage, raising children, or seeing the end of life approaching. These events are concentrated in particular age ranges, however, and there is no sign from the graphs that the patterns are similarly punctuated. The curves show continuous transition from one year of birth to the next, rather than jumps from lower to higher plateaus.

In addition, it is clear that in at least some countries people do not become more religious with age. At this point it is worth looking at the one country in the ESS not so far considered: Israel. Although Israel has a substantial minority of highly religious people, its general level of religiosity is no higher than the European average. In sharp contrast to the other 21 countries in the survey, however, there is no indication that older Israelis are more religious than their children and grandchildren (Figure 8). The results discussed above are neither some curious artefact of the measure used nor an inevitable product of the lifecycle.

The view that we are seeing absolute decline rather than merely a sign that people become more religious with age is further reinforced by repeated cross-sectional surveys. According to Eurobarometer data, attendance dropped substantially in every European country during the last three decades of the 20th century (see Norris and Inglehart 2004: Table 3.5). The European/World Values Survey tells a similar story. One could argue that these changes are period effects (i.e. one-off, across-the-board shifts) rather than generational decline, but in any event they are incompatible with pure age effects.

Finally, we do possess some studies based on sophisticated longitudinal analysis that can help to identify the source of the changes. In Britain it is quite clear that the differences should be explained on the basis of cohort and not age or period effects (see Voas and Crockett forthcoming, Crockett and Voas submitted). Similar evidence is available for the Netherlands (Dutch references). Although we lack good material in English on other countries, a Dutch study of West Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Norway, Ireland, Italy and Great Britain concluded that the gap between young and old in religiosity simply results from the fact that people born earlier in time are more likely to be religious. To the extent that an age effect could be detected, it was in the opposite direction to the one suggested: older people are more likely to have lost religion than younger people! (See Te Grotenhuis, De Graaf and Peters 1997.) Whether this phenomenon is a true age effect (as might occur if every year brings a risk of apostasy, so that the cumulative probability of defection rises with age), or is perhaps the result of multiple period effects (so that older people have been exposed to more secularising influences, partly counteracting their more religious upbringing), or will not be found again, is a matter for further investigation. In any event the evidence we possess points unambiguously to the generational nature of religious decline, and gives no support to the conjecture that most Europeans enter adulthood relatively unreligious and gradually become devout as they go through life.

Conclusion

There is much more to be done with this dataset. It will be interesting to examine each of the religion variables separately to see whether private prayer, for example, is on a different trajectory than public worship. (The answer seems to be ‘no’: the generational contrast appears to be at least as marked when it comes to prayer. In Ireland, for example, 78 percent of people born before the Second World War pray every day, and most of the remainder do so at least weekly; a mere 6 percent pray only on ‘special holy days’, less often, or never. Of those born since 1965, the proportion praying daily is down to a just over a quarter and falling while the numbers seldom or never praying are a third and rising.)

We might see whether the gender gap in religiosity is widening or narrowing, and where. The associations between religiosity and a host of social, economic and attitudinal variables await investigation.

Although we have barely begun, the ESS has already yielded an important conclusion. While there are indeed many interesting variations in European religion – countries may be high or low in affiliation, attendance and belief – there is also a single, inescapable theme. Religion is in decline. Each generation in every country surveyed is less religious than the last, measured by the best available index of religiosity. Although there are some minor differences in the speed of the decline (the most religious countries are changing more quickly than the least religious), the magnitude of the fall in religiosity from the early to the late 20th century has been remarkably constant across the continent.

In defining which countries in the world are the most modern – something difficult to do in a neutral way – we might start with the top 20 on the UN Human Development Index. In addition to 14 European countries plus Iceland, the list includes the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. We thus have a score of countries on four continents, with very different histories, speaking 11 different languages. Is Europe somehow exceptional in its level of secularization? Studies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand show very similar patterns. Japan may call for somewhat different measures but does not appear to be more religious than Western Europe. There is only one other country to consider: the United States.

Whether and why the US is an exception to the rule that modernization undermines religion is not something to be discussed in a paragraph. The point here is simply that it is, at best, an exception. Of course most of the world is not secular, but then most of the world is not modern. The United States is the major world power, but to the scientific study of religion it is merely one society among many.

Proponents of the market model have argued that any country that is not as religious as the United States will become more so as soon as it adopts the appropriate public policies. One can only note that over the past century European religious ‘markets’ have become increasingly open and well stocked, and total consumption has steadily declined. It is time once again to take secularization seriously, whether or not the United States is or will be affected.

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Appendix 1: Countries participating in the European Social Survey

Austria
Belgium
Czech Republic
Denmark
Finland
France
Germany
Greece
Hungary
Ireland
Israel
Italy
Luxembourg
Netherlands
Norway
Poland
Portugal
Slovenia
Spain
Sweden
Switzerland
United Kingdom

Appendix 2: ESS questions on religion

- Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?
[Footnote: Identification is meant, not official membership.]

Yes/No (if yes, which; if no ...)

- Have you *ever* considered yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?

Yes/No (if yes, which)

- Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?

0 Not at all religious
...
10 Very religious

- Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?

1 Every day
2 More than once a week
3 Once a week
4 At least once a month
5 Only on special holy days
6 Less often
7 Never

- Apart from when you are at religious services, how often, if at all, do you pray?

1 Every day
2 More than once a week
3 Once a week
4 At least once a month
5 Only on special holy days
6 Less often
7 Never

- Looking at this card, how important is each of these things in your life.

... religion?

0 Extremely unimportant

...

10 Extremely important

[Other items are family, friends, leisure time, politics, work, voluntary organisations]

- For each of the voluntary organisations I will now mention, please use this card to tell me whether any of these things apply to you now or in the last 12 months, and, if so, which.

... a religious or church organisation?

- None
- Member
- Participated
- Donated money
- Voluntary work

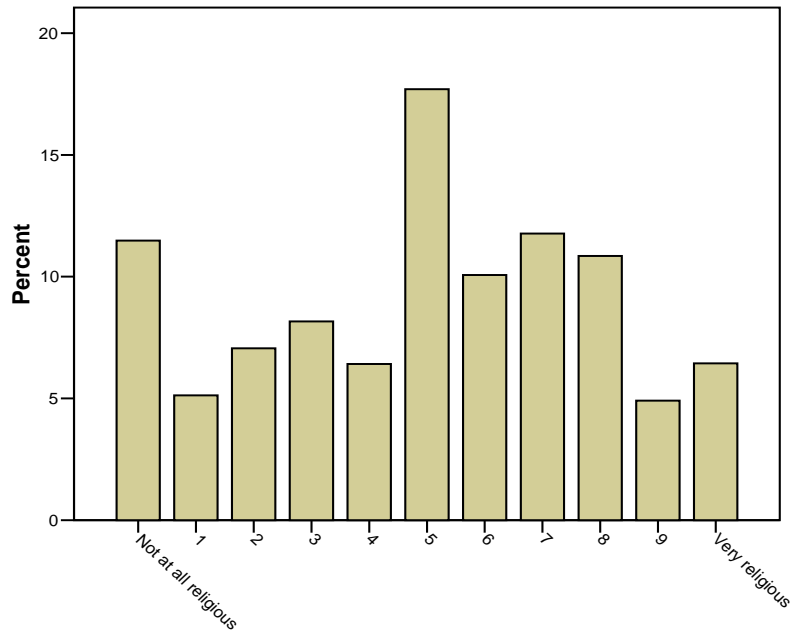
[If the response is other than 'none', ask ...]

- Do you have personal friends within this organisation?

Yes/No

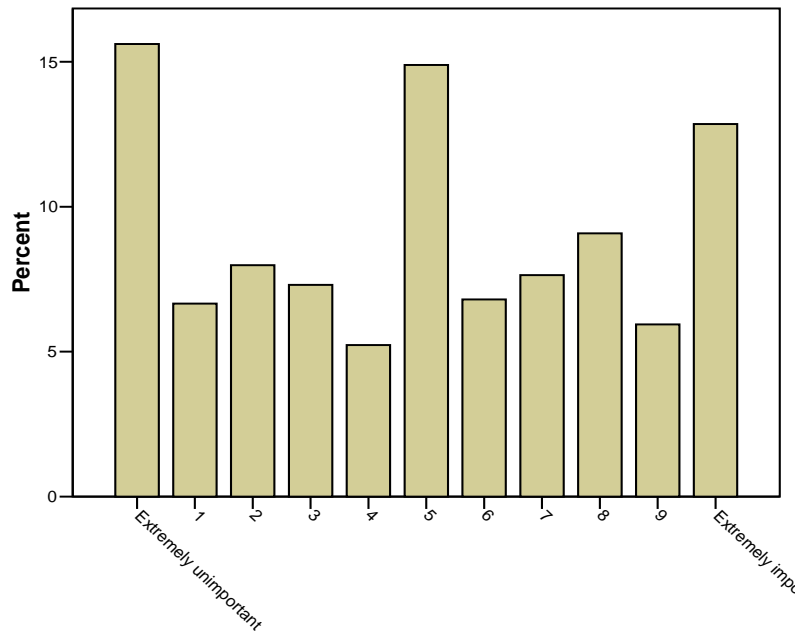
[Other organisations – in a list of 12 – include sports clubs, trade unions, etc.]

Figure 1a, 1b



How religious are you

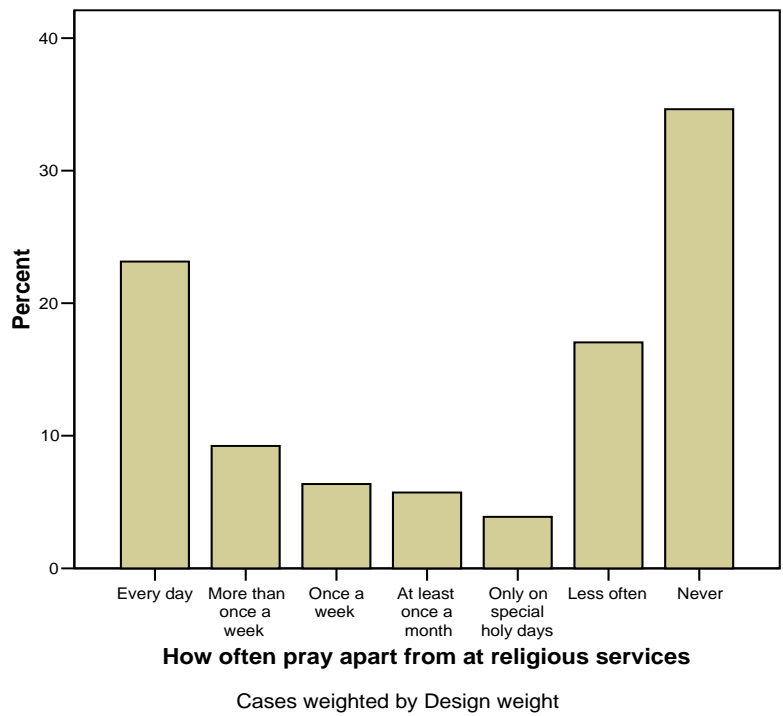
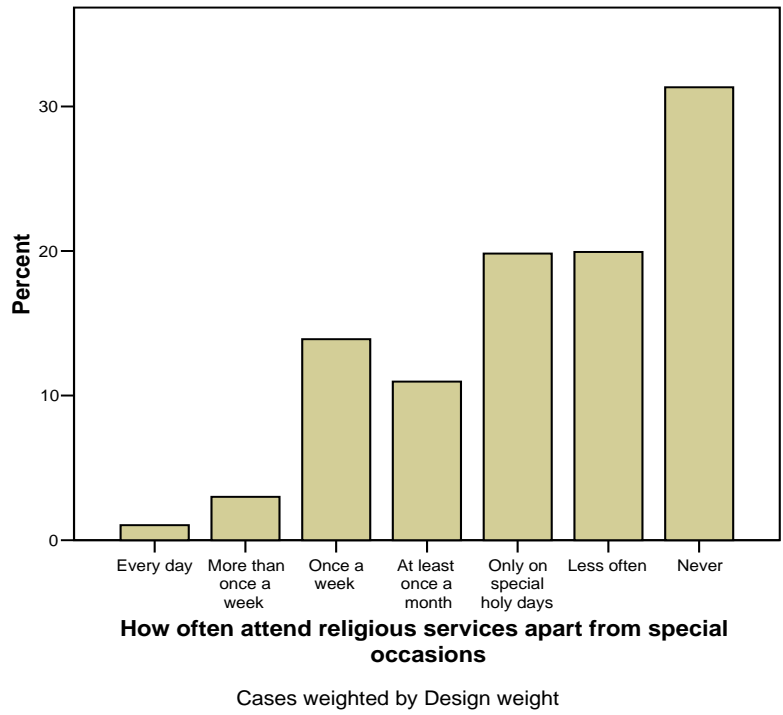
Cases weighted by Design weight



Important in life: religion

Cases weighted by Design weight

Figure 2a, 2b



Figures 3a, 3b

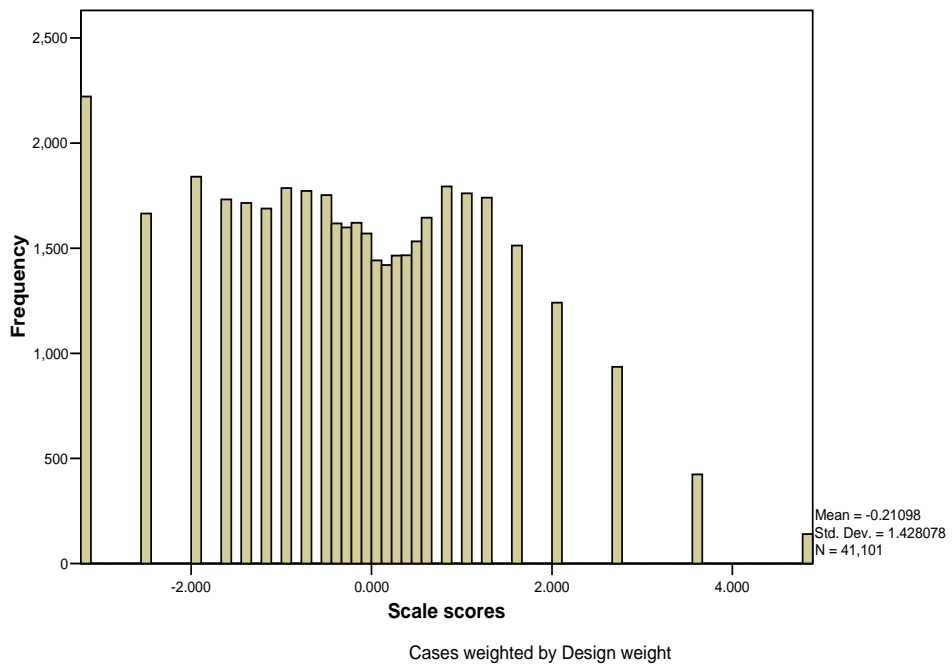
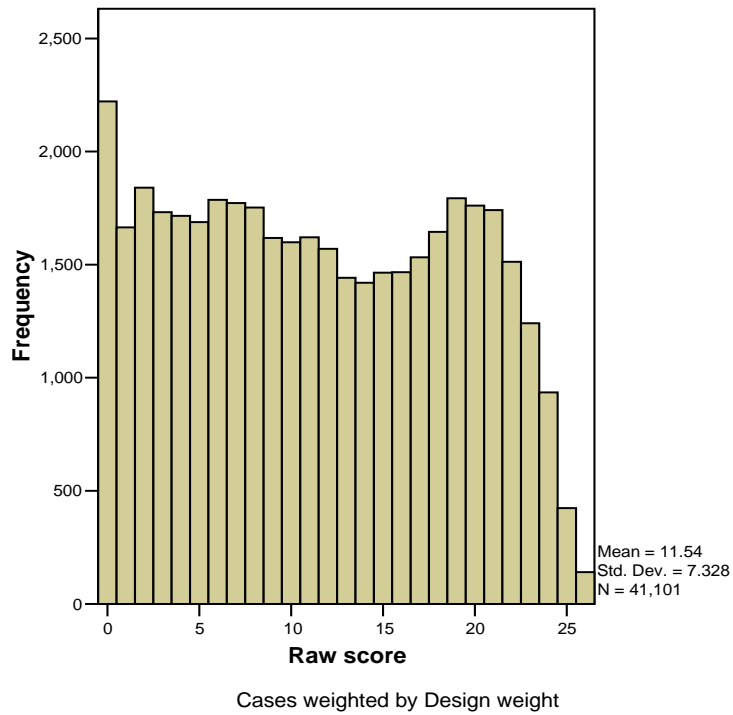


Figure 3c

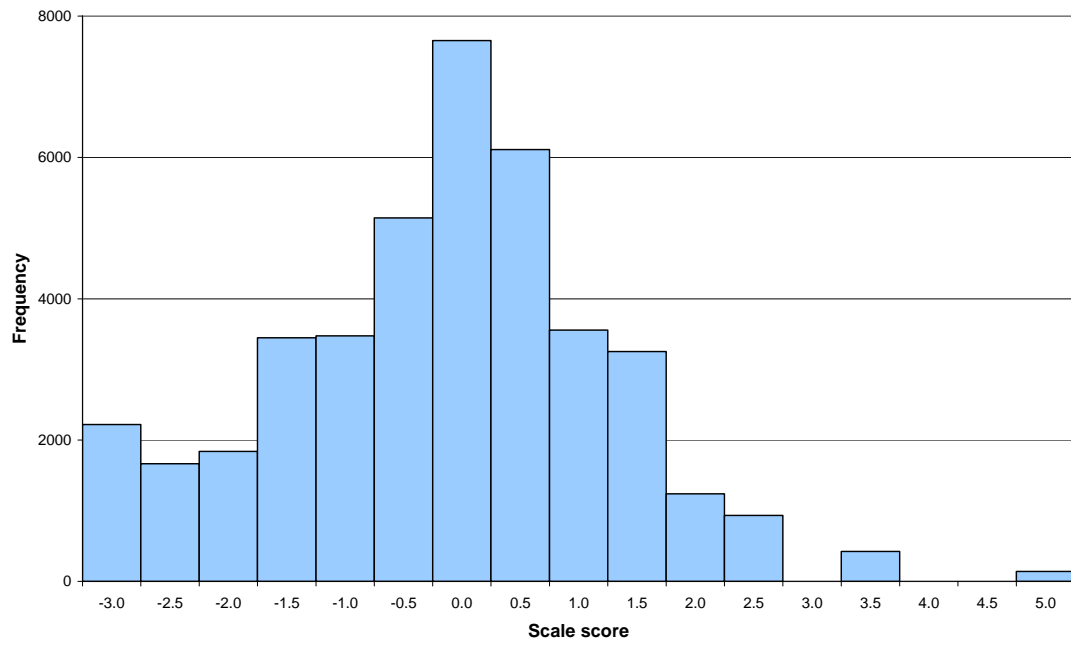


Figure 4: Franco-German core

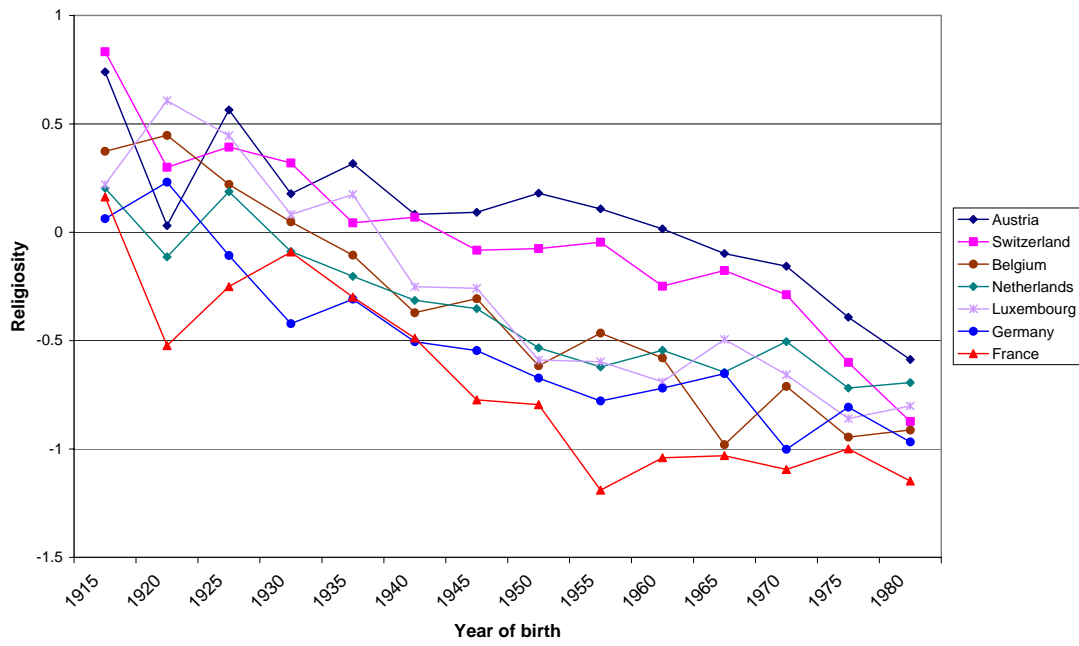


Figure 5: Catholic fringe

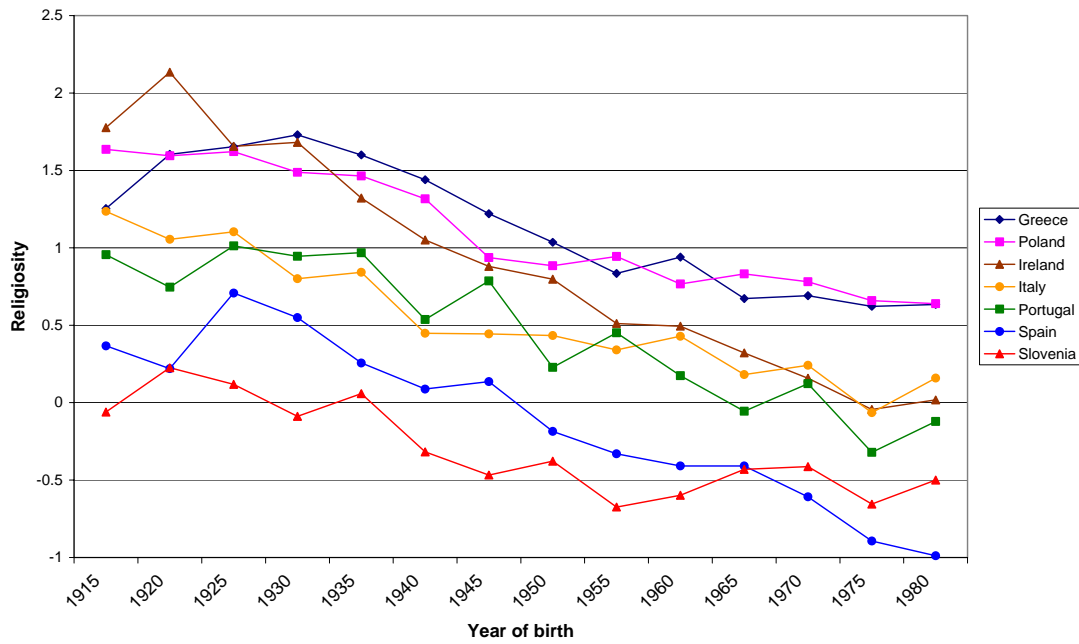


Figure 6: Northern/Eastern fringe

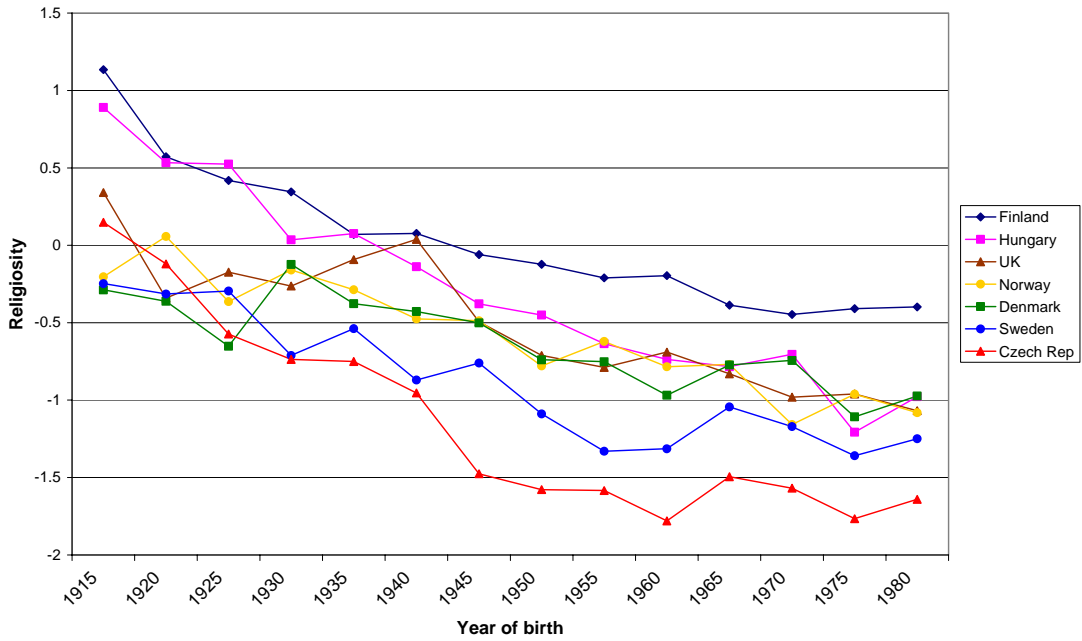


Figure 7: Major countries

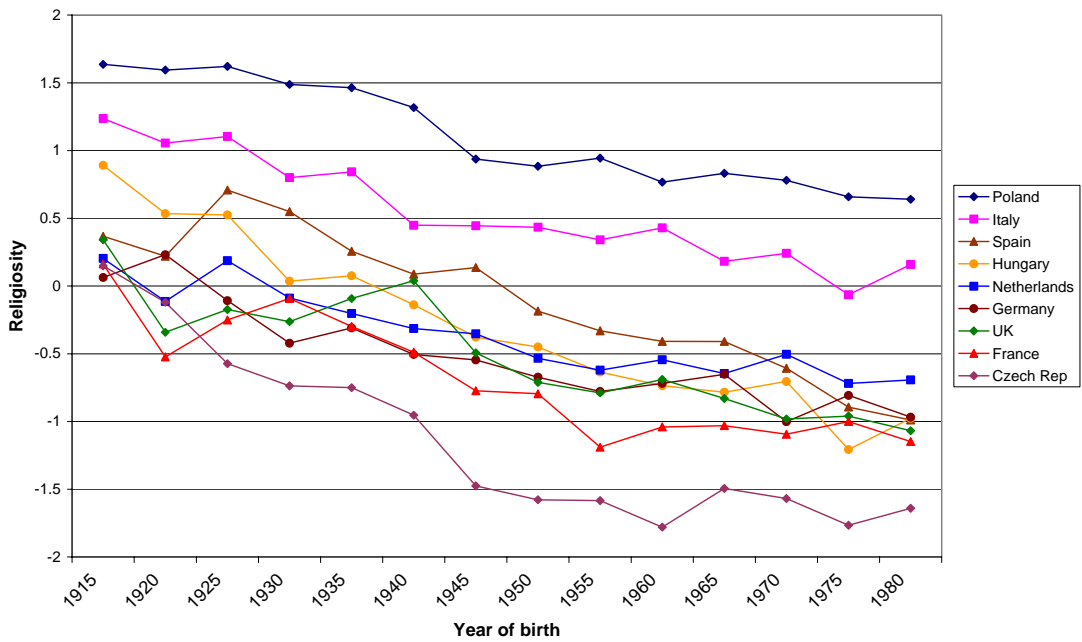


Figure 8: Israel

