

A DYING CREED? The demographic contradictions of liberal capitalism

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“Rich nations are becoming more secular, but the world as a whole is becoming more religious” claim the authors of a recent book on global religious trends (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: 22-23).

The reason given for the discrepancy is that nations with low levels of ‘human development’ in the form of income, education and equality seek solace in religion, whose pronatalist injunctions in turn promote higher fertility. This compounds the increase in the number of religious people. However, the authors claim that human development will undercut the forces driving worldwide religious growth, placing the world on a secularising, western European path. This research asks whether secularism can be so easily taken for granted, even in the West.

The study focuses on demography as a crucial factor in determining the future of religion. The key demographic forces operating in the West are higher religious fertility and religious immigration. The main sociological factor is religious apostasy or conversion. Thus far, religious apostasy has clearly prevailed over demographic forces in western Europe.

This research seeks to uncover the balance between these processes to determine whether western Europe will become more or less religious in the century ahead. It examines patterns in the rest of the world and asks what these changes might mean in political terms.

Key findings from the research are as follows:

- Decline of religious *attendance* has taken place in western Europe in the late twentieth century, and older people show no sign of returning to church as they age.
- Decline of religious *belief* has been much less pronounced than the decline of religious attendance.
- While secularisation seems to be occurring with force in the Catholic countries, it has effectively ceased in Protestant Europe and France for those born after 1945.

- Religious beliefs held by non-attenders are not a lightly-held relic of the past, but a powerful predictor of social behaviour and attitudes. For instance, even with controls, religious people are significantly more likely to place themselves on the ‘conservative’ end of the ‘liberal-conservative’ ideological spectrum; those who identify as ‘conservative’ are significantly more likely to vote for right-wing parties.
- Religious belief is also a significant predictor of the number of children a person will have in nearly all regions of the world.
- The correlation between a person’s level of religiosity and their fertility is higher in more developed countries.
- Individuals in developing countries tend to conform more closely to the national average level of religiosity; in wealthy countries, by contrast, people vary more in their levels of religiosity. This suggests that religiosity is more of a choice than an ascribed tradition in the developed world.
- The proportion of religious people in the most secular societies of western Europe will be higher at the end of the twenty-first century than today — even without immigration.
- Immigration is likely to be substantial, however, and will probably lead to a more religious western Europe before 2050.

Religious attendance and belief

The study examined the 10 western European countries which were consistently sampled by both the European Values Survey (EVS) and the European Social Survey (ESS) during 1981-2004 using cohort analysis. Figure 1 shows that the level of religious (mainly church) attendance has fallen with each successive generation in each of the survey waves of the EVS (1981, 1991, 2000) and the ESS (2004).

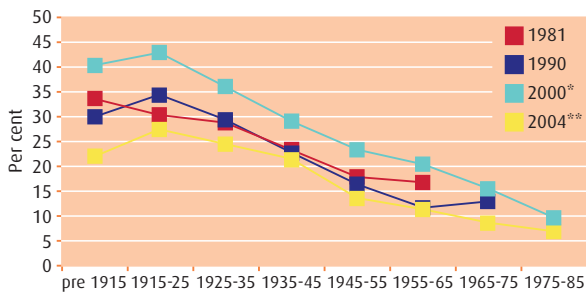


FIGURE 1. WEEKLY RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE BY COHORT AND GENERATION

* Data for 2000 uses Norway responses from 1997
 ** Data for 2004 from ESS which uses same question but different methodology

Moreover, we find no ‘stacking’ of the survey lines, suggesting no evidence of people returning to church as they age across the life course. Much of the debate over secularisation in Europe has been based on single-year survey research which fails to prise apart the ageing and generational effects. This evidence shows more clearly that there is a generational effect and hence a clear secularising pattern.

However, there are important countercurrents. In particular, secularisation of religious *belief* has been much less pronounced than secularisation of religious *attendance*. Figure 2 shows that while belief falls as we move from older to more recent generations (birth cohorts), the lines now *do* stack with each survey wave, demonstrating a pronounced life cycle effect in which people return to religious belief as they age.

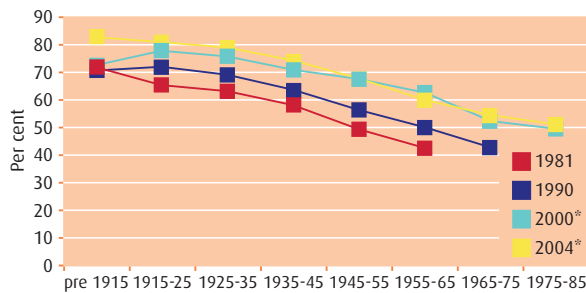


FIGURE 2. RELIGIOSITY BY COHORT AND GENERATION

* Data for 2000 uses Norway responses from 1997
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This pattern differs from the attendance evidence and supports a ‘believing without belonging’ interpretation (Davie, 1994). This is not to say that there has not been secularisation of belief as well as attendance. Some have indeed ceased to both believe and belong. However, a majority of respondents in these western European countries continue to remain believers even if most do not belong.

However, there is more to this picture than meets the eye. This emerges when we split the sample into countries where secularisation took place earlier in the twentieth century (France, Britain, Nordic Protestant countries) and those where secularisation came in the mid-to-late twentieth century (Catholic Ireland, Spain, Belgium and part-Catholic Holland).

It is striking that while secularisation seems to be occurring with force in the Catholic countries, it has stalled in the early secularising societies of Protestant Europe and France. In the latter group, we find that the downward sloping line of church attendance across cohorts flattens out by the time we reach cohorts born in 1945 (‘baby boomers’) or later (Figure 3). It seems that in these countries, which are in the vanguard of secularisation, declining attendance has reached a floor of around 5% and there is no indication of further slippage.

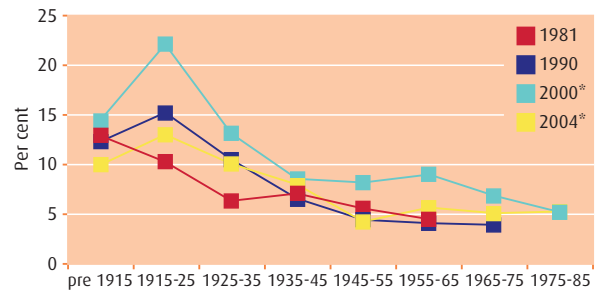


FIGURE 3. WEEKLY ATTENDANCE BY COHORT AND GENERATION IN EARLY SECULARIZING SOCIETIES

* Data for 2000 uses Norway responses from 1997
 ** Data for 2004 from ESS which uses same question but different methodology

The same patterns emerge with religious belief. Indeed, on this indicator, there seems to have been a modest revival of religiosity in western Europe. This is entirely down to native Christian trends rather than the increase in (more religious) non-Christians. Overall, in 2000, just under half the population of the early-secularising societies answered ‘yes’ to the question ‘are you a religious person?’ and this figure seems to be holding.

On the other hand, in the mainly Catholic countries, secularisation continues to proceed rapidly. Although church attendance is much higher, the most recent cohorts in these countries have attendance rates little higher than their counterparts in early secularising countries. Religious belief has also declined, but to a much smaller extent. It seems that Catholic Europe is following the ‘believing without belonging’ trajectory of Protestant Europe, but there is as yet no evidence of where the ‘floor’ of secularism will appear.

One might surmise that Catholic Europe will follow Protestant Europe in reaching a very low (i.e. 5%) steady-state figure for attendance and a much higher (45-50%) level for belief. However, future data is needed to substantiate this assertion.

The link between religion and fertility

Some claim that those answering that they are ‘religious’ are merely espousing a lightly held belief, almost a relic from a previous era, that has no hold over human behaviour. But if this were the case, how can we explain that religious belief is a powerful predictor of fertility. The large constituency of people who describe themselves as ‘religious’ even if they do not attend church meant that the



study was more interested in looking at them than at attenders.

Whether one uses attendance or religious belief, religiosity emerges as a significant predictor of the number of children ever born — more important than education, class or income, which are traditionally seen as the key determinants of fertility after marital status. There was no indication of a slackening of the effect with subsequent survey waves. Indeed, the religiosity-fertility link seems to be a pervasive one across time.

It is also enduring over space. Models based on World Values Survey (WVS) data for 18 developing countries in 1991-1997 and 32 developing countries in 1999-2000 show that even with controls, religiosity is a significant predictor of children ever born in nearly all regions of the world.

Another startling finding is that the correlation of private religiosity with fertility is highest in the most developed countries and weakest in the least developed. Thus, individual religiosity seems to become more important as a determinant of fertility than collective religiosity as societies modernise.

Moreover, Figure 4 shows that individuals in developing countries tend to conform more closely to the average level of religiosity while there is more variation around the mean in the more secular, developed countries.

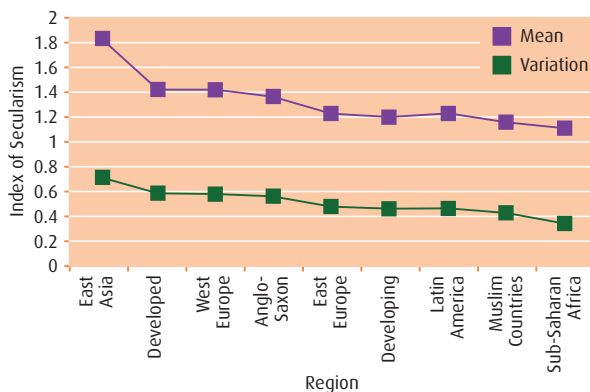


FIGURE 4. RELIGIOSITY BY MAJOR WORLD REGION, 1981-2000

Multivariate analysis also sheds light on the fact that education and income, two key 'human development' variables in theories of secular modernisation, generally have a much weaker effect on the level of personal religiosity in developing countries than in developed ones.

All of this suggests that individuals in developed countries tend to break free of religious traditions, but this does not necessarily render them less religious. They may mobilise as self-consciously religious individuals or within self-conscious religious subcultures. Thus, unreflective 'traditional' religiosity gives way to more self-conscious religious identity in developed countries. These subcultures can, in turn, expand within society, reversing secularising trends.

This is a critical finding in that it questions the automatic link between rising income, rising education and rising

secularism posited by some secularisation theorists such as Norris and Inglehart (2004).

In order to properly assess secularisation theories, one must move from the global gaze back to western Europe, to focus upon the 'cutting edge' of secularisation: namely those societies that secularised earliest.

Projections were made of the proportion of religious and nonreligious population in the six 'early secularising' (mainly Protestant) countries of western Europe. These were based on fertility and apostasy/conversion assumptions derived from the EVS of 1981-2004.

Interestingly, the main projection, which appears in Figure 5, shows that the proportion of religious people in the most secular societies of western Europe will be higher at the end of the twenty-first century than today — even without immigration.

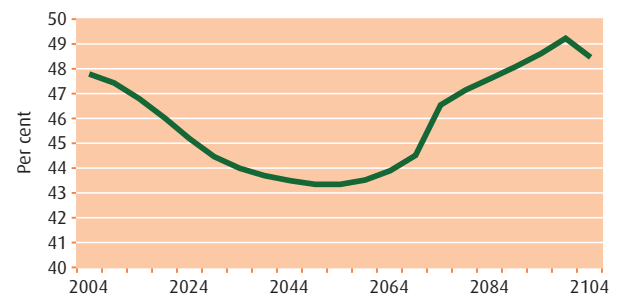


FIGURE 5. PROJECTED RELIGIOUS POPULATION IN SIX EARLY SECULARIZING SOCIETIES, 2004-2104

Three-quarters of the reason for the change has to do with a decline in religious apostasy, and about a quarter is related to higher religious fertility and the fact that women in the childbearing age ranges are significantly more religious than men (and thus likely to impart such beliefs to children).

In the short and medium-term, however, secularisation will merely slow, buoyed by the population momentum of twentieth century secularisation which has produced a younger secular age profile and an older population of religious people. By 2050, however, the proportion of secular people will have peaked and de-secularisation will begin, albeit gently.

Immigration effect on secularisation

All of this ignores a factor which is likely to be far more important for west European religiosity levels in the near-term: immigration. The respondent pools in the 2000 EVS and 2004 ESS were only about 2-3% Muslim. This is a slight undercount, and also a small sample with which to work. However, the pooled ESS Muslim sample, as with the total EVS sample, shows that Muslim religious attendance and belief does not vary with age.

Similar trends appear in UK ethnic minority surveys of 1994, 2001 and 2003, where sample size was not a problem and one could compare the immigrant generation

with a second generation sample (Home Office, 2003; ONS, 2005). The evidence clearly shows that while Afro-Caribbean Christian immigrants become more secular in the second generation, this is not true of Muslim ethnic groups, who have an almost perfect rate of religious retention. This accords with evidence from Dutch studies (Van Tubergen, 2006).

In other words, there is no evidence for Muslim secularisation. With Muslims set to comprise around half of non-European immigrants to western Europe in the coming half-century, this has important ramifications for the overall level of religiosity in the most secular countries of western Europe.

In a period in which the native majorities of western Europe are experiencing the population decline predicted by thirty years of below-replacement fertility, immigration takes on greater importance as an agent of de-secularisation. For example, Figure 6 shows that the age structure of Muslim and nonaffiliated (secular) Britons was similar in the 2001 Census. Both are young populations, but the engine of growth is demographic in the Muslim case and sociological in the secularist case.

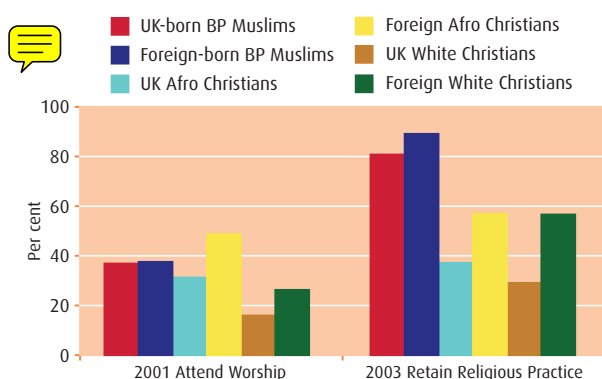


FIGURE 6. AGE STRUCTURE OF THE MAJOR RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN THE UK, 2001

In the future, as secularisation wanes, we would expect the nonaffiliated British population to begin to age, the Christian population to become slightly younger, and the Muslim population to remain broadly similar. Overall, religious-secular fertility differences and a slowing of Christian secularisation mean that immigration will lead to a more religious northwestern Europe before 2050.

Where will the loyalties of the new immigrants — especially the Muslim ones — lie? Recent research claims that immigrants to Britain and Germany are more conservative than the native-born, although they tend to vote for leftist parties (Dancygier and Saunders, 2006). Yet immigrant loyalty to the Left may lead to an indeterminate electoral effect.

The present study revealed a significant two-stage association flowing from religiosity to ideology to voting

behaviour within the general population. This suggests that west European religiosity, far from being a relic of past beliefs, has a real impact on attitudes and, through them, upon voting behaviour. A growing religious population may therefore lead to a more conservative electorate and a more traditionalist drift in the cultural mood, as we currently see in the United States.

Much will depend on how west European political parties craft their appeal in response to a growing population of religious voters of both native-Christian and immigrant provenance.

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