

SECULARIZATION IN EUROPE: Religious Change between and within Birth Cohorts

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ABSTRACT: There is ample evidence of religious decline in Western Europe but no general consensus on the situation in the East. Analysis of three waves of the European Values Study (from 1990, 1999 and 2008) adds to the evidence base on secularization across the continent. As expected, older people in most countries, even in Central and Eastern Europe (though not in parts of the former Yugoslavia), seem to be more religious than the rest of the population. More surprisingly, the data suggest that religiosity increased in Northern as well as Eastern Europe during the 1990s, though it is not certain that these apparent rises are genuine.

It still seems fair to say that society is changing religiously not because individuals are changing, but rather because old people are gradually replaced by younger people with different characteristics. Much remains to be understood, though, about why recent generations are different. Parents may be partly responsible, by giving children more control over their own lives. The composition of society has changed, but so has the context in which people are raised. Young people acquire different values and face new conditions. Which factors are most important remains to be determined.

KEYWORDS: religion, generations, values, Eastern Europe, EVS

INTRODUCTION

The social and personal significance of religion has declined in most developed countries during recent decades. Religious institutions, leaders and norms have become less influential, and at the same time individuals are participating less in religious activities and giving religion a less important role in their lives. We have good reason to suppose that "modernization undermines the power, popularity, and prestige of religious beliefs, behaviour and institutions" (Bruce 2011, 24).

The debate over secularization is often hampered by confusion over whether it is the social or the personal significance of religion that is at issue. The influence of religious institutions on other sectors of society is clearly much lower now in the Western world than in the past; no one disputes that the role of religion in the making and enforcing of laws or in the regulation

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of family life, education, leisure, scientific research, the economy and so on has diminished steadily over a period of several centuries. These changes are intrinsic to the process we call modernization, and there is no serious prospect of them being reversed. Religion might continue to have a public role if it involves enough people with shared views, but even here the tendency in liberal democracies is to view faith as a private matter.

By contrast, there is a great deal of disagreement over the degree to which religious ideas and organizations will continue to influence the attitudes and behaviour of individuals in modern society. No one seriously imagines that religion will disappear in the foreseeable future, but the downward trend in most post-industrial societies is striking. Secularization appears to be a micro- as well as a macro-level process, so that the late stages of modernization bring declines in religious practice, affiliation and belief.

Why should this be so, when atheism is not a necessary feature of modern ideology? What is a feature, though, is a disposition to heterodoxy. No person or organization has privileged access to the truth. No statement— either religious or scientific— is truly authoritative. The worldview is scientific in part through its tendency to look for physical causes and solutions, but just as importantly in its promotion of the scientific method. Every claim is subject to criticism and testing. All pictures of reality are revisable.

Various scholars have highlighted this openness (to the new, the different, the individual, and the personal synthesis) in characterizing modernity. People are unwilling to judge one idea or style superior to another; tolerance is the only rule. Such a mindset may in the short term lead to religious creativity and a flowering of alternative spiritualities, but it is destructive of religious institutions.

Modernity brings about a shift in the relative value attached to the individual as opposed to the collective. Not only is the authority of the community diminished in control over behaviour, it is also reduced in control over thought. Orthodoxy— right belief— becomes a foreign concept. No one has privileged access to power, and no one has privileged access to the truth. Everyone decides what is right him or herself, and everyone else is expected to be tolerant.

Some scholars object that the decline in churchgoing has not resulted in a large number of conversions to secular rationalism. But whatever words people use to describe themselves or their beliefs, they are far less inclined to see the supernatural around them than were our great-grandparents. Declared belief shows little real commitment to the idea of divine action in the world. The God of private belief is rather vague, and what people are prepared to do for God is even vaguer.

Many sociologists, including Luckmann (1996, 2004) and others, argue that modernity does not necessarily produce a decline of the significance of religion. Rather, religion mutates in response to the challenges of modernity, and people increasingly embrace various non-traditional individualized beliefs without belonging to conventional religious organisations (Davie 2003, Hervieu-Leger 2003). Critics of the secularization thesis also assert that Europe is an exceptional case, and that religiosity remains strong in a global perspective. Even in Europe, according to Casanova (1994), religion is in some places moving out of the private realm into the public sphere .

If secularization is a consequence of modernization, then it should be most advanced in the most modern countries. Which countries those are may be contentious, but it is fair to start by looking at the UN Human Development Index. In 2010, the top three dozen countries (all listed as having 'very high human development') included most of western and central Europe in addition to Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates. One sees clear signs of religious decline in 31

of these countries. The evidence for the US, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore is debatable, though the proportion of people claiming to have no religion is increasing in all of them. Only the UAE (which a few decades ago was an undeveloped tribal society) seems unlikely to experience secularization in the foreseeable future.

Contrary to claims that European countries are so diverse that we cannot generalize about their religious trajectories (Greeley 2003), there is a remarkable uniformity in religious decline across much of the continent. Voas (2009) created a religiosity scale constructed using variables from the European Social Survey for religious affiliation, frequency of attendance and prayer, self-description as religious (or not), and importance of religion in life. While there are many variations—countries may be high or low in affiliation, attendance and belief—there is also an overriding theme: religion is in decline. The magnitude of the fall in religiosity from the early to the late twentieth century has been remarkably constant, although the most religious countries are changing slightly more quickly than the least religious.

RECENT CHANGE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

In Western Europe there is little need for more evidence of religious decline; the debates are largely over causes and the extent to which the weakening of mainstream religious groups is balanced by growth in alternative spirituality or privatized belief systems. By contrast, there is still no general consensus over the religious situation in Eastern Europe. (At the conference of the International Study of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe Association in December 2010, for example, the first author heard some scholars assert that Catholicism in Poland was as strong as ever while others claimed that its popularity was waning.) There is a growing but still relatively new literature on these issues.

In the years immediately following the fall of communism in 1989, it was widely maintained that there was a religious revival in Eastern Europe. The apparent resurgence of religion was held by some scholars, including Greeley (1994), to contradict the secularization thesis. In a subsequent article based on International Social Survey Programme data on religion from 1991 and 1998, he claimed to find evidence for “a U-shaped curve of religious beliefs, with younger cohorts and their grandparents’ generation expressing greater religious faith than their parents’ generation” (Greeley 2002, 76).

Tomka (2006) makes a similar argument to suggest that decline is observed only in Western Europe and that revival is the main feature to the east. He too argues that generational shifts have been the motor for this resurgence: “Young people who have discovered God are more numerous in this area than those who have lost their faith in God.” Tomka also points to conceptual and theological differences between eastern and western Christianity that mean that some of the traditional tools used by sociologists of religion are not well suited to investigating what he elsewhere referred to as the “religious restoration” in Central and Eastern Europe (Tomka 2004).

Many commentators came to see this revival as short-lived, however. Froese presented evidence “that levels of monthly church attendance began to level out following their dramatic growth in 1990” (2001, 265). He offers a supply-side interpretation of these findings, based on the market model of religion. In his view the revival began with the lifting of restrictions that had encumbered religion during the communist era, but then quickly fizzled out as state intervention helped to bolster religious oligopolies and hinder competition.

The use of attendance statistics has been the cause of much disagreement. Borowik (2002) argues that while there was a religious revival, it is evident primarily with regard to belief and identification with the Orthodox church, not in church attendance. Religious practice in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine are as low as in Western Europe. In response, Titarenko (2008) asserted that the relative infrequency of attendance at Eastern Orthodox churches is largely the

product of official repression during the communist era. People in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine go to church more often now than they did at age 12. The reverse is true in Catholic Lithuania.

Titarenko, like Tomka, asserts that church attendance has a different meaning among Orthodox compared to western Christians. Churchgoing is less important in Orthodox countries, and hence the lower attendance rates there should not necessarily be viewed as signs of secularization.

In a distinctly different strand of the literature, some scholars argue that the religious revival in Eastern Europe was a temporary phenomenon largely confined to Orthodox countries, and that most indicators of religiosity are declining. For example, Pollack (2008) finds signs of religious decline (mainly resulting from the replacement of older generations by a less religious younger cohorts) across both eastern and western Europe, with only a few exceptions. Similarly Halman & Draulans (2006) report a general decline of religiosity across the continent. In earlier work, Pollack (2003) noted that new forms of spirituality outside the church (such as 'New Age' beliefs) were spreading in Eastern as well as Western Europe, but too slowly to compensate for the numerical losses in conventional religion.

A related argument is that one finds different processes in different countries, producing revival in some and religious decline in others. Specifically, Mueller (2009) finds revival in countries such as Russia and Belarus and several other former Soviet republics, in addition to Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovakia. Other territories, however, have apparently been de-Christianized by their communist past (e.g. the Czech Republic and eastern Germany). "Summing up our findings, we can neither claim a continuous decline, nor a general increase in church adherence and traditional religiousness in Eastern Europe. ... Apart from this, these developments have to be considered from different angles. Despite the fact that identification with religion and the church has increased in many countries since the breakdown of communism, some doubts remain with regard to the substance underlying such self-expressions" Mueller (2009, 75).

It has even been argued that there was no religious revival in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. Need & Evans (2001) found that except in Romania and Poland, younger adults were less religious than older ones across Eastern Europe. The differences between age groups were more pronounced in Catholic than in Orthodox countries. In the findings we discuss below, the pattern of cohort change does not necessarily point to the direction of period effects.

Assuming that religion has indeed increased in popularity in Eastern Europe, the collapse of the barriers to religious activity associated with communism is not the only possible explanation. In addition, the economic transformation to free markets produced widespread hardship. The material deprivations that followed the fall of the old order in Eastern Europe may tend to encourage religious identity, belief and participation.

The degree to which income is evenly distributed or at least reasonably secure for individuals may be even more important than the absolute level of aggregate income. There is an association between the strength of the state welfare system and the amount of religious practice in a country: the better the financial safety net, the less need for religious services (a generalization found in Wuthnow & Nass 1988 and elsewhere, and corroborated by Gill & Lundsgaarde 2004). The thesis has been applied on a global scale with the claim that religious commitment is greatest where "existential security" is lowest (Norris & Inglehart 2004). The significance of inequality receives empirical support in the work of Ruiter & van Tubergen (2009).

The arrival and departure of communism changed values in a number of ways (Schwartz & Bardi 1997), and the ultimate impact on religion is not easy to predict. It is difficult to sustain tradition when individuals have a sense of autonomy.

EXPLAINING RELIGIOUS CHANGE: AGE, PERIOD AND COHORT EFFECTS

For the reasons set out above, it is particularly interesting to compare religious commitment in different parts of Europe. In doing so, we also focus on year of birth as a key variable. There are large differences between the young and the old in various indicators of religious involvement, in particular the willingness to identify with a religion, to attend services, or to assign an important role to religion in one's life. In many Western countries, age is far more important than any other characteristic in the strength of its association with religious commitment, easily trumping gender, education, employment, place of residence, denomination, and so on.

The challenge, then, is to discover why age matters. The search for answers will take us to a core problem in the analysis of social change: distinguishing between the effects of period, cohort and age. Society may change because people change, or because of a change of people; it may stay the same even if everyone changes. Some illustrations may help to clarify these various effects.

If a new religious movement appears and a significant number of people convert to the new faith, the change is rapid and potentially enduring. Such a shift is an example of a 'period' effect, because it is specific to one particular period in history. Anyone present at that time is potentially affected.

In a different scenario, people who were born around the same time (or were at school together or fought in the same war) may share certain characteristics by virtue of their common formative experience. Society would change even if no individual changed once he or she reached maturity, because older people would gradually be replaced by younger people who did things differently. Here we have a 'cohort' effect.

Finally, what we do and believe might change as we get older. It is often supposed that people tend to have little interest in religion in youth but gradually become more religious with age, perhaps because of evolving priorities or an awareness of personal mortality. This pattern would be an 'age' effect. These changes may occur on reaching key stages in life, such as marrying and having children, rather than being connected to age per se. In this instance every single individual might change without society changing at all, because at any point one would always find the same mix of old and young, more or less involved with religion.

Age, period and cohort effects are important, but other demographic changes and their interactions might also affect the religious trajectory of modern societies. Immigration will offset decline to a degree dependent on its scale and the religiosity of immigrants relative to the native population. Because religious characteristics tend to be inherited from parents, decline may be slowed if religious people have more children than others.

Our first task is to try to understand what combination of age, period and cohort effects are at work. Is society becoming less religious because of forces that have an impact on everyone? Or do those forces have their effect by undermining religious upbringing, so that some generations come to be less religious than their predecessors? And if (as we tend to suppose) people become more religious with age, how far does this factor compensate for the other influences?

Even with the best available data and methods, unfortunately, it can be difficult to distinguish between these three types of change. Each of these three effects can be expressed as a combination of the other two. For example, an individual's age is simply the difference between the date at a given time (period) and an individual's year of birth (cohort), and with sufficient ingenuity all purported effects of one kind could be explained in terms of the others. Plausibility and parsimony will generally lead us to favour certain interpretations, however (Harding and Jencks 2003).

Previous studies suggest that the major changes observed in religious adherence arise from differences between cohorts. Religious involvement does not tend to change during adult-

hood, despite the impact of lifecycle and historical events. Age and period effects are therefore small, to the extent that they exist at all. (See Voas & Crockett 2005, Crockett & Voas 2006, Wolf 2007.)

EVS FINDINGS

The fourth wave of the European Values Study provides new evidence on religious change across the continent. The 2008 survey covers 47 countries or territories, reaching as far west as Iceland and as far east as Azerbaijan. National samples were typically 1,500 respondents, and nearly 68,000 people in total participated. The questionnaire, administered in face-to-face interviews, took more than an hour to complete.

For present purposes we have grouped the countries into six regions, as shown in Table 1. Our definition of 'Europe' follows geographical convention and we have therefore omitted a few countries from the dataset: Turkey, Northern Cyprus, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. These countries offer fascinating points of comparison with those we do cover, but predominantly Muslim populations or the conflicts in the Caucasuses introduce complications we hope to avoid. (Note, however, that we do include both Albania and Kosovo, where Islam is the main religion.)

The country groups are largely a matter of convenience. Our aim is to identify common patterns rather than to compare 42 different nations in detail. We are well aware of the considerable diversity within each set and the fact that some countries might be reassigned to other groups. Our intention, moreover, is not to find the 'best' system of geopolitical classification, but rather to illuminate some key contrasts found in the data. To that end we have separated out one small group of countries that composed the southeastern half of what was formerly Yugoslavia, while collecting together a set of Eastern European countries stretching from Albania to Russia.

Note that we are not trying to test theories about any particular region: we are simply trying to describe the findings as economically as possible. To that end we looked at the individual countries, and their similarities and differences helped to guide our system of classification. Where particular countries (e.g. Slovenia, Croatia or the Baltic states) might have been classified in alternative ways, we have been guided by the patterns observed in the data of interest.

Western Europe	Northern Europe	Southern Europe	Central Europe	Eastern Europe	Southeast Yugoslavia
Austria	Denmark	Cyprus*	Czech Republic	Albania*	Kosovo
Belgium	Estonia	Greece*	Germany (East)	Bosnia and Herzegovina*	Macedonia
France	Finland	Italy	Hungary	Bulgaria	Montenegro
Germany (West)	Iceland	Malta	Poland	Belarus	Serbia
Ireland	Latvia	Portugal	Slovak Republic	Croatia	
Luxembourg*	Lithuania	Spain	Slovenia	Moldova*	
Netherlands	Norway*			Romania	
Switzerland*	Sweden			Russian Federation	
UK: Great Britain				Ukraine	
UK: Northern Ireland					

Table 1: Country groups (2008)

Note: The table shows the composition of country groups for Figures 1-4 (EVS 2008). Countries marked with * were not included in the 1990 or 1999 waves and so are excluded from the groups used for Figures 5-17. In addition, Southeast Yugoslavia is not available for the earlier years and Eastern Europe appears only in 1999. Northern Europe does not include Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in Figures 5, 8, 9, 12 and 14.

To repeat, each group remains highly diverse in religion, history, and culture, and the aggregation is used simply for economy of presentation. No classification is able to produce perfectly homogeneous groups of countries. To take one example, the Baltic states (which one might be tempted to treat as a natural group on its own) are religiously very diverse.

One option would be to abandon the use of regions within Europe. With more than 40 countries, however, it is impossible to see patterns if one considers each nation separately. At best the result is a kind of league table, which is of little use. In this instance we are concerned with at least three things: the general level of religious interest, contrasts between young and old, and comparisons between the 1990, 1999 and 2008 waves. Looking at countries individually makes the overall picture hard to discern, partly because there are so many particularities to consider and also because random fluctuations become sizable.

By aggregating data for a group of countries, there are considerable benefits in smoothing, and it is possible to summarize the main trends. Of course one must not assume that these trends apply to every country in the group, but here we are mainly interested in obtaining an overview. Armed with the general picture we can then look more closely at individual countries to see whether or not they conform to the pattern.

We focus on the following variables:

How important is God in your life? [Scale from 1 to 10, where 10 means very important and 1 means not at all important]

Independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are ...

- *A religious person*
- *Not a religious person*
- *A convinced atheist*

Please say, for each of the following, how important it is in your life. ... Religion [very important, quite important, not important, not at all important]

Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days? [More than once a week, once a week, once a month, only on specific holy days, once a year, less often, never / practically never]

We look at the proportion of respondents who gave 'religious' responses, namely:

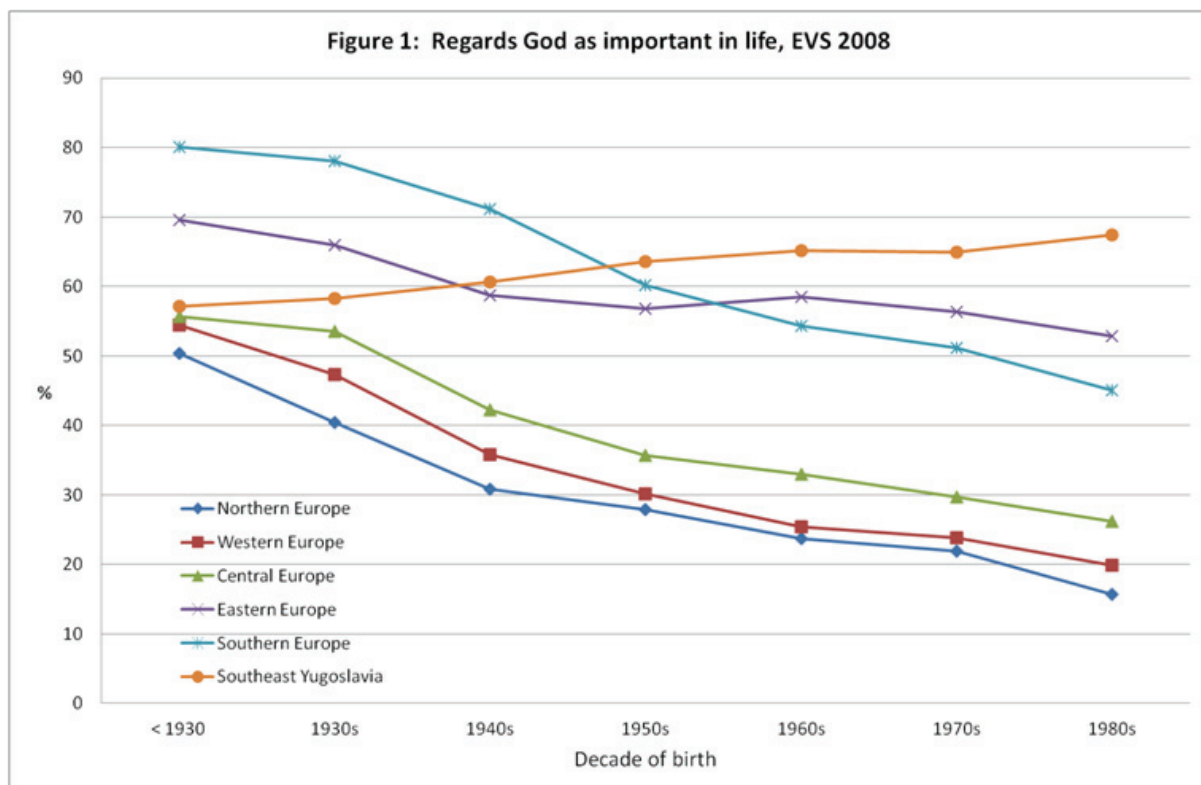
Values of 8, 9 or 10 for the importance of God in life; choosing the label 'a religious person'; finding religion very important or quite important; and attending services monthly or more often. The graphs show the percentage of respondents by decade of birth who satisfy these criteria. Note that weighting cases by national population would have meant that respondents from the smaller countries would have had little influence on the results. We have chosen to weight every country equally, and so these findings should be regarded as representing the set of countries included in each group rather than the geographical region viewed as a single entity. (This approach is used by other scholars; see for example Kaufmann et al. 2011).

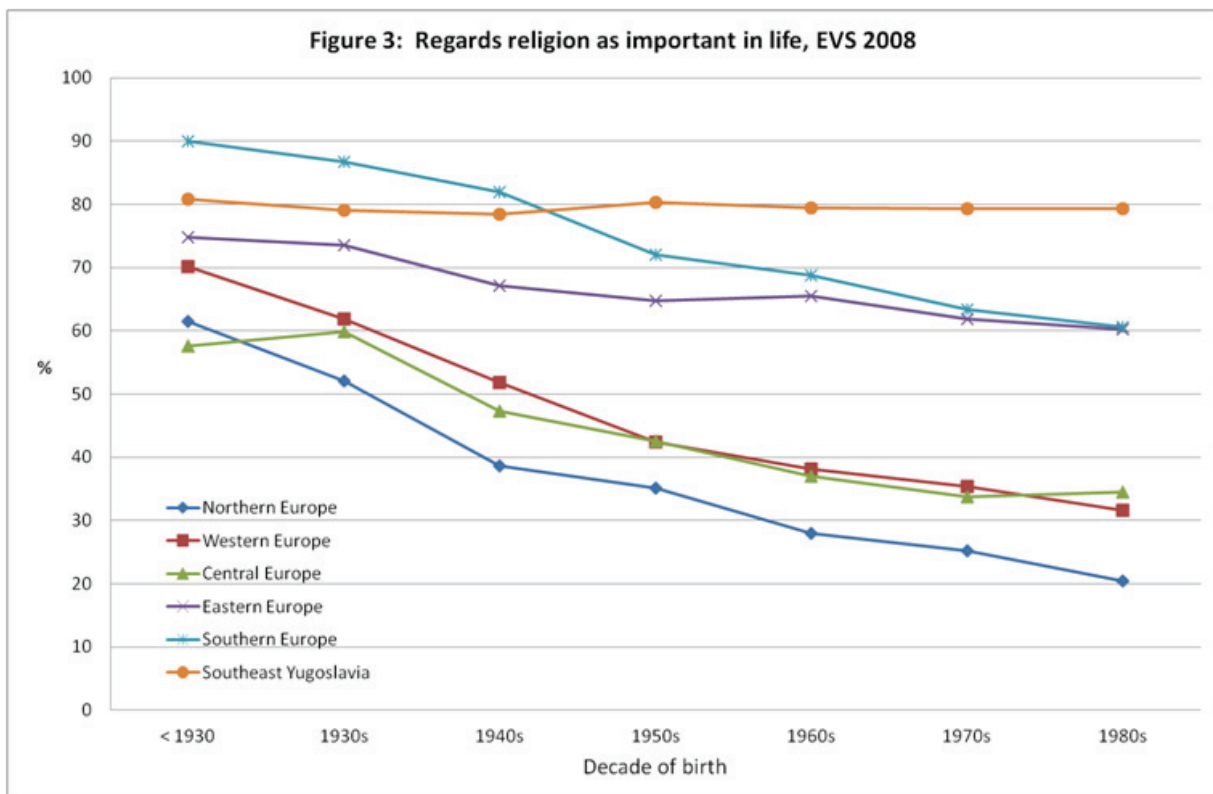
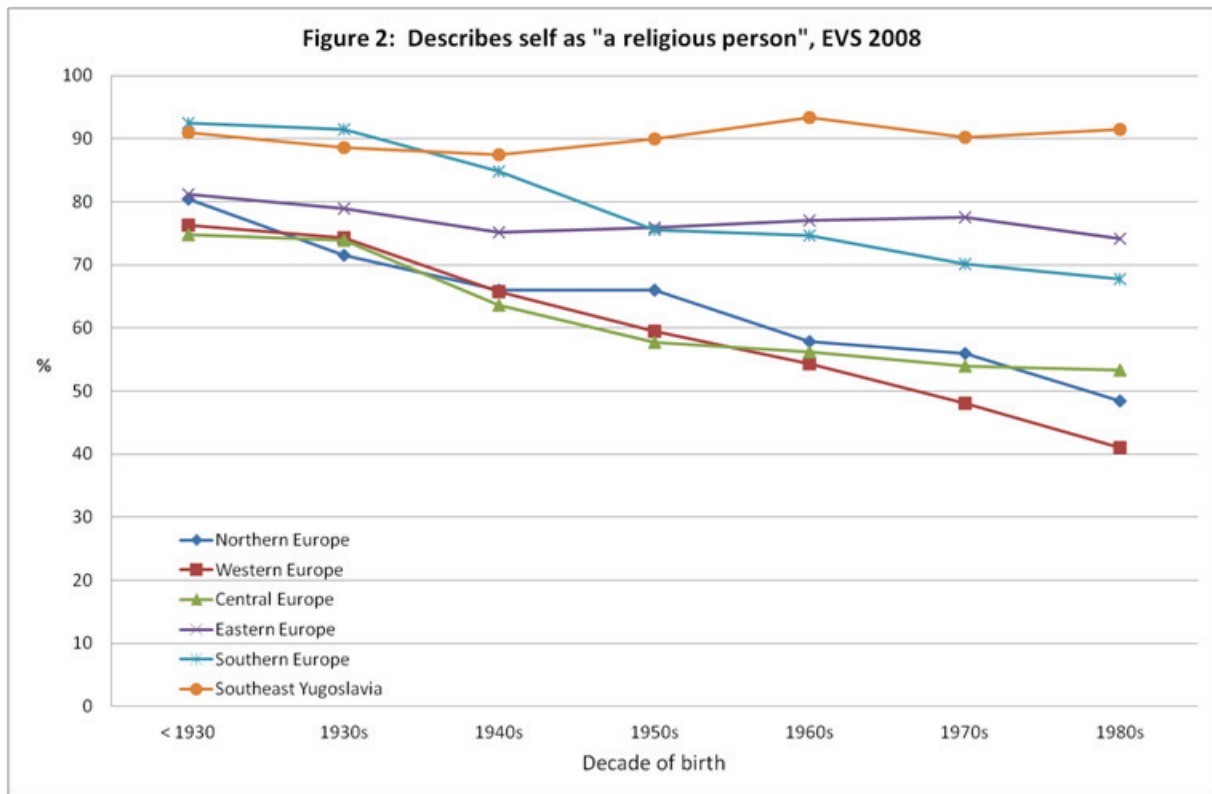
It is immediately apparent from Figures 1-4 that younger birth cohorts in Western, Northern, Central and Southern Europe are on average less religious than older ones. Southern Europe has higher religiosity on all measures than the other regions, but the slope of the graphs – that is to say, the difference between successive cohorts – is the same in all four of these regions. Almost the only exception to monotonic decline across years of birth is attendance at religious services, where in some instances people in the very oldest generation attend less frequently than some others. This phenomenon is commonly seen, and presumably arises because some elderly people are too infirm to attend services.

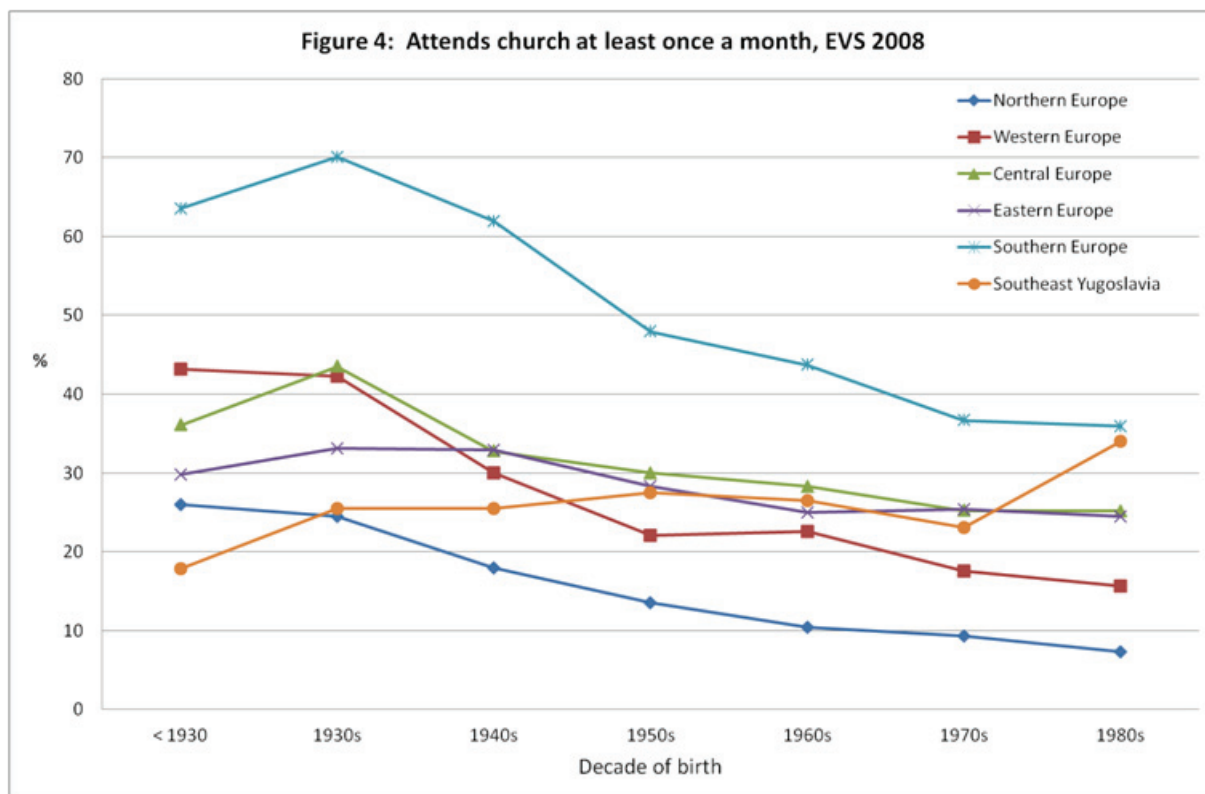
The lines for Eastern Europe and Southeast Yugoslavia provide a striking contrast to the parallel lines seen for these four regions just mentioned. In Eastern Europe, younger people are still typically less religious than older people on these measures, but the differences are

not nearly as substantial as in countries further west. In the nations that composed the south-eastern half of the former Yugoslavia, there is no sign that younger people are less religious than older people. On the contrary, for at least the 'importance of God in your life' variable, the gradient is clearly upwards.

These findings are entirely consistent with our expectations. The cohort progression that is indicative of secularization has been observed previously in the European Social Survey, e.g. by Voas (2009), for countries in Western, Northern, Southern and Central Europe. As discussed above, religion seems to have made at least a partial comeback in Eastern Europe following the collapse of communism, though the strength and persistence of that revival continues to be debated. The territories of the former Yugoslavia – in particular Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia – continue to be affected by nationalistic turmoil in which religion has had a role to play.



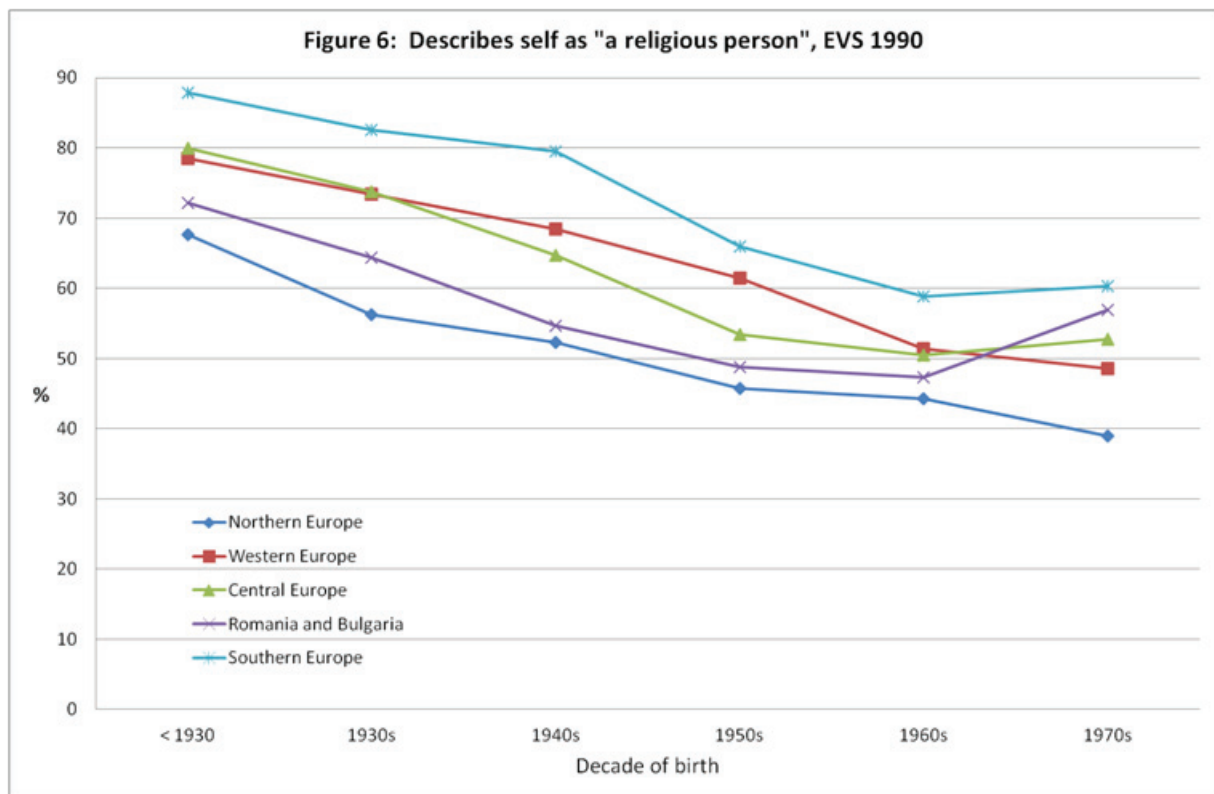
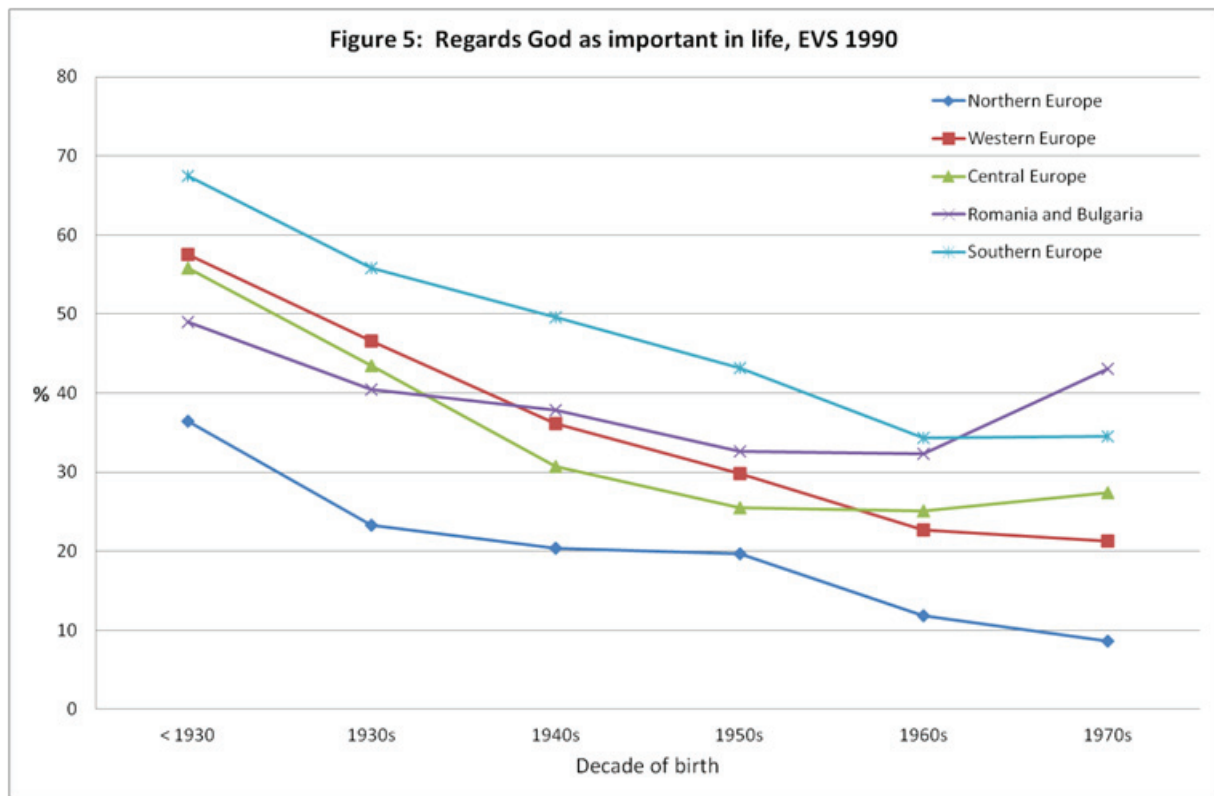


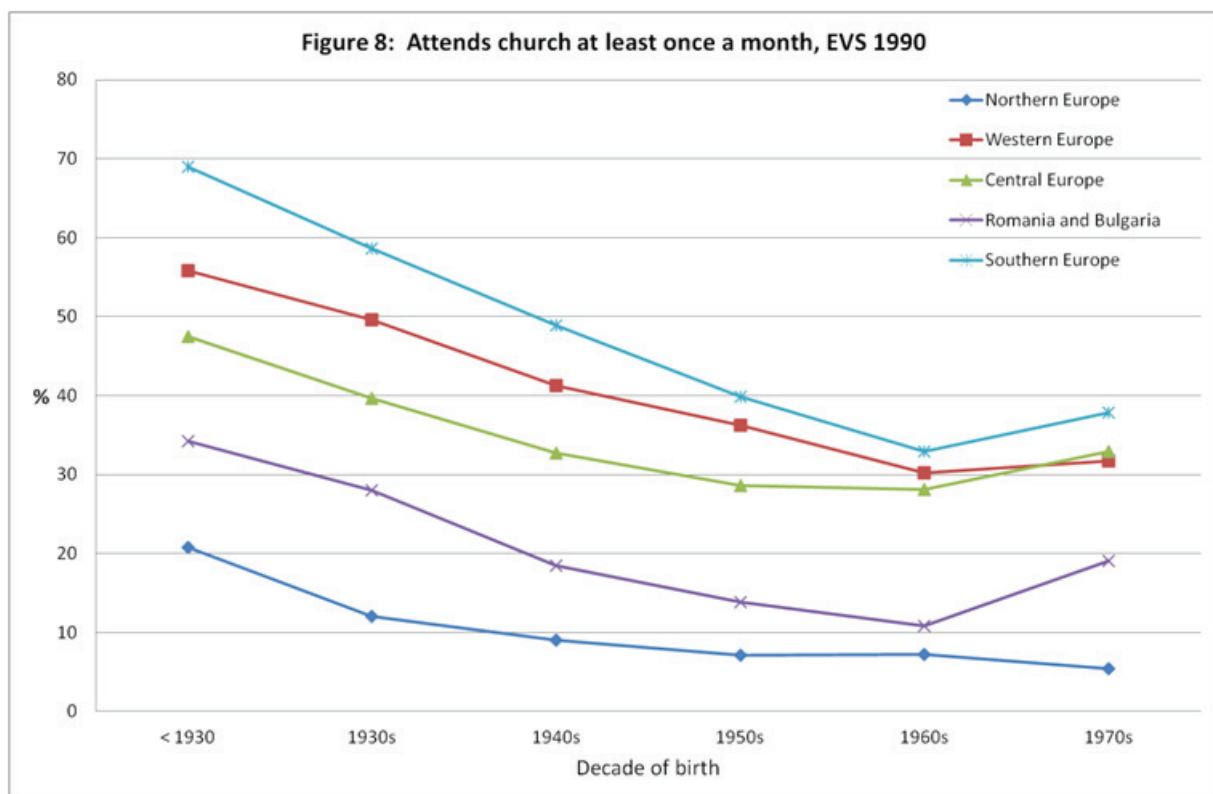
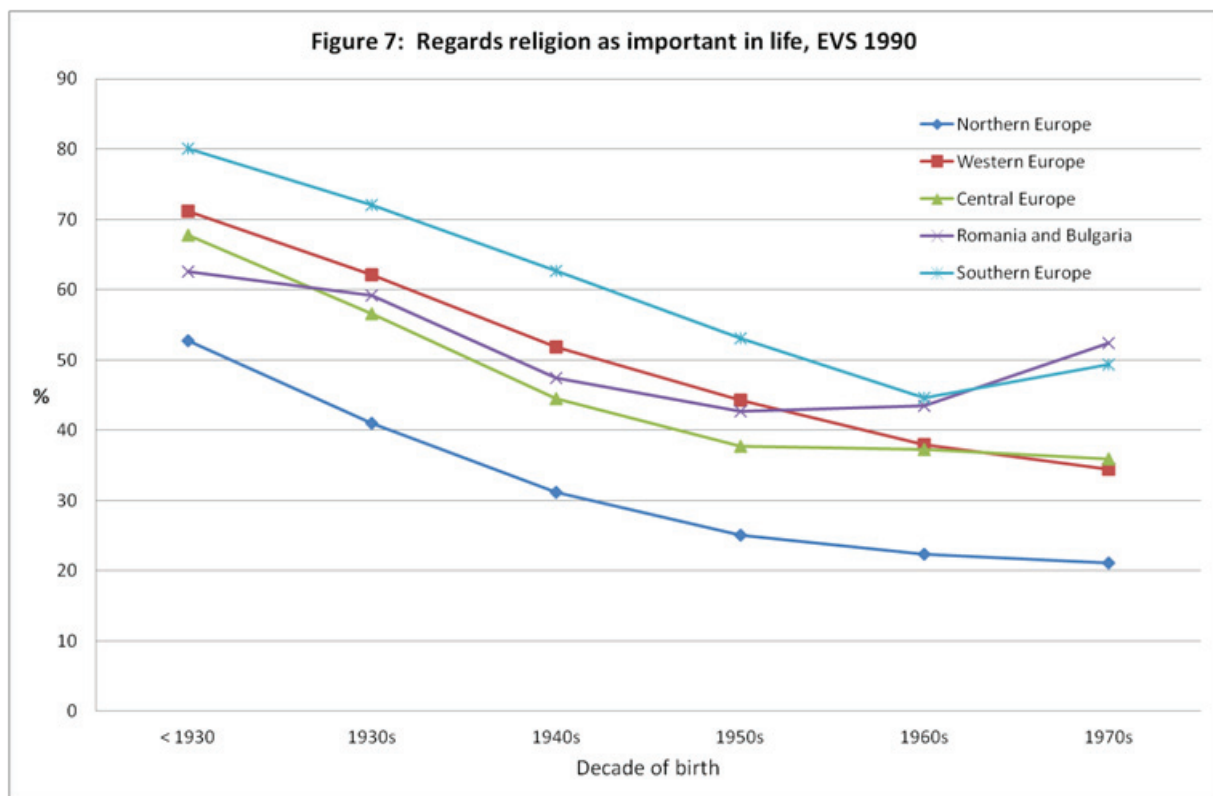


The view that secularization comes about through the replacement of more religious older generations by less religious younger ones is clearly supported by the graphs discussed so far. The 2008 survey simply gives us a cross-section of the population at one point, however. To investigate religious change, it would be helpful to compare data from two or more years.

We will look at the subset of countries for which EVS data are available from 1990 and 1999 (the second and third waves). We will first consider the cross-sectional results separately and then compare the findings from the last three waves. Not all of the variables we use were included in each survey in the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia); those countries are included in the analysis of 'religion is important' and 'religious person', but not of 'God is important' or monthly attendance. In the final set of graphs showing a combined measure of religiosity, the Baltic states are excluded completely.

The graphs based on the EVS 1990 survey (Figures 5-8) show relationships between cohorts that are similar to those already described for 2008. Older people are more religious than younger people based on these four indicators. For some country groups, we do however observe that some measures are higher for those born in the 1970s than in the previous decade. It is possible that this upturn reveals a religious revival among emerging adults, an interpretation that is most plausible for Romania and Bulgaria (the only Eastern European countries included in the survey that year). In other places, though, it seems more likely that family influence is still felt by members of the youngest group. For surveys conducted in 1990, any respondents born in the 1970s would be 18, 19 or at most 20 years of age. Some of these individuals will still live with their parents, and all will have had recent exposure to the religious influence of their family of upbringing. We commonly find that it is not until people reach their mid-20s that religious involvement settles at the level that then typically remains stable over the life course.

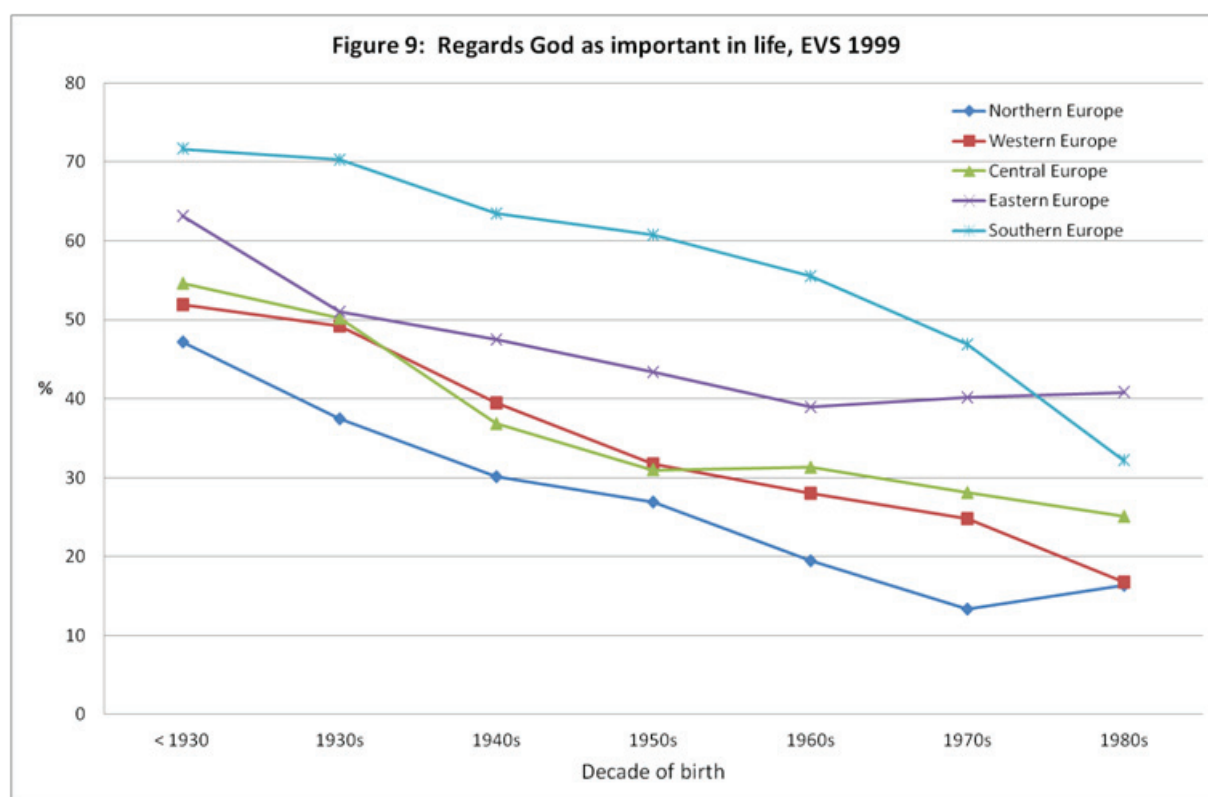


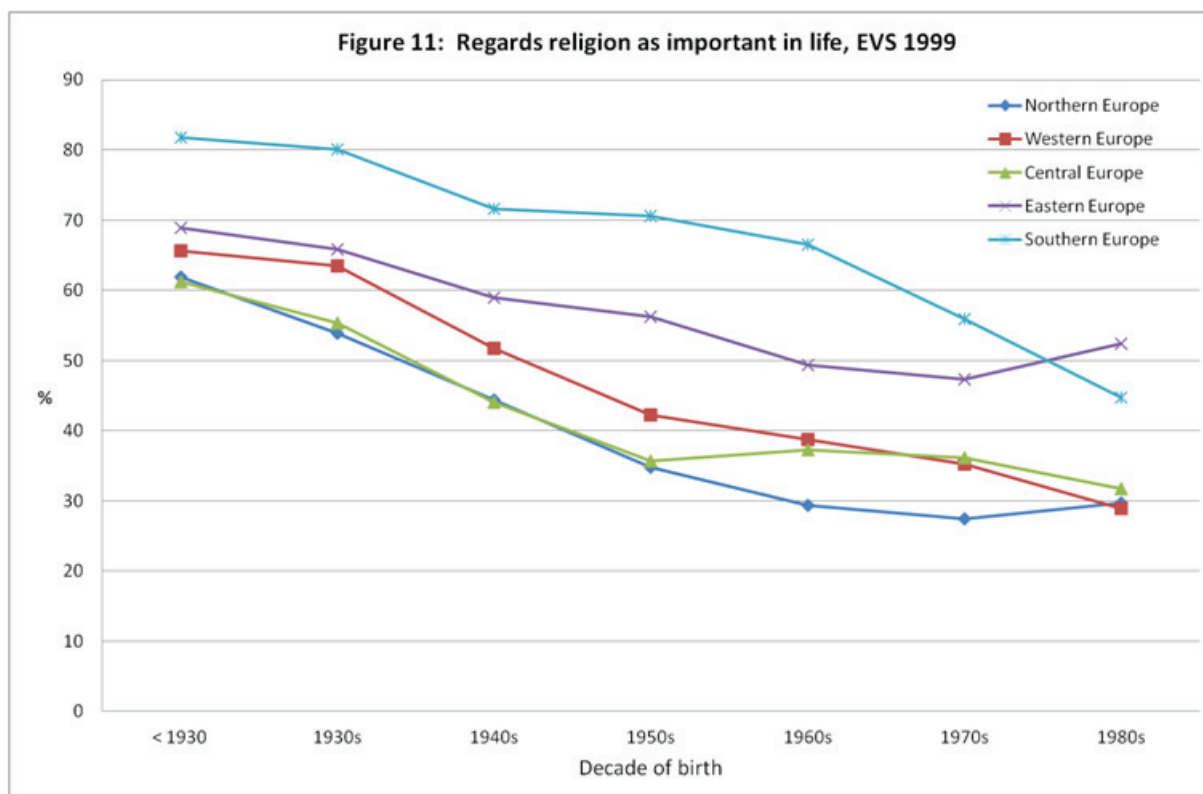
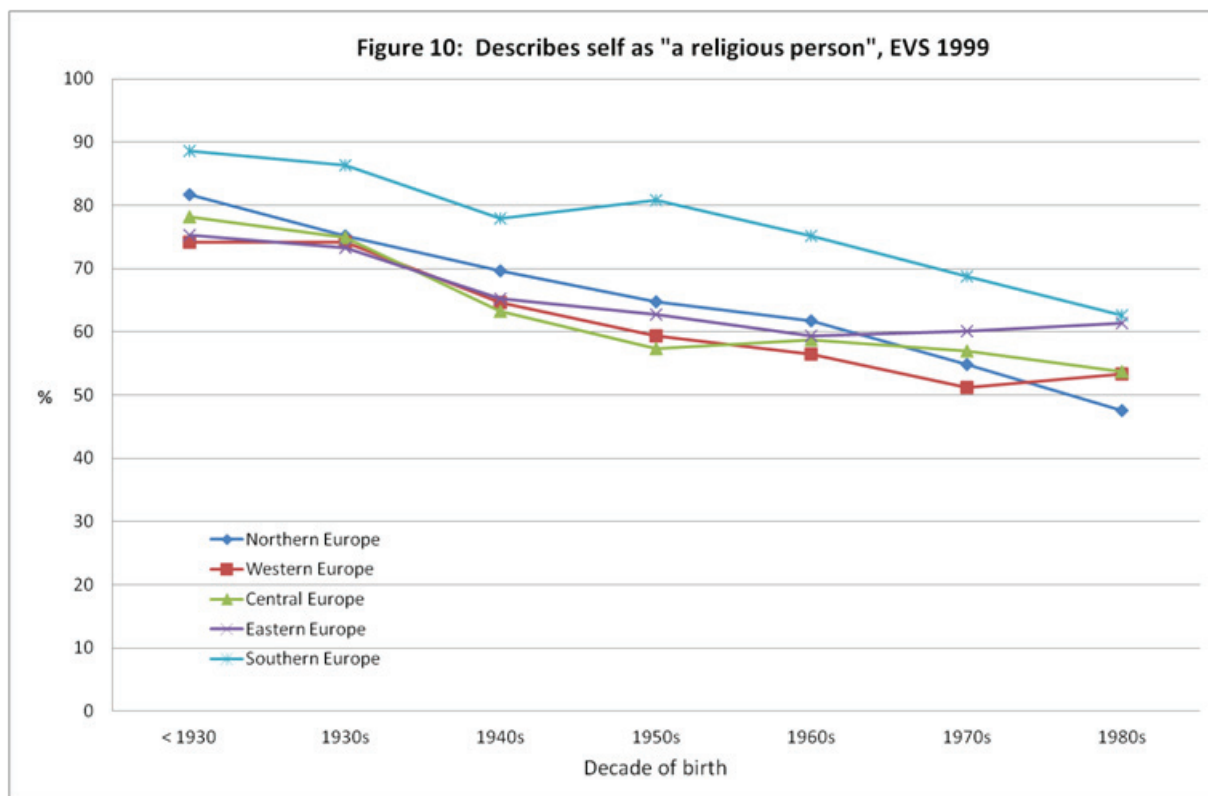


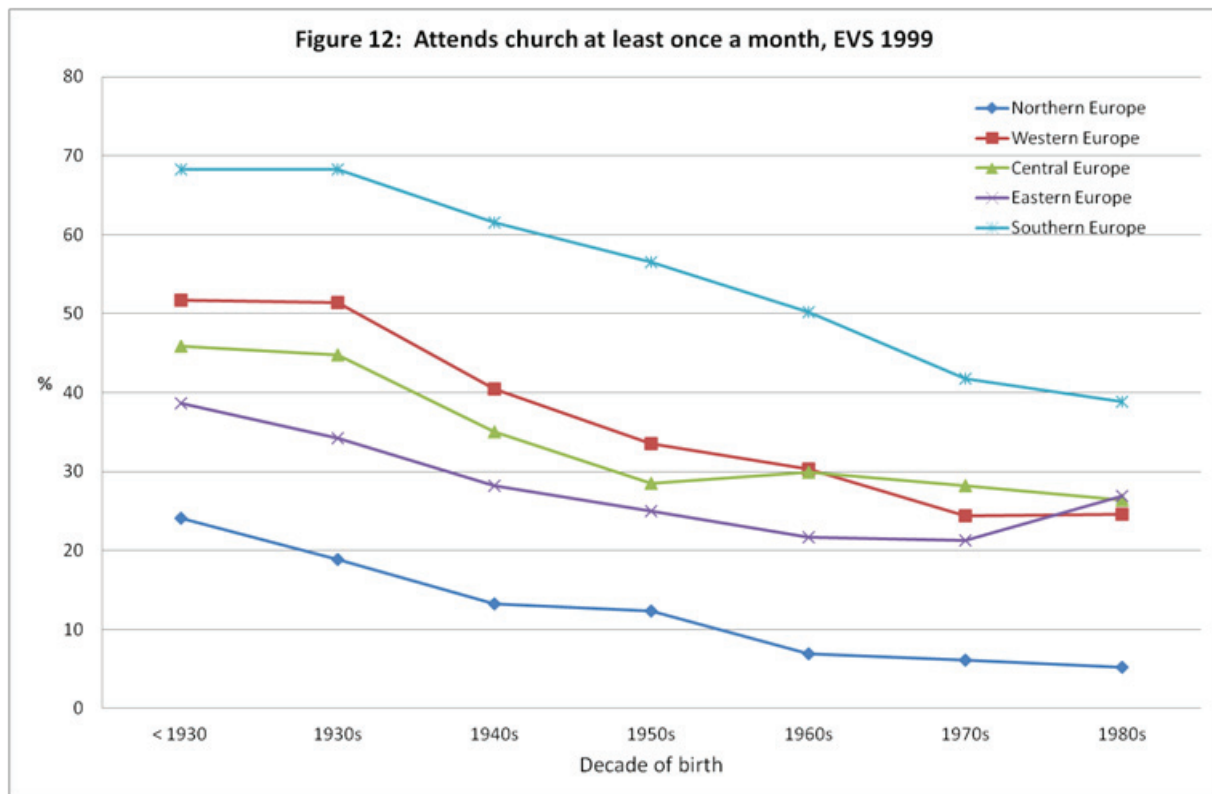
This interpretation is reinforced by the findings from 1999. With attendance at services (Figure 12), for example, the apparent rise for the 1970s cohort in Southern Europe in 1990 has been replaced by a marked decline. Once again, though, the youngest cohort (composed of people born in the 1980s) does not always continue the downwards progression seen in these graphs.

As before, Southern Europe shows high levels of religiosity, particularly as measured by attendance. Many respondents in Eastern Europe described religion or God as important in their lives, though average attendance was relatively low. The differences between country groups in attendance is probably attributable to contrasting expectations in the dominant religious traditions of these areas, with Catholics being especially frequent churchgoers and members of Orthodox churches much less so.

The Central and Eastern European groups are both composed of countries that had had communist governments prior to 1989. If a religious revival occurred during the decade that followed, one might expect that young people would be particularly affected. The evidence from 1999 is mixed. In Central Europe the cohort born in the 1960s seems slightly more religious than their predecessors, but younger generations are if anything somewhat less religious. Respondents in Eastern Europe born in the 1970s (who would have been in their 20s at the time of the survey in 1999) are not significantly less religious than those born in the 1960s, and to that extent the decline at least seems to have been interrupted. There is little sign of a resurgence of religion among the young, however. What we must now investigate is whether a revival might have occurred among people of all ages.



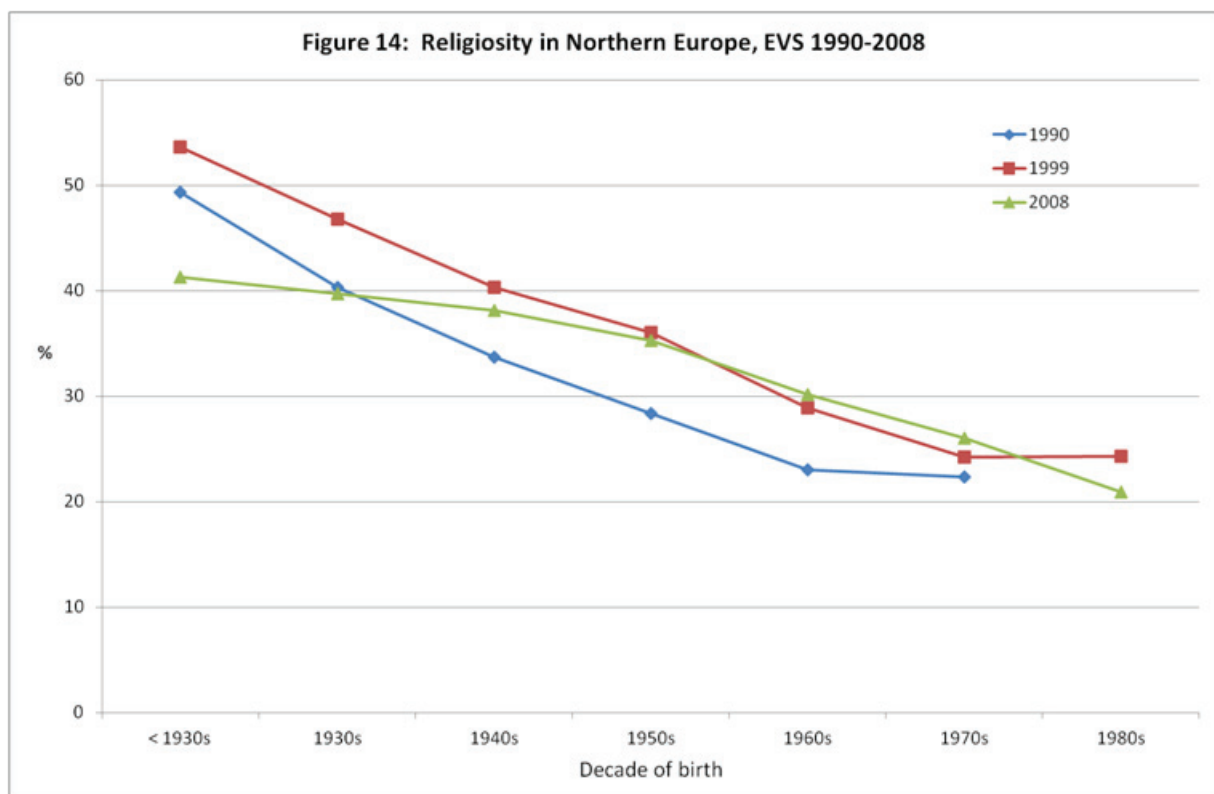
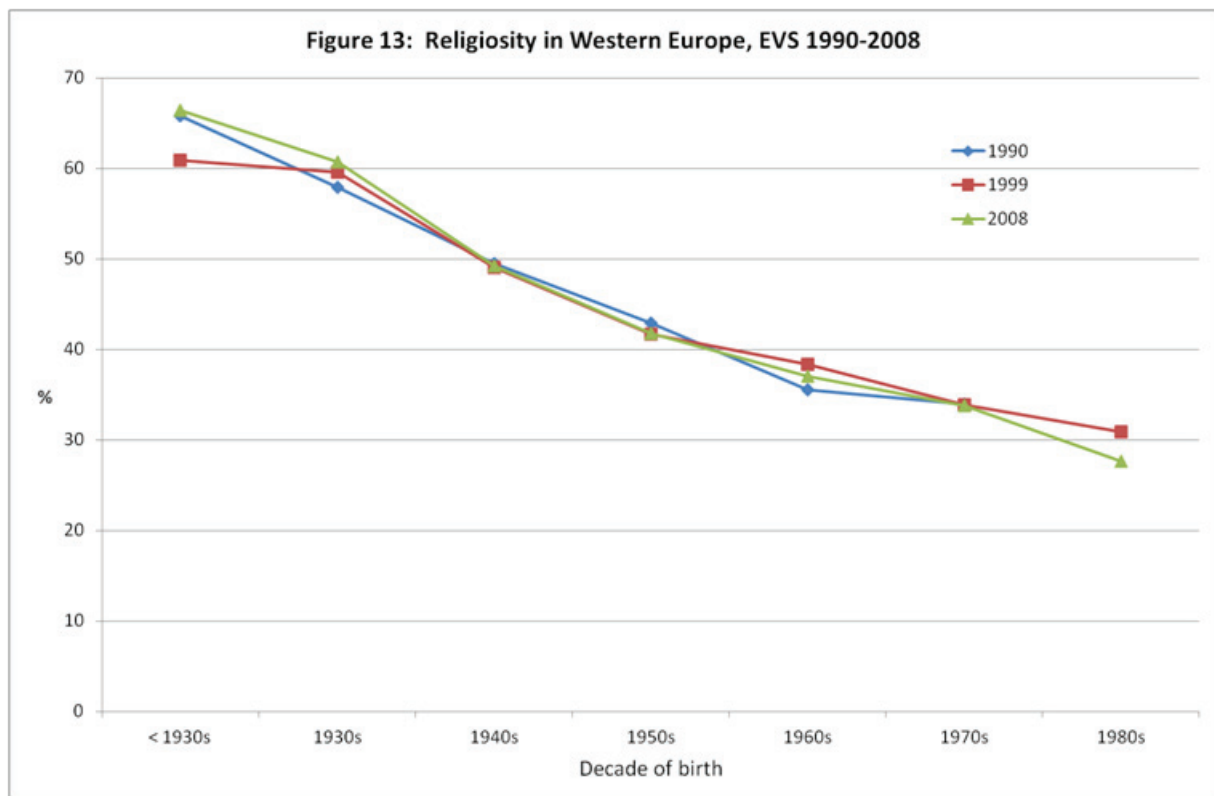


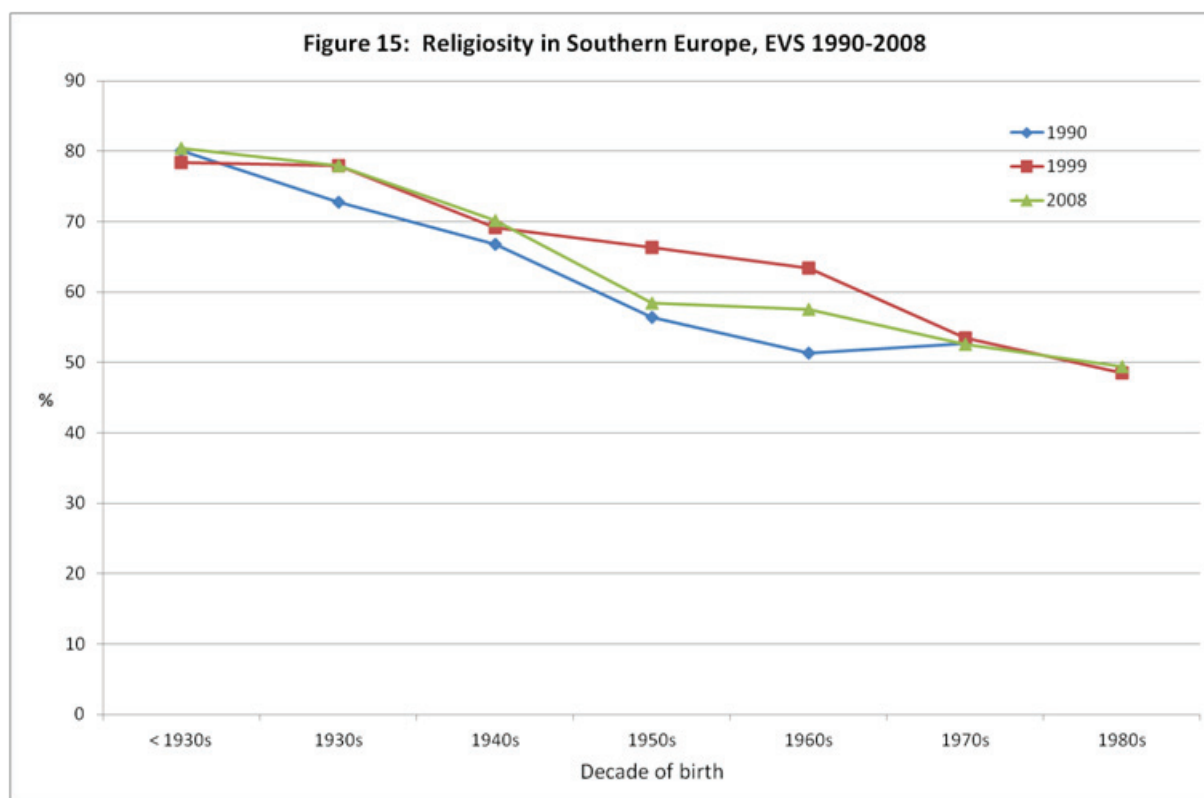


For Figures 13-17 we created a single religiosity scale by averaging (for each country group and cohort) the values of the four measures used in the earlier analysis. It is then possible to compare the results from 1990, 1999 and 2008. A consistent set of countries is used across the three survey years, generally based on those surveyed in 1990 (with Norway omitted, as it was not part of the 1999 wave). For Eastern Europe only 1999 and 2008 are available for most countries and hence no graph is shown for 1990.

The picture in Western Europe is what one would expect from previous research. The lines slope downwards (showing that each birth cohort is less religious than the one before), and the average religiosity of any given cohort is virtually unchanged from one survey to the next.

The graphs for Northern and Southern Europe are much more puzzling. Here there is an apparent rise in religiosity across all cohorts between 1990 and 1999, though some of that increase is reversed by 2008. We are not aware of evidence from Scandinavia or the Catholic countries of southern Europe that religiosity grew during the 1990s. It is possible for religiosity to decline (because of cohort replacement) even if there are within-cohort increases, but these EVS results remain surprising.





Four possible explanations need to be considered:

1) It is a sampling artefact: the differences between the figures for 1990 and 1999 do not reflect genuine changes in religiosity but rather differences in sample quality, selection procedures, non-response bias, and so on between the two survey waves in the countries concerned. Although this explanation is plausible for any single country on its own, it is harder to understand why there would be a systematic bias in 1990 that depressed reported religiosity across several of the countries surveyed.

2) It is a period effect: there was a religious revival that swept through much of Europe during the 1990s making people of all ages more religious on average at the end of the decade than they had been at the beginning. This story is plausible for formerly communist countries but much less so elsewhere, at least in the absence of independent evidence. Moreover young people continue to be less religious than their parents, and we need to ask how religiosity in general could increase without affecting the engine of generational decline.

3) It is an age effect: contrary to previous findings for Britain, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, people in some countries do become more religious as they get older. The problem with this explanation is that we see no such increase between 1999 and 2008.

4) It results from immigration: the average religiosity of people resident in 1990 did not increase during the decade, but the composition of the population changed as more religious people arrived from outside Europe. Although this explanation seems attractive, the number of non-Christian immigrants in the sample is not nearly large enough to produce the differences observed.

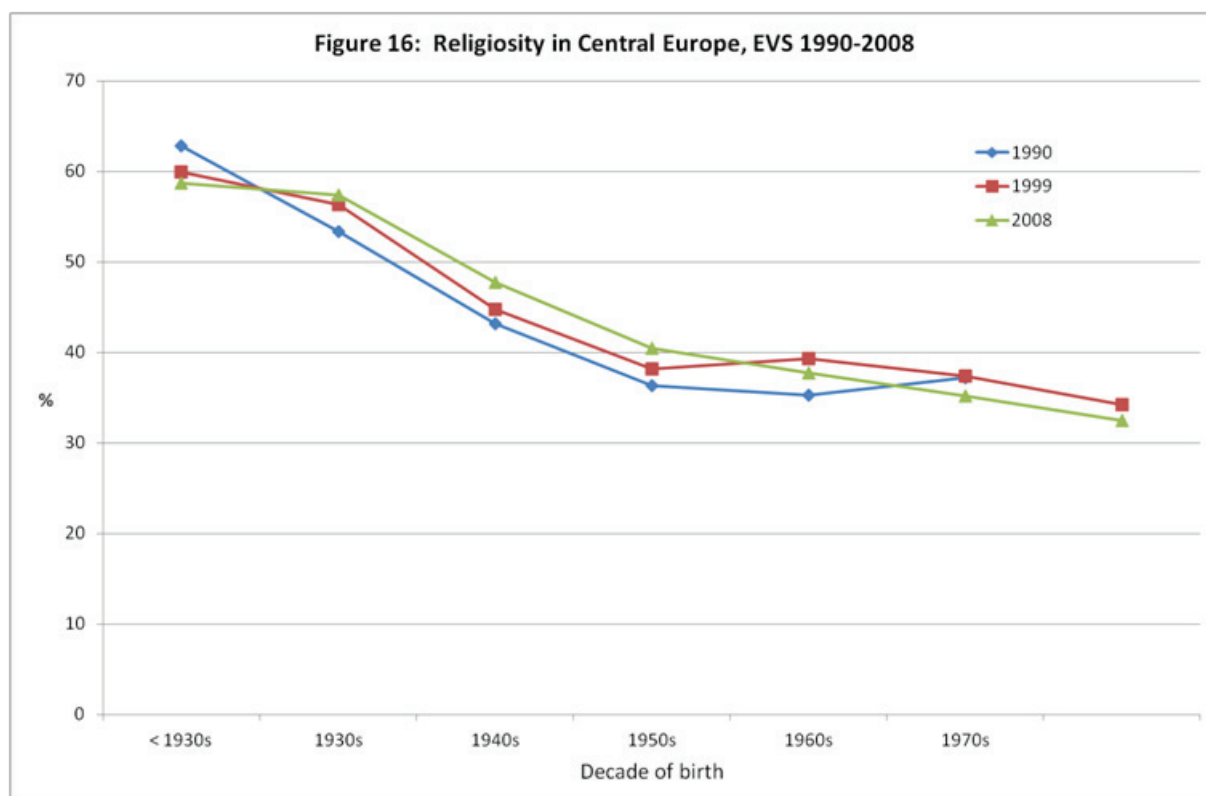
It is therefore difficult to choose between these explanations, none of which is highly persuasive. For Southern Europe we tend to favour the first. The group contains only four countries (Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain), and the contrast between 1990 and 1999 is entirely produced by the figures for Portugal. Some of the gaps observed between the two surveys

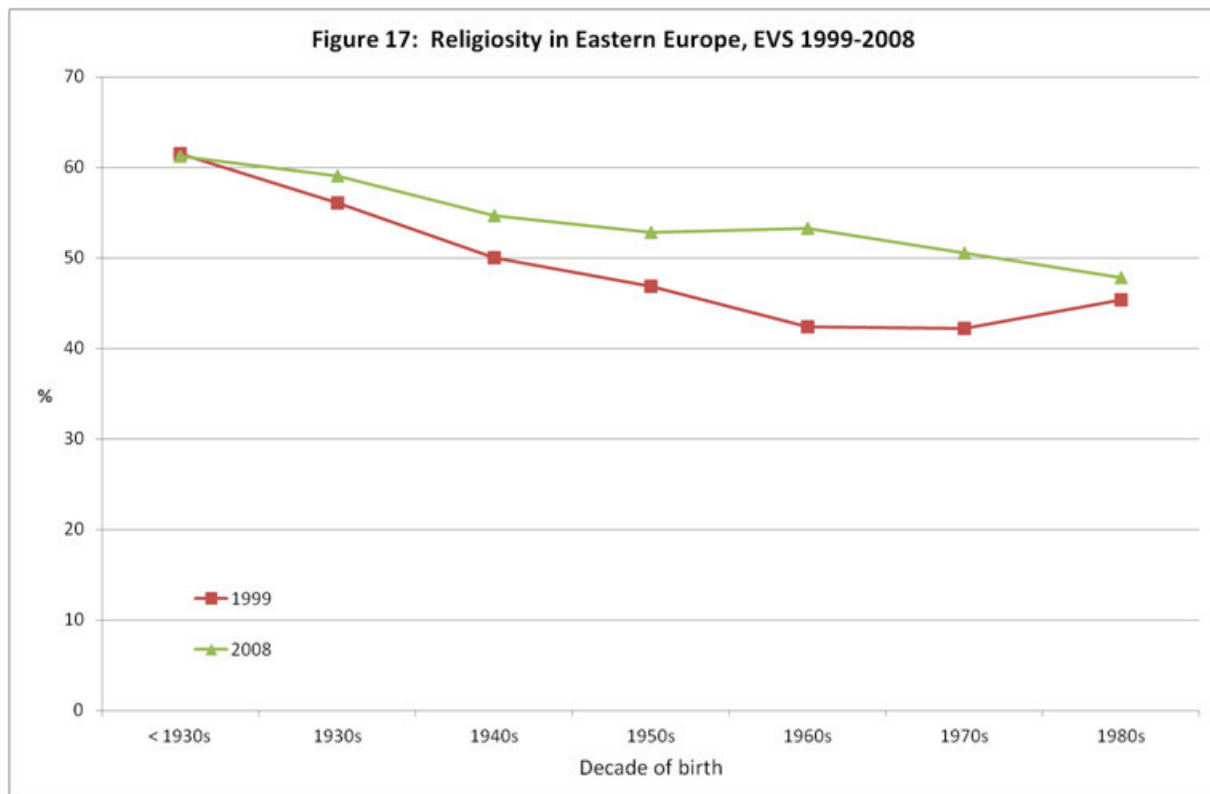
are very large (for example the fraction of respondents born in the 1960s saying that religion is important in life increased from 38 to 83%), and it is hard to believe that they correspond to genuine shifts in the religious culture.

Northern Europe also includes only four countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Sweden), as these are the only ones for which we have data for all four variables across all three waves. In this case, though, all four countries contribute to the anomaly, as do all of the variables apart from frequency of attendance at services. Moreover the data from 1981 seem consistent with those from 1990, so we are not looking at a single set of rogue results. It is still possible that the gap between the earlier and the later waves is an artefact of procedural changes in data collection, but we have no direct evidence in favour of this hypothesis or any of the others.

Finally, we turn to Central and Eastern Europe. Later surveys show generally higher religiosity than the earlier ones, but here it is easier to accept that a period effect was operating. We are probably seeing the result of a post-communist rebound in religiosity (or at least openness about being religious). It is something of a puzzle that on this evidence religiosity in these countries is subject to two contrary forces: a positive period effect and a negative cohort effect. Findings of this sort are not unknown, however: Voicu & Constantin (2011) analyzed religious change in Romania using a number of data sources and found a similar pattern of increase over time combined with decrease across birth cohorts. Part of the explanation is that the cohort effect dates from an earlier time, and shows in particular the difference between the pre-war (and hence for eastern countries other than the former Soviet republics, pre-communist) generations and those that followed.

Levels of religious involvement were artificially depressed in Eastern Europe prior to 1989, and no secularization theorist would find it surprising to see them rise to levels that are compatible with the cultural traditions and the degree of modernization of the countries affected. The persistence of religious generation gaps, however, with younger people being less involved than their parents and grandparents, makes it almost inevitable (unless something changes) that the overall trend will ultimately be one of religious decline.





EXPLAINING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

The generational nature of religious change is consistent with a close connection between religion and personal values. Inglehart and associated scholars (Norris & Inglehart 2004, Inglehart & Welzel 2005) have argued that the evolution of society from agrarian through industrial to post-industrial stages tends to produce corresponding shifts in how people are orientated: towards survival, rationality or self-expression. Religion does best in traditional societies, though in their view an emphasis on self-expression can promote interest in spiritual matters (where spirituality is very broadly defined to include interest in the meaning of life).

We need to look at three possible explanations for the changes in religious involvement between generations. The challenge is not only to measure the relative importance of these factors but to explain what produces them.

- Value changes among parents (reducing the priority they give to transmission of religion)
- Value changes among young people (reducing the importance of religion to them)
- Social changes that may have an impact on religion even if values remain the same.

The evidence points to something that seems paradoxical. For decade after decade in most developed countries, people have become less religious (at least in a conventional sense) than their parents. To put it another way, there are many families in which parents continue to identify with a religion and to practise it while their adult children do not. (There are some families, but far fewer, where the reverse is true.) If parents regard religion as important – and one presumes that they do – why have they failed to pass it on to their offspring?

One possible explanation is that parents have become less committed to conformity in their children. The value attached to autonomy (rather than social embeddedness) has increased, giving adolescents the option of avoiding church. Another possible explanation is that the

practical utility of religious affiliation and values has declined, and so parents feel less need to socialize their children religiously.

Religious decline does not result from prior deliberate choices about the value of religious practice; instead, a kind of decay in patterns of observance only subsequently feeds into conscious perceptions of what is or is not beneficial. For example, the decline in participation in voluntary associations has been blamed in part on the time now devoted to watching television (Putman 2000). That can be true, though, even if no one says “I’ve decided to give up going to my church club so that I can spend more time at home watching TV.” There is no cold calculation of long-term benefit; rather, it all starts as a matter of short-term expedience. The term “behavioural drift” has been aptly used to describe the process.

To the extent that changes in religious involvement are the result of values shifts in the younger generation, we might consider two types of explanation:

- Compositional change: perhaps there has been little change in people *with given characteristics*; what has changed is the relative frequency of those attributes (e.g. higher education, employment for women, childbearing).
- Contextual change: arguably people have not changed, but the *environment* in which they make choices has changed (e.g. ethno-religious diversity, physical security).

The boundaries between these factors are blurred. Increased access to higher education (which is a matter of context), for example, might have a compositional effect (if more educated individuals are less religious than others), which could in turn create a contextual effect (if the prevalence of non-religious worldviews had an impact on the common culture).

Contextual factors include:

- Incentives to believe and belong (such as material insecurity)
- The kind of education available (especially the balance between religious and secular instruction)
- Erosion in prohibitions on Sunday working and increased availability of competing secular activities
- The kind of worldviews available (and promoted by the media or opinion leaders)
- The diversity of worldviews
- Religious norms about required commitment (determining the cost of involvement and whether disengagement can be gradual)
- Social norms about women working, the importance of family formation, and so on.

We should not focus exclusively on values in trying to explain changes in religious participation; other factors might also have an influence. To take one simple example, if divorce becomes more common, religious transmission may be disrupted.

A number of (mainly American) scholars argue that the supply of religion (and in particular its breadth and quality) is crucially important to the level of religious involvement (Iannaccone 1991, Stark & Finke 2000). Other scholars in the same ‘rational choice’ tradition (Gruber & Hungerman 2008, Stolz 2009) emphasize the role of secular competition (including television, music, the internet, DVDs, and so on) for time and attention. Such competition might reduce religious involvement without directly affecting values. In the longer term, of course, shifts in choices are likely to translate into shifts in preferences.

Social incentives to identify or attend may exist. At one time the church served as a good place to meet potential partners (for marriage or business). Religious participation might also affect one’s reputation in the community. Such factors are likely to diminish in importance,

which introduces a feedback mechanism in religious decline. Not all instrumental motives have been undermined, however: in some countries (including England), religious organisations operate as gatekeepers to preferred schools.

The extent of religious diversity can affect the proportion of people choosing a partner with a different religion (though value change will also have an influence on the willingness to enter into a mixed marriage). There are good reasons to believe that religiously mixed marriages tend to undermine religious involvement. A joint choice not to attend services may help to avoid disagreement about where and how much to participate. If parents have different religious backgrounds, it may be less likely that they will try to socialise their children in one or the other.

Geographical mobility may have positive or negative effects on churchgoing. On the one hand people may join a church following a move in order to become better integrated in the community. On the other hand people who have been churchgoers will lose their old ties and may not replicate their previous habits in the new location. With young adults it seems likely that the latter effect will dominate; moving away from the parental home frees people to make their own choices.

THE IRREVERSIBILITY OF SECULARIZATION

Stark and others maintain that religious downturns are merely part of a cycle governed largely by what is on offer (Stark & Bainbridge 1985). There are two key objections to this supply-side story: secularization comes as part of the package of advanced modernity, and modernization is irreversible. What follows is a statement of theory, not an interpretation of the empirical findings discussed above.

Theories of modernization were rightly attacked in recent decades for their quasi-Marxist flavour, whereby all changes were seen as being driven by economic transformations. If we include cultural or ideological characteristics in the package of modernity, however, and do not view them as necessarily secondary to material factors, then notions of modernization seem much less suspect.

Development is driven by rational choice, which is to say by people seeking to satisfy their preferences with the means available. These preferences are shared by most human beings. We all want to be healthy, to live longer, to live in greater comfort, and to have more resources at our disposal. Occasionally people choose differently, but they are very rare, even in societies that revere ascetics. Likewise we all tend to want a measure of control or at least influence in our societies, to feel that we are at no one else's mercy and are not inferior to any other person. We do not want our personal interests subordinated to the group's without very good reason. To a considerable extent these more or less universal human desires determine the course of development in such a way that there are not, in fact, multiple modernities. There is little point in talking about modernization at all unless we believe that modernity is characterized by a number of characteristic features; the question is simply what they are. What is true is that the preferences underlying some aspects of ideology in particular may push in multiple directions, so that change is slow and erratic.

Predictions in social science are viewed with suspicion, especially when they seem to imply a kind of inevitability that was labelled "historicism" by Popper (1957). Certainly events may surprise us, and no social predictions enjoy the sort of confidence we attach to physical regularities. That said, it seems clear that some social phenomena are cyclical or haphazard (e.g. conflict) and others are genuinely directional: it is hard to imagine going backwards. Does anyone think that child labour is going to be revived, or that polygamy will become more rather than less common throughout the world? Erosion of religion, like declines in fertility, appear to belong in the "directional" rather than the "cyclical" category. There will obviously be many revivals of a local and temporary nature; the post-1989 changes in Eastern Europe are

an example. "But, unless we can imagine a reversal in the increasing cultural autonomy of the individual, secularization must be seen as irreversible" (Bruce 2011, 56).

What we are considering is a kind of evolution, and as Darwin taught us evolution does not need to be teleological. There is no goal, no end point, and the traits that survive are superior only in being better adapted to the environment. The suggestion is simply that modernity has a kind of momentum that is difficult to resist, and that in consequence all kinds of social changes (including improvements in the status of women, the spread of liberal democracy, and so on, not merely secularization) are hard to reverse. Some people and societies may swim against the tide, and it is always possible that some kind of catastrophe or unanticipated development might turn things around. Nothing is inevitable, but some outcomes seem more probable than others.

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