

## Religiosity as a demographic factor

### - an underestimated connection?

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#### Abstract:

Two topics are currently the subject of separate discussions in science and society: the demographic shift and the “return of the religions.“ This article appeals to data from the ALLBUS<sup>1</sup> survey of 2002 to demonstrate that these two phenomena (as well as a number of other questions) can be explained if the connection between religiosity and birth-behavior is taken into account.

In getrennten Diskursen werden derzeit in Wissenschaften und Gesellschaft zwei Themen immer wieder diskutiert: der demographische Wandel und die „Wiederkehr der Religionen“. Der Artikel zeigt anhand von Daten der ALLBUS-Befragung 2002<sup>2</sup> - aus denen wir ausgewählt und Schaubilder erstellt haben - auf, dass sich beide Phänomene (und eine Reihe weiterer Fragen) klären lassen, wenn der Zusammenhang zwischen Religiosität und Geburtenverhalten berücksichtigt wird.

#### 1. Observations on religiosity and demographics from an international perspective

On the basis of demographic data and the results of the *World Value Survey*, which has been conducted in 76 countries since 1980, U.S. American political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have observed that a loss of religious meaning in society is the primary cause of the

<sup>1</sup> The data referred to in this article have been taken from the „Allgemeinen Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften“ (General Social-Scientific Population Survey) of 2002. The ALLBUS program was supported from 1980-1986 and has been again since 1991 by the DFG. In the other years, support came from the GESIS (Gesellschaft sozialwissenschaftlicher Infrastruktureinrichtungen) (=Society for social-scientific infrastructural institutions). ALLBUS is conducted by ZUMA (Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen e.V., Mannheim) (=Center for Methods and Analyses inc., Mannheim) and the Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung (Köln) (=Central Archive for Empirical Social Research (Cologne)) in cooperation with the ALLBUS-committee. The data is available at the Zentrum für empirische Sozialforschung in Cologne. The aforementioned institutions and individuals bear no responsibility for the application of the data made in this article.

<sup>2</sup> Die in diesem Beitrag benutzten Daten entstammen der „Allgemeinen Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften“ (ALLBUS 2002). Das ALLBUS-Programm ist 1980-1986 und ab 1991 von der DFG gefördert worden. Die weiteren Erhebungen wurden von Bund und Ländern über die GESIS (Gesellschaft sozialwissenschaftlicher Infrastruktureinrichtungen) finanziert. ALLBUS wird von ZUMA (Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen e.V., Mannheim) und dem Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung (Köln) in Zusammenarbeit mit dem ALLBUS-Ausschuß realisiert. Die Daten sind beim Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung (Köln) erhältlich. Die vorgenannten Institutionen und Personen tragen keine Verantwortung für die Verwendung der Daten in diesem Beitrag.

subsequent decrease in birth rate.<sup>i</sup>

They point out that in secular societies – with varying degrees of affluence – the fertility rate (live births per woman) presently falls below the 2.1% necessary to maintain the population level. Dynamic population growth, on the other hand, can be expected of societies shaped by a religion, regardless of which specific religious denomination that may be.<sup>ii</sup>

This gives rise globally to the “paradoxical simultaneity” of, on the one hand, advancing secularization processes in many societies and, on the other hand, the increase in number and in proportion of religious individuals. Hence, the cultural, social and political gap is widening between shrinking secular societies and growing religious ones.<sup>iii</sup>

Norris and Inglehart suspect that social safeguards are the cause of religion’s loss of meaning, which, in turn, brings about a decrease in birth rates. Wherever a “welfare state” frees people of existential concerns, traditional values and religions lose their primary function and are replaced by secular and individualistic attitudes, which lead to a drop in fertility.<sup>iv</sup>

Norris and Inglehart do not attempt to account in their theory for the partial revival of religious interest (and even a modest rise in fertility) that their own data reveal in developed countries and especially among educated and affluent groups.<sup>v</sup>

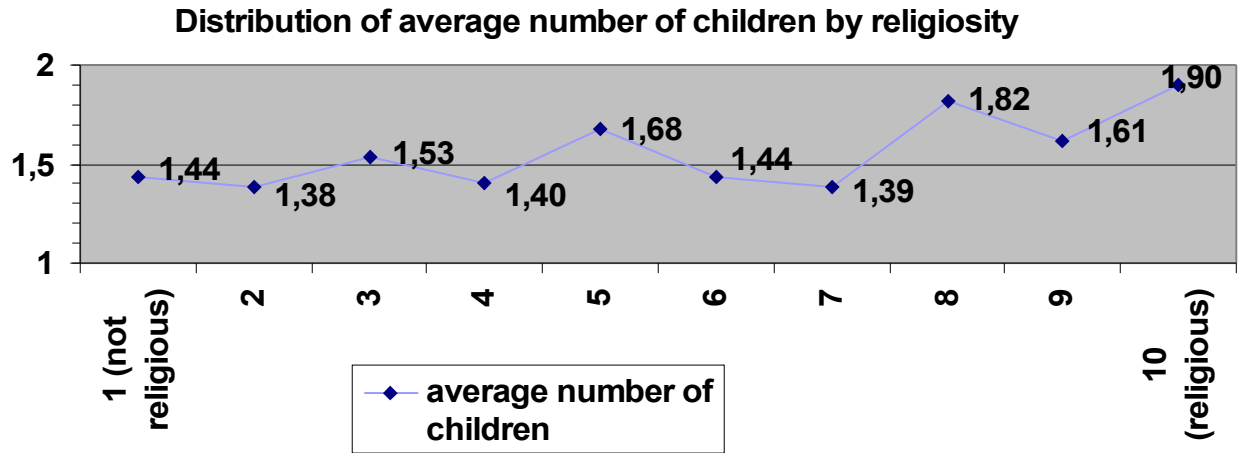
## **2. Testing Norris’ and Inglehart’s theses against the results of ALLBUS 2002 – Germany**

Building upon work begun in a seminar at the Religion Department of Tübingen University, the authors intend to check the observations made at the international level by Norris and Inglehart against inner-societal data for Germany and, if the postulated connection should be confirmed, to explain it with a theory based upon the material data and supported by Religious and Demographic Studies.

As our source of data, we chose the ALLBUS-survey from 2002, which was conducted throughout Germany and contained questions pertaining to family as well as to religiosity, income and educational circumstances.

We shall focus on the data from respondents between the ages of 35 and 45 – a group which made substantial decisions with respect to family planning. Of the 682 individuals in this group, 28.6% were Catholic, 29.7% Evangelical, 2.7% belonged to an independent or other Christian community, and 2.5% to a non-Christian religious community. 36.2% of the respondents were undenominational.

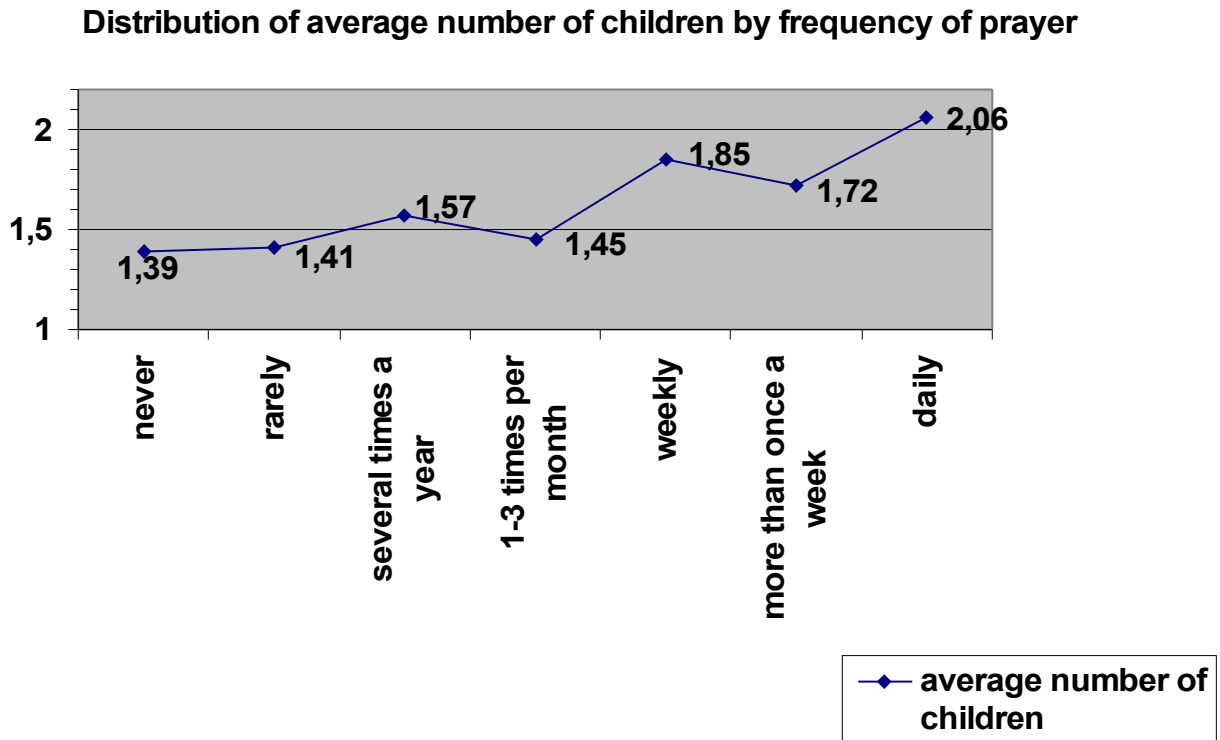
### 3. Religiosity as a demographic variable



(Figure 1: Distribution of average number of children by religiosity (ALLBUS 2002), N=673<sup>vi</sup>)

The juxtaposition of the respondents' estimation of their own religiosity from 1 (not religious) to 10 (very religious) and the number of their children reveals a clear connection. The average number of children ranges from 1.44 for respondents who characterized themselves as non-religious to 1.9 for those who considered themselves very religious. The rise is clear but not continuous. Respondents who characterized themselves as not particularly religious (2,4) or somewhat religious (6,7) had fewer children than the decidedly non-religious respondents.

When respondents were asked about their religious practices – in this case prayer – the connection and the conspicuous contrast became even clearer. The average number of children for respondents who never pray was only 1.39 compared to 2.06 for those who pray daily.



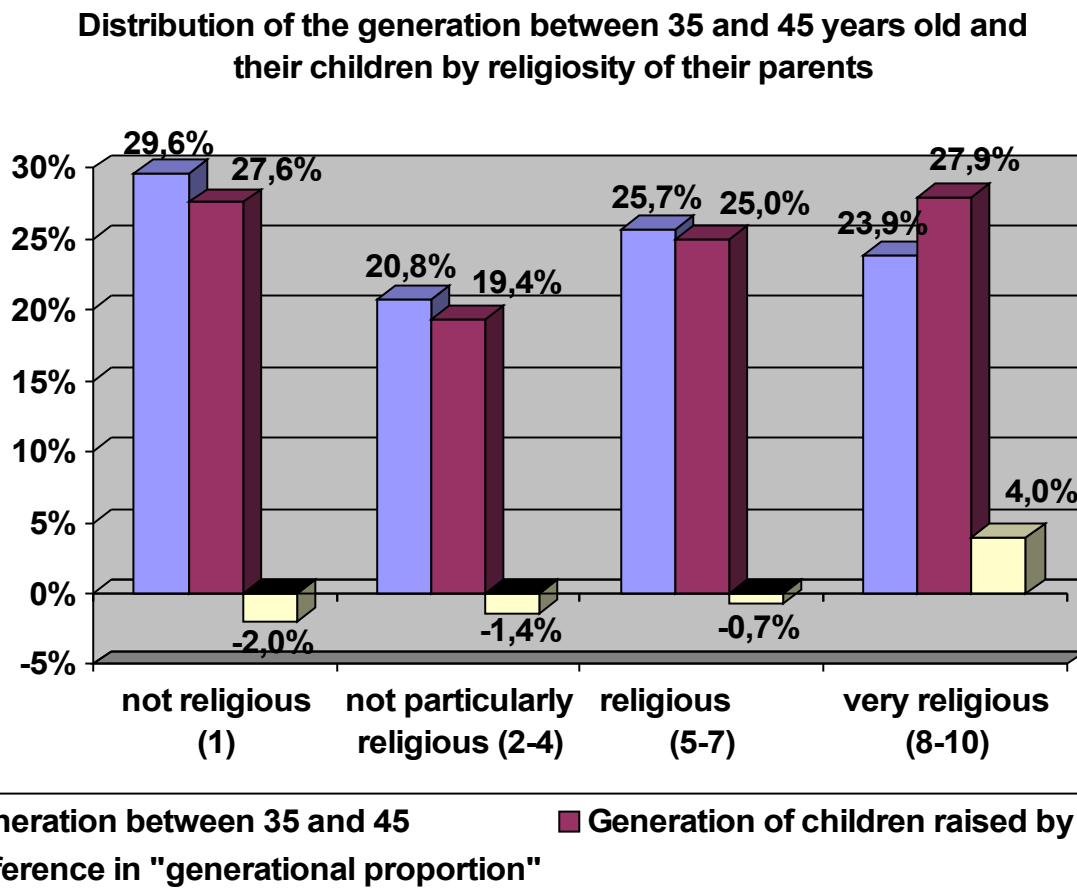
(Figure 2: Distribution of average number of children by frequency of prayer (ALLBUS 2002), N=680)

Here, too, the rise is not linear but wavelike. The average drops for individuals whose prayer frequency does not correspond to the temporal rhythms typically prescribed by religious communities (i.e. on annual holy days, weekly, daily).

Although the term “religiosity” is somewhat imprecise and not particularly strong, we can nonetheless conclude that the connection observed by Norris and Inglehart exists in Germany at the national level.

Individuals who characterize themselves as religious and, above all, social strata in which religion is practiced have more children on average than individuals who do not practice religion systematically or do not consider themselves religious.

The following chart compares the distribution of respondents to the distribution of their children by religiosity of their parents. The “paradox of simultaneity” described by Norris and Inglehart at the global level becomes apparent here at the level of a single society by comparing generations. Despite the overall secularization of society, the percentage of people with religious backgrounds is increasing again, since those who have either remained or become religious, as well as those who are religious and have immigrated, opt for more children than those who are not religious. In a shrinking society like Germany, this effect is indeed especially pronounced.



(Figure 3: Distribution of the generation between 35 and 45 years old and their children by religiosity of their parents (ALLBUS 2002), N=673, Children: 1035, Average number of children per respondent: 1.54, highest value 10: 1.90.)

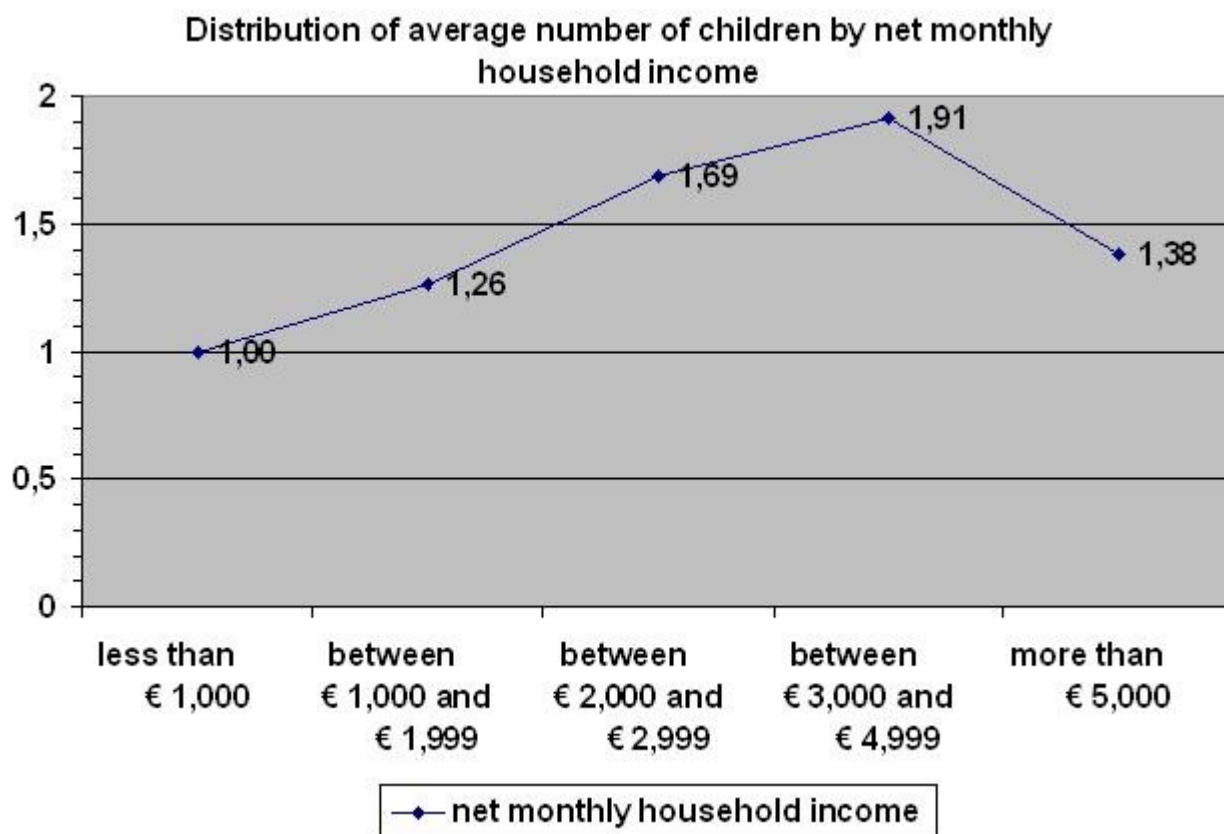
The assumption that child frequency independently correlates with religiosity will have to be tested against three competing explanations. One commonly advanced thesis concerning the “religious factor” holds that religiosity is itself to a large extent a dependent variable that can be derived from level of education, income and general social milieu. Hence, religiosity would not be the “actual” factor influencing birth behavior; at most, it would be a merely accompanying factor.

### 3a. The influence of income upon child frequency

The fact that poor people have particularly many children has been regarded with disquietude by affluent social strata since the days of Thomas Malthus (1766-1834). In Inglehart’s and Norris’ theory, too, which sees the primary function of religion in overcoming “existential uncertainty,” the assumption of a negative connection between affluence and religion also plays a role. Thus, the question arises whether the correlation between religiosity and high numbers of children could be based on the fact that poor people have lots of children and also happen to be religious.

For Germany, in any case, this assumption cannot be supported. The lowest income group (less than

€ 1,000 per month) in Germany also has by far the lowest average number of children. The highest average number of children is attained by households with an income between € 3,000 and € 4,999.

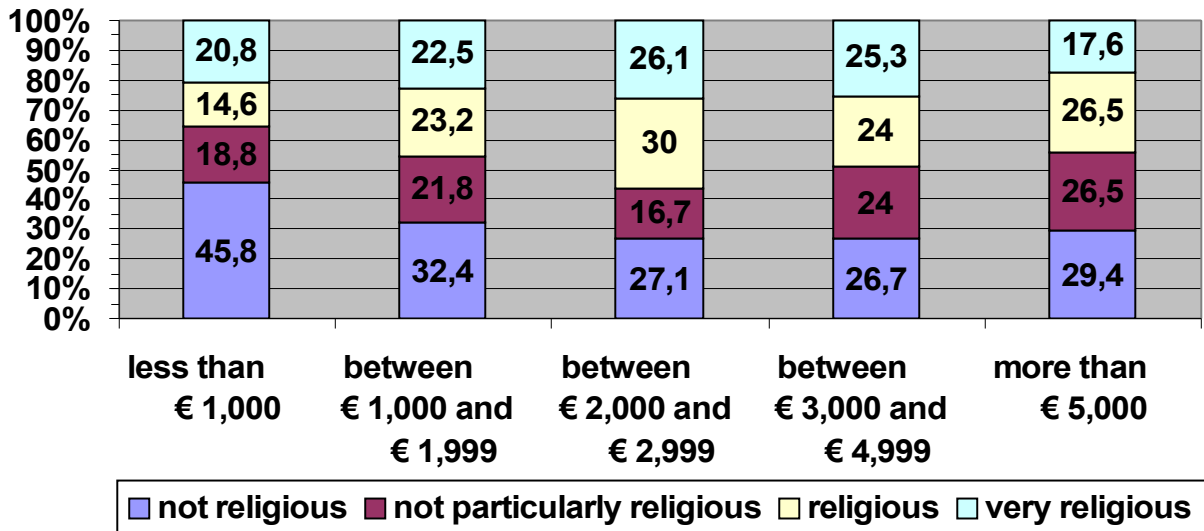


(Figure 4: Distribution of average number of children by net monthly household income (ALLBUS 2002), N=585)

The unique circumstances of German social and family politics (as of 2002) must, however, be taken into consideration in analyzing this data. Having children increases a household's income via subsidies (education and child subsidies, in some cases welfare, housing subsidies, etc.) that can increase low incomes especially significantly. On the other hand, having children frequently demands the sacrifice of professional chances as well as opportunities for income (especially on the part of the mother).

Thus, the low values in the lowest and highest income brackets are partially influenced by the subsidies that raise the incomes of poor parents and by the sacrificed opportunities that lower the incomes of wealthy parents. As a result, respondents with more children and with greater religiosity are concentrated in the middle income brackets.<sup>vii</sup>

**Distribution of net monthly household income by religiosity**

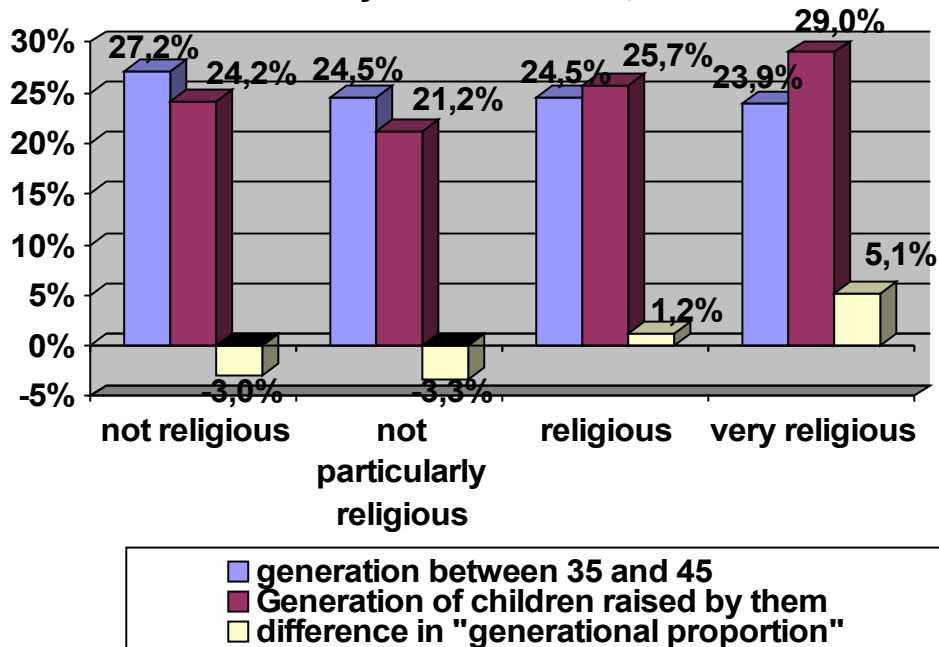


(Figure 5: Distribution of net monthly household income by religiosity (ALLBUS 2002), N = 582)

The group with by far the highest proportion (45.8%) of respondents who characterized themselves as non-religious is not the most affluent but the poorest (less than €1,000 monthly household income). On the other hand, the highest income groups have on average fewer children and the lowest proportion of respondents who characterized themselves as “very religious.” This indicates that affluent parents in Germany are forced to choose between children and affluence – and that religious parents opt with higher-than-average frequency for more children to the detriment of their income opportunities.

This connection is confirmed by a comparison of the generational distribution and the number of children by religiosity for the income class above € 3,000.

**Distribution of the generation from 35 to 45 years of age and their children according to parents' religiosity for households with a net monthly income over € 3,000**



(Figure 6: Distribution of the generation from 35 to 45 years of age and their children according to parents' religiosity for households with a net monthly income over € 3,000 (ALLBUS 2002), N=184, children = 335, average number of children per respondent: 1.82, highest value "very religious": 2.2.

On the whole, then, the data contradicts the assumption that an above-average number of children and religiosity can be derived from poverty. Indeed, the decision in favor of having a high number of children is strongly influenced by religiosity – especially in the higher income brackets! With an average of 2.2 children, the group of "very religious" people with a monthly income above € 3,000 is among the few social strata in Germany that are presently experiencing real demographic growth. In contrast, respondents from the same income bracket who characterized themselves as "not religious" only had 1.62 children. Thus, the demographic effect of the "religious factor" is not explained but, rather, intensified by the "affluence factor."

**3b. The influence of education upon child frequency**

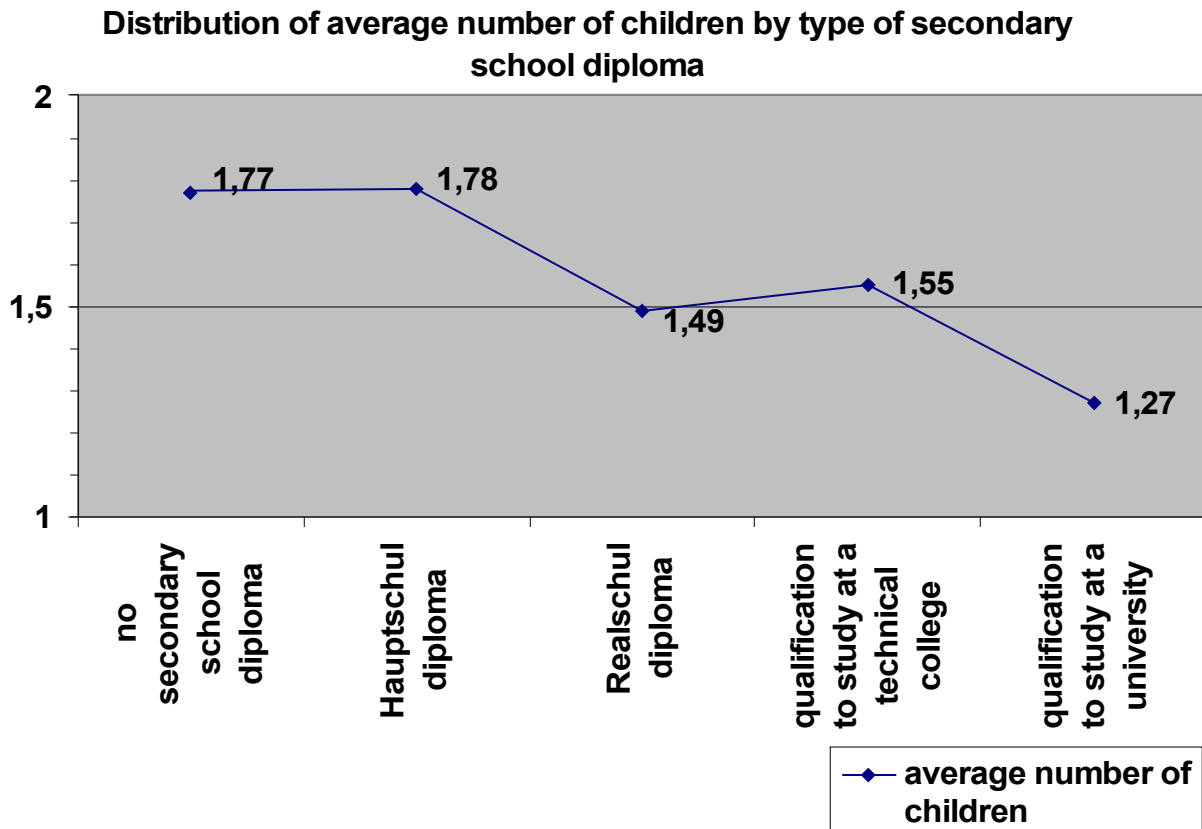
Another classical assumption in secularization theories maintains that increasing education leads to decreasing religiosity.

The phenomenon of the childless academic, much discussed in current demographic debates in Germany, fits into this picture well.<sup>viii</sup>

If both assumptions were to be confirmed, education would emerge as the decisive variable, because high numbers of children and low religiosity would result from it.

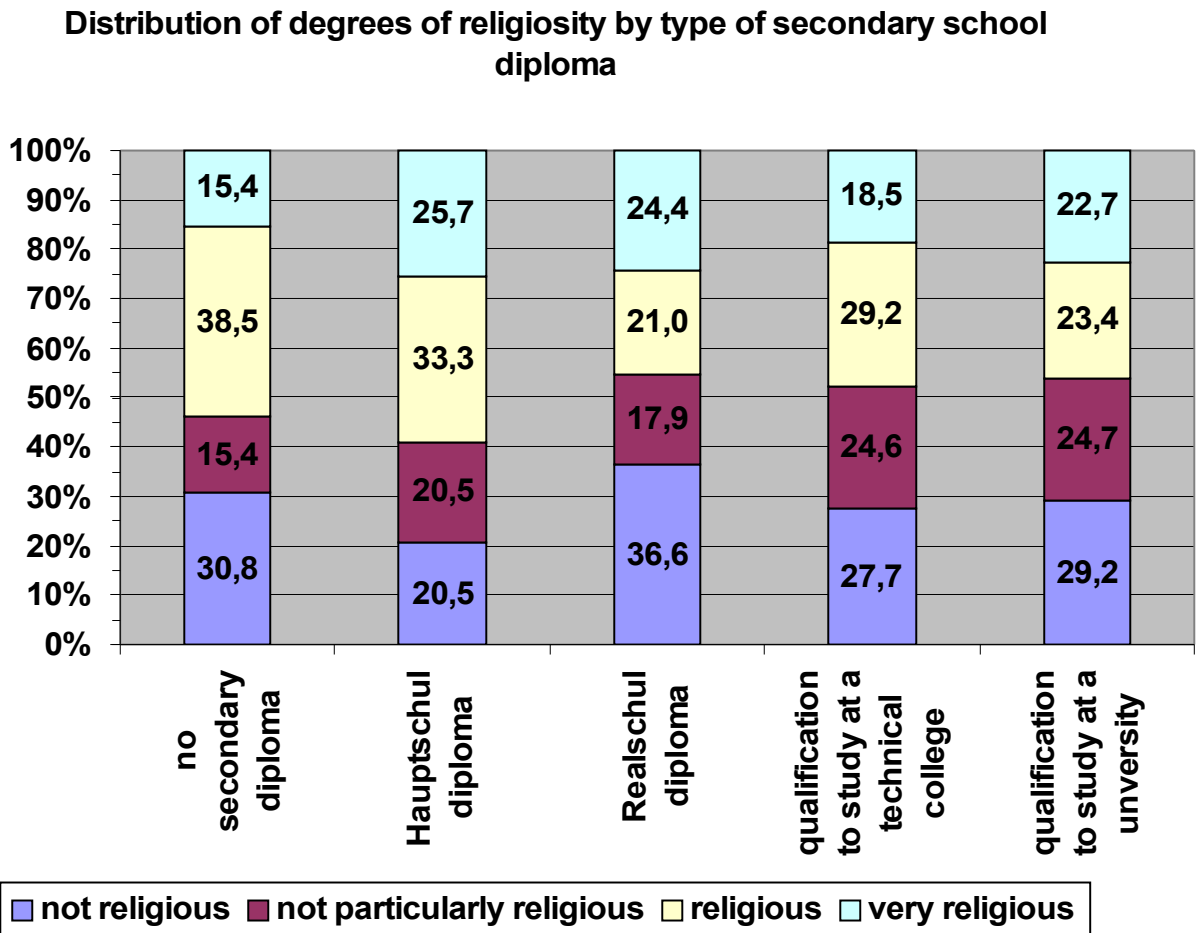


The first assumption is in fact confirmed by the results from ALLBUS 2002: with increasing formal education, the average number of children clearly decreases. The one irregularity that resists the pattern anticipated by this assumption is the below-average number of children among respondents with a secondary school diploma from a *Realschule*.



(Figure 7: Distribution of average number of children by type of secondary school diploma (ALLBUS 2002), N= 681)

There is, however, no evidence to support the second assumption – namely, that increasing education directly leads to decreasing religiosity. The proportion of respondents characterizing themselves as “not religious” is highest not among those with secondary school diplomas that entitle them to study at the university (*Hochschulreife*) but among those with a diploma from a *Realschule*, followed by respondents with no secondary school diploma, who also constitute the group with the lowest proportion of individuals characterizing themselves as “not religious.”



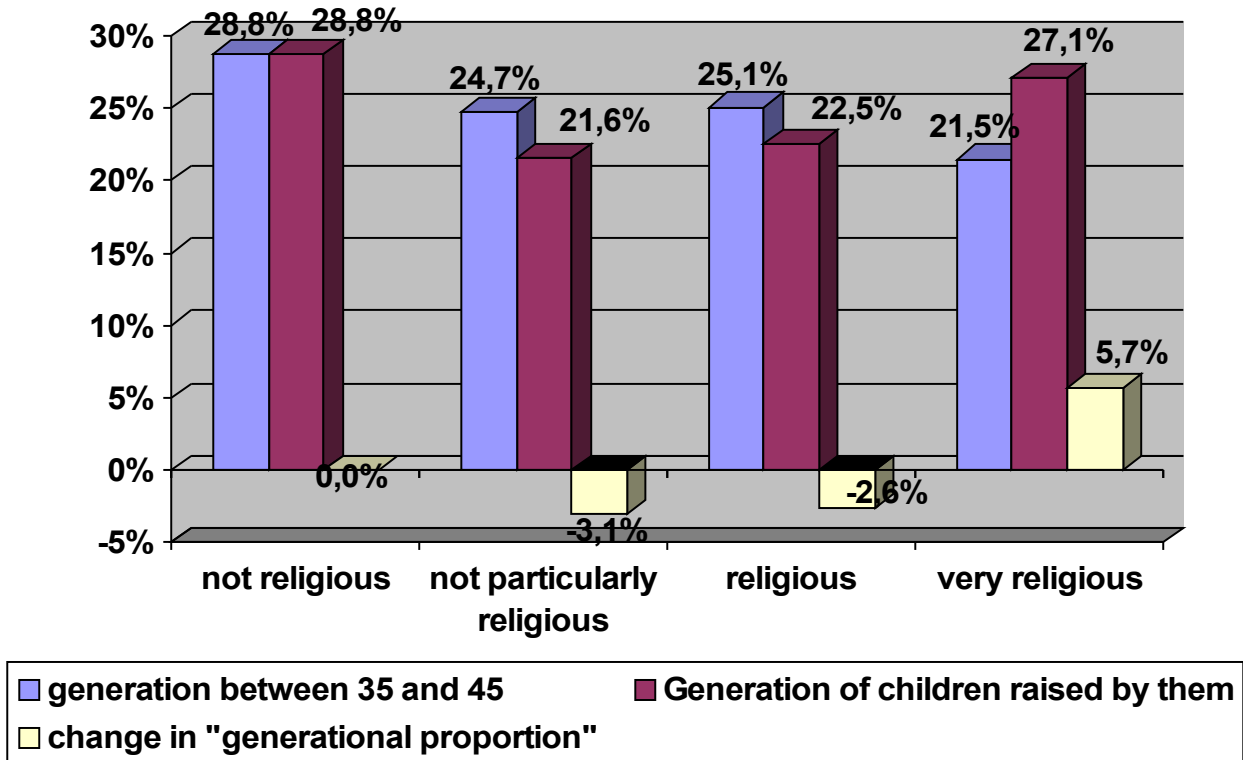
(Figure 8: Distribution of degrees of religiosity by type of secondary school diploma (ALLBUS 2002), N= 681)

Only if we consolidate the values for “very religious” and “religious” respondents does a different picture emerge. If we do so, 53.9% of the respondents with no secondary school diploma and 59% of those with a diploma from a *Haupt-* or *Volksschule* characterize themselves as religious, as opposed to 47.7% of those with a secondary school diploma entitling them to study at a technical college (*Fachhochschulreife*) and only 46.1% of those with a secondary school diploma entitling them to study at a university (*Hochschulreife*). Hence, the proportion of respondents who are religious is higher among those with no secondary school diploma or one from a *Haupt-* or *Volksschule* than among those with a secondary school diploma entitling them to study at a technical college (*Fachhochschulreife*) or one entitling them to study at a university (*Hochschulreife*). But this does not by any means confirm the assumption increasing education leads to decreasing religiosity. The value is considerably higher for respondents with a diploma from a *Haupt-* or *Volksschule* than for respondents with no secondary school diploma. The lowest value (45.4%) is among graduates of a *Realschule*. Hence, it is lower for this group than for those no diploma or one from a *Haupt-* or *Volksschule*, but also lower than for the group with diplomas entitling them to study at technical colleges (*Fachhochschulreife*) or universities (*Hochschulreife*).

Respondents with a diploma from a *Realschule* also constitute the group with the second lowest average number of children, following those with a degree entitling them to study at a university (*Hochschulreife*). This can be regarded a strong index for a dependency of religiosity and child frequency, especially since the difference between these two groups is only 0.7%.

Among respondents with superior degrees, religious parents also decide distinctly more often in favor of larger families than parents who consider themselves not particularly religious or not religious. In higher educational strata, the effect observed in comparing average number of children by religiosity and prayer frequency (figures 1 and 2) emerges with particular clarity: formally educated people with vague religious attitudes have distinctly fewer children than their counterparts who are “decisively” religious or even emphatically (often ideologically?) unreligious.

**Distribution of the generation from 35-45 years of age and respondents with secondary school degrees entitling them to study at technical schools (*Fachhochschulreife*) and universities (*Hochschulreife*)**



(Figure 9: Distribution of the generation from 35-45 years of age and respondents with secondary school degrees entitling them to study at technical schools (*Fachhochschulreife*) and universities (*Hochschulreife*) (ALLBUS 2002), N = 219, children = 306, average number of children per respondent: 1.41, highest value: (8-10) “very religious“: 1.77) .

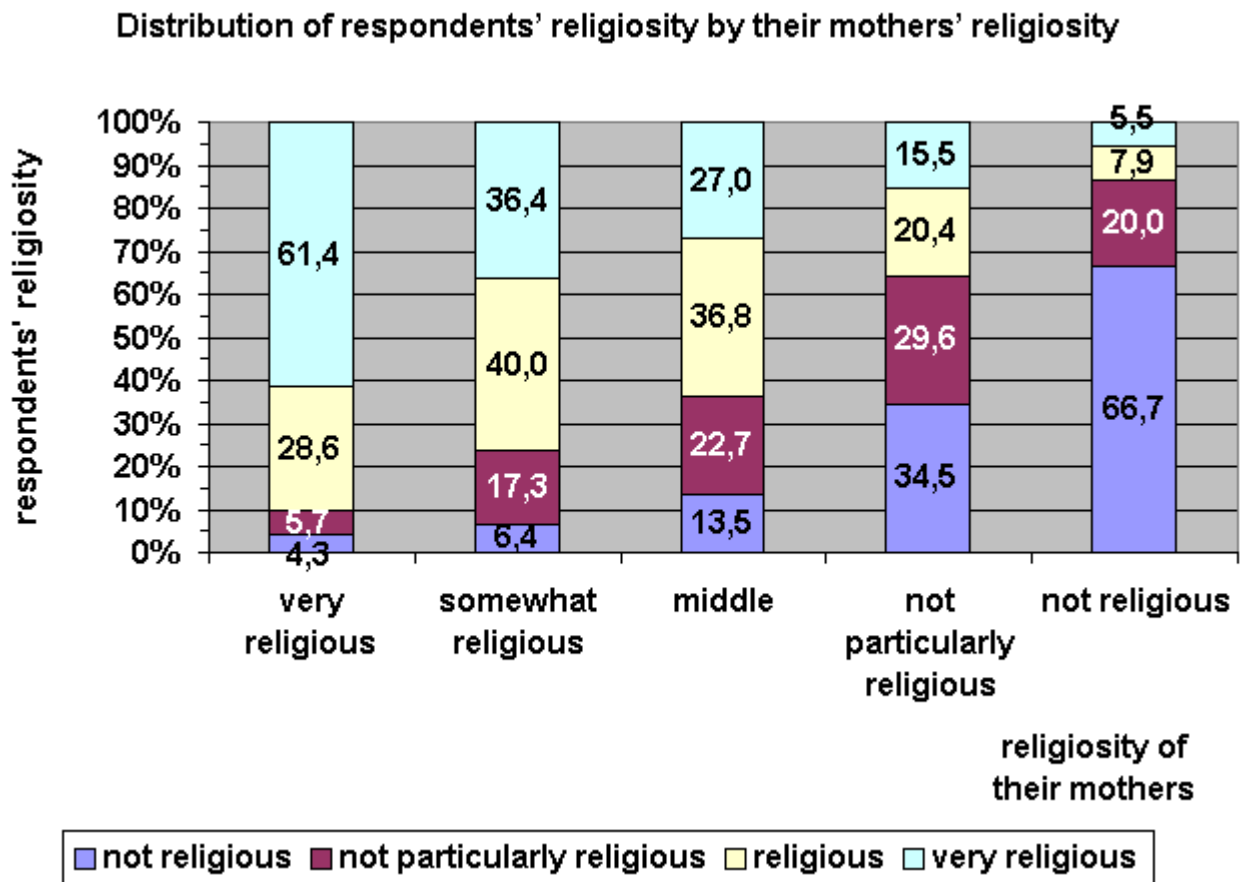
Thus, the “education factor” clearly has a negative effect on average number of children among those with more superior diplomas. But it does not explain the demographic influence of the

“religious factor” either. On the contrary, like the “affluence factor,” it reveals the religious factor’s significance all the more clearly.

### 3c. Familial versus social influence?

It could yet be questioned whether there the above-average number of children from religious families has any influence on succeeding generations. It must be established that there is a significant transmission of religiosity across generations. A conceivable counter-thesis could, for example, maintain that parents’ religiosity has no shaping influence or even a negative (off-putting) influence on the religious attitudes of succeeding generations.

The group of respondents between 35 and 45 years old proves to be of particular interest in this respect, their years of birth falling amid the social and religious upheavals of the 1960’s – in the Catholic Church, the second Vatican Council and the controversial encyclical letter on birth control; in the Evangelical churches, among other things, the doctrinal debates surrounding Bultmann and Barth; the impact and the murder of Martin Luther King; the first unfolding of broad ecumenical movements; the increasing state-imposed secularization in East Germany and the church-critical student movements of 1968 in West Germany. How did parents’ religious orientation (as recalled by the respondents) influence their children under these circumstances?

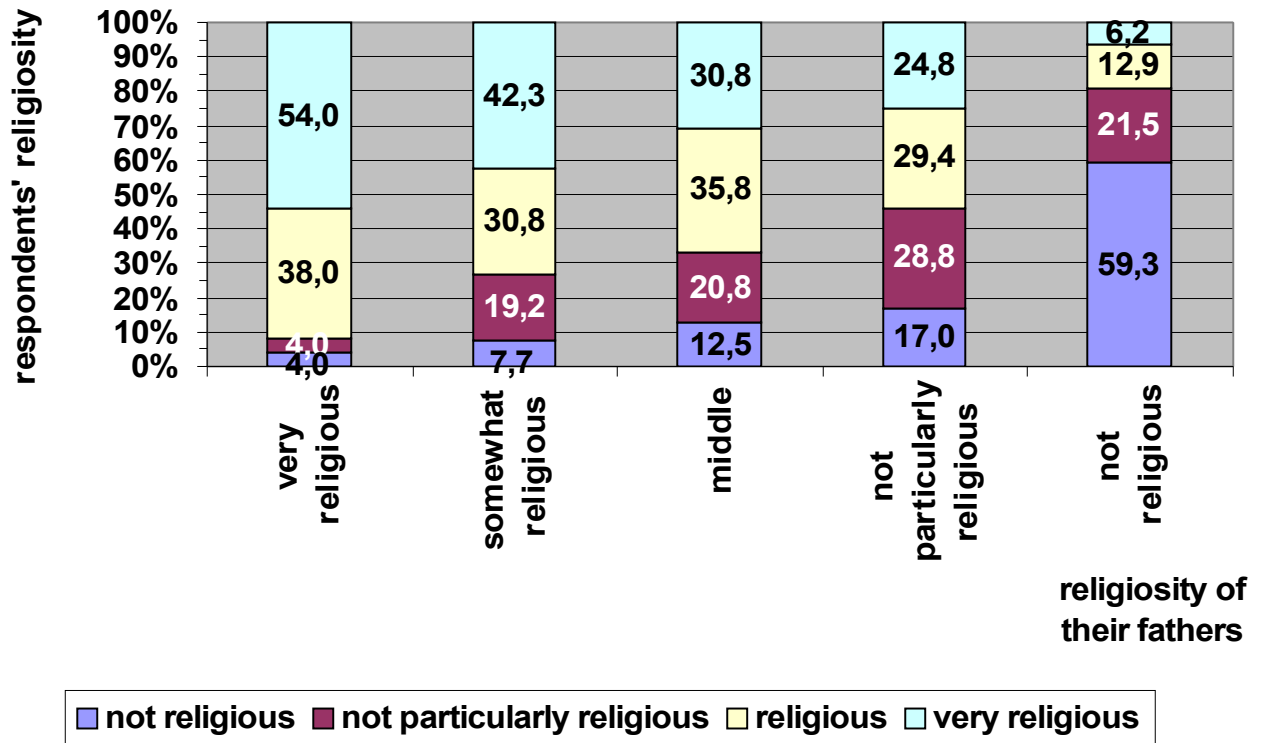


(Figure 10: Distribution of respondents' religiosity by their mothers' religiosity (ALLBUS 2002), N= 650)

The picture is especially clear with respect to mothers' religiosity: there is a very strong positive connection. Over 60% of those raised by "very religious" mothers themselves developed "very religious" attitudes, as did 36% of those raised by "somewhat religious" mothers. Of those with mothers were "not religious," on the other hand, two-thirds were "not religious" and another 20% were "not particularly religious." Only about 10% of the respondents with "very religious" mothers characterized themselves as having little or no religiosity; 13% of the children of mothers who were "not religious" became either religious or even very religious.

A connection was also found, albeit a weaker one, between fathers' religiosity and that of their children. 54% of those who characterized their fathers as "very religious" also characterized themselves a such, and 38% characterized themselves as "religious." 60% of the children of fathers who were "not religious" themselves remained "not religious," and 21.5% more characterized themselves as "not particularly religious." And only 8% of those with "very religious" fathers completely or almost completely abandoned religion.

### Distribution of respondents' religiosity by religiosity of their fathers



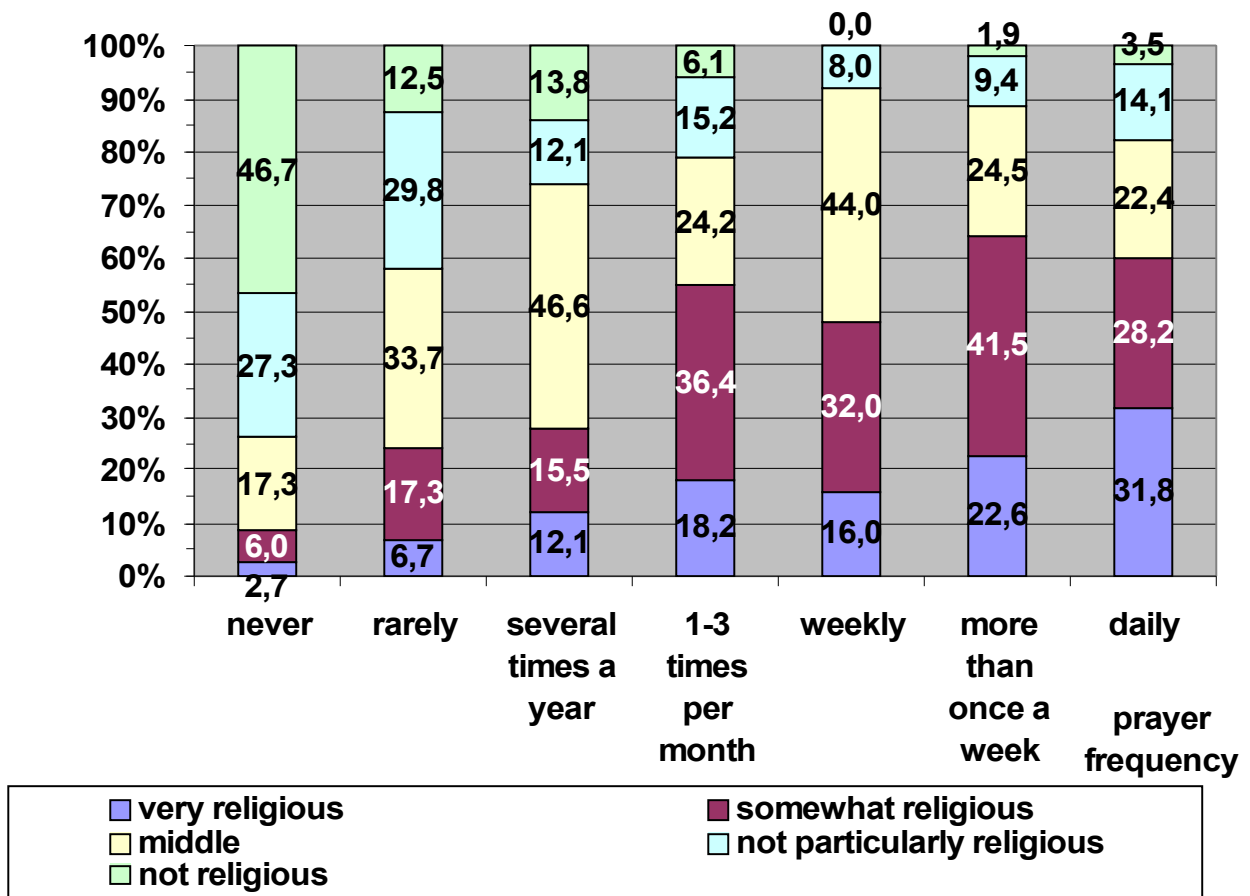
(Figure 11: Distribution of respondents' religiosity by religiosity of their fathers (ALLBUS 2002), N = 610)

The results attest to a surprising trans-generational stability in estimations of religiosity. This is all the more surprising given that the respondents were adults and that they had grown up in socially and religiously quite turbulent times. Nevertheless, their parents' influence is unmistakable: even in the 1960's, parents succeeded in passing on their basic religious attitudes. Also surprising are the indications, subtle though they are, of increasing religiosity in this generation: a shift from "not religious" or "not particularly religious" attitudes to more strongly religious ones was more common than a shift in the reverse direction.

Still, there are no grounds to infer from a similarity in religious attitudes between parents and their children that religious behavior is "copied." Indeed, it seems that although religious interest was passed on or even enlivened, this was not necessarily the case for religious practice. A comparison of respondents' estimations of their parents' religiosity with their own prayer frequency blurs the parents' influence to some extent. Respondents who grew up without religious practice seem not to have missed it: 74% of those who do not pray characterized their mothers as "not religious" or "not particularly religious." Only very seldom did respondents with "not religious" mothers later develop the practice of praying regularly.

Only 60% of those who pray daily, on the other hand, were raised by “very religious” or “somewhat religious” mothers. The children of “very religious” mothers pray almost without exception – although often infrequently and sometimes not on a regular schedule. And conversely, 40% of those who pray daily were raised by mothers they characterize as “somewhat religious,” “not particularly religious,” or, in some cases, “not religious.”

**Distribution of prayer frequency by religiosity of their mothers**



(Figure 12: Distribution of prayer frequency by religiosity of their mothers (ALLBUS 2002), N = 685)

Without wanting to jump ahead to the analysis, we can refer briefly at this point to Luckmann’s explanatory model of “invisible religion.”<sup>ix</sup> According to this model, basic religious interest (or lack thereof) is strongly shaped by socialization, but the question whether and how this interest is later expressed in “visible” practice is increasingly left to the decision of the individual. A large number of those coming from religious households consider themselves religious but do not practice religion regularly or systematically. On the other hand, there was a smaller number of respondents whose parents were less religious but who prayed on a daily basis at the time of the survey.

A basic attitude towards “religiosity” is frequently inherited from parents, but the form and system

of religious practice that follows is more strongly a matter of individual decision (surely in social interaction).

#### **4. The biographical interaction of religiosity and birth behavior**

The empirical data concerning the influence of religiosity upon child frequency seems at first glance to be quite complex and not easily explicable. But it can in fact be combined elegantly with the “biographical fertility theory” developed by Herwig Birg, Professor Emeritus for demographics and long-time director of the Institut für Bevölkerungsforschung und Sozialpolitik (Institute for Population Research and Social Politics) at the University of Bielefeld.<sup>x</sup> He points out that people living under technologically, economically, socially and politically advanced conditions are confronted with an ever-growing “biographical universe” with ever more choices.

According to this model, then, it has become increasingly infrequent simply “to have” children; “rather, having children became the object of identity-creating and identity-preserving reflection and a biographical decision.”<sup>xi</sup>

With increasing progress, the “opportunity costs” and “risk of commitment” involved in having children have also increased: they restrict parents’ options and income opportunities, and their birth is “irreversible.” Hence, the decision to have children is increasingly infrequent and the “demographic-economic paradox”<sup>xii</sup> of decreasing fertility and increasing affluence has come about. Thus, the demographic changes are not results of a change in values; rather, they preceded this change. In Germany, the birth rate began to decline measurably in the middle of the nineteenth century – a trend long compensated for by decreasing child mortality and increasing life expectancy.<sup>xiii</sup>

We see a clear convergence of Birg’s theory with observations made in the scientific study of religion and in our data analysis. With increasing education and technological, economic, social and political development, the “biographic universe” also grows in the religious domain. Religious practice is no longer simply “adhered to.” Rather – like the decision whether to have more children – it is increasingly the “object of identity-creating and identity-preserving reflection and biographical decision.” Systematically adhering to the regulations prescribed by a religion (such as praying daily, going to mass, observing holidays, refraining from pre-marital sexual intercourse and from frequent changes of partner, paying regular fees and making donations, etc.) involves taking on “chosen” commitments and thus passing up other options.

The reflection of this fact can be observed in all religions in the earliest teachings, proverbs, sermons and pictures having to do with the “narrow road” or “path,” from which to stray would lead to perdition.<sup>xiv</sup> Extensive regulations of sexual behavior are regularly included in these sources or derived from them. Like Inglehart and Norris, Birg observes “the mostly pro-natal influences of practically all cultures and world religions.”<sup>xv</sup> This fact, too, which may at first appear astounding, can be explained with reference to the affinity already noted: religious movements that are

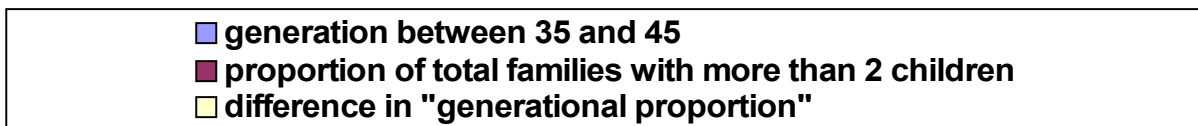
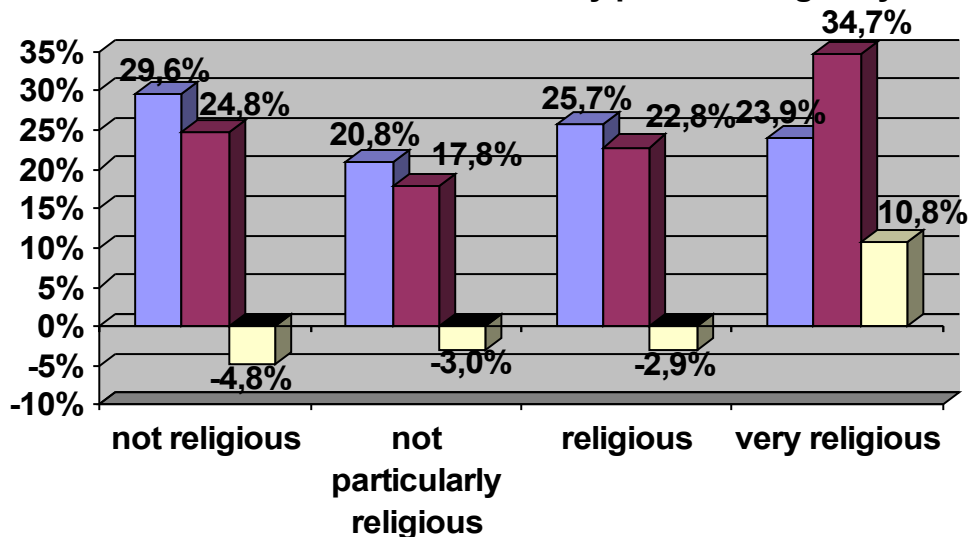


indifferent or negative towards having children will tend to lose out against birth-supportive competitors: they will produce fewer children and will be less attractive to families with lots of children. Thus, they will only seldom succeed beyond initial missionary achievements and establish traditions. Conversely, religious movements that urge their followers to have lots of children – even within the major world religions – will tend to be successful. As a result, statements of skepticism about having families will generally be relativized; a small celibate caste will concern itself all the more earnestly with promoting the fertility of the lay people and with providing religious education for children.

Thus, between those who decide for a “religious life” and those who decide in favor of “having children,” a mutual affinity has developed – historically and especially under modern conditions – and is increasing along with increasing income and education.

Anyone who lives in a developed country and is affluent and free has an enormous “biographical universe” of options at his or her disposal. Those who no longer restrict their freedoms and chances by religious observance will frequently decide against the significant sacrifice of options inherent in having lots of children. At any rate, the biographical option of “having children” can be realized in the form of having only one or two children, just as the option of religiosity can be pursued occasionally and unsystematically. Larger families become the province of more decisively religious parents.

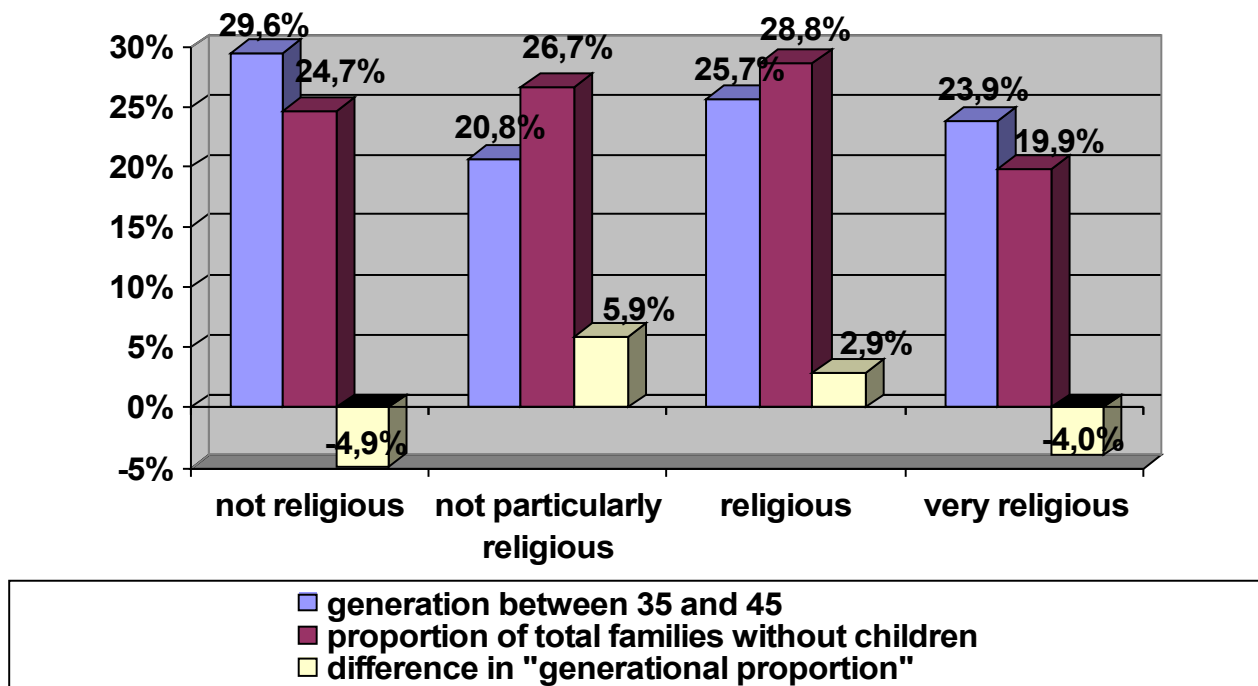
**Distribution of the Generation between 35 and 45 years of age and families with more than 2 children by parents' religiosity**



(Figure 13: Distribution of the Generation between 35 and 45 years of age and families with more than 2 children by parents' religiosity (ALLBUS 2002), N = 673)

This explanatory model fits perfectly with the observation that “uncertain” religious attitudes and “not very systematic “ religious practice less effectively promote having children than do “clearer” (religious or non-religious) attitudes – it is a matter of the readiness to pass up on options. Making no decision often amounts to a decision against having children. Becoming a bit pregnant is literally an impossibility.<sup>xvi</sup>

**Distribution of the generation from 35 to 45 years of age and respondents without children**



(Figure 14: Distribution of the generation from 35 to 45 years of age and respondents without children (ALLBUS), N = 673)

### 5. Concluding remarks: “the return of the religions”

There is nothing wrong with the often vary diverse theories about the reasons for the supposedly puzzling “return of the religions.”<sup>xvii</sup> For a long time, common demographic theories sufficed to explain why masses of people emigrated from poorer, traditional countries to more affluent, secular societies, and the persistent religiosity of immigrants could be understood as a means of preserving identity in the Diaspora. The most decisive and sometimes radical activists of the “Islamic Renaissance” that has been noted at least since September 11, 2001 have been educational climbers – students, natural scientists, technicians, doctors and teachers. In India and China, too, the expanding middle cases are among the catalyzers of religious revival, which in its decisiveness even sometimes departs from tradition (Falun Gong, Hindutva). In the USA, the evangelical movements

can be counted among the driving forces behind “neo-conservative” advances in society, politics, justice and even science – even to the point of, for example, demonstrations by young people against pre-marital sexual intercourse (“love can wait”) and massive campaigns against evolutionary theory.

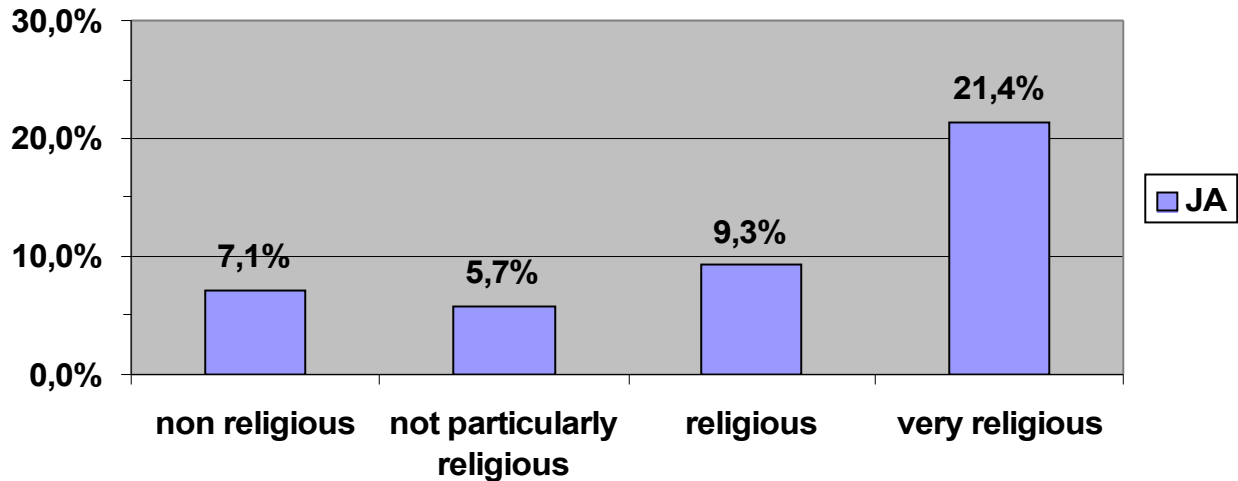
In Europe and in Germany, too, attention has been paid to the ecstatic pilgrimages of young, educated central Europeans to papal conventions and church days, to the broad willingness to donate money to support the restoration of the Dresden Women’s Church, to the success of religious books and films (in Germany, for example, Peter Hahne’s “Schluss mit lustig!” and the new Catholic Catechism; internationally, the films “The Passion of Christ” and “Luther”).

Critics who warn against a premature generalization of the thesis that religion is experiencing a general revival are right to point out that only a small minority of the young papal pilgrims really feel themselves bound to the papal teachings concerning sex, and that the decline of membership in Germany’s major churches continues. The charismatic and evangelical movements and “mega-churches” in the USA as well as in Europe, Africa and Asia also appear different in certain respects from earlier religious awakenings – for example in their focus on target groups in marketing and service, and in their emphasis on topics pertaining to healing and success instead of less pleasant sermons about punishment in hell, etc.<sup>xviii</sup>

Although these observations appear in certain respects contradictory, we are of the view that they can indeed be explained elegantly by referring to the mutual interaction of socio-economic development, religiosity and demographics proposed by the present theory:

1. Social-economic development leads – at a regionally specific pace – to an increasing number of biographic options (a growing “biographic universe”). The “option costs” of traditional orientations and of having lots of children thereby rise. People are constantly confronted with new options, but thereby also with new decisions to make. Worldwide, the most significantly effected are educational climbers, who within a few generations make the “jump” from traditional and religious circumstances to modern urban life. They are compelled to choose among options and to justify their choices vis-à-vis their parents and vis-à-vis the secular society they live in.
2. Most people tend towards compromises between new options and traditional lifestyles. People find certain aspects of the “religiosity” they acquired from their parents useful and retain them, but only on an individual level or within their urban lives. Religious commitments, and thus also religious practice and numbers of children, continue to lose out against the variety of biographical options (“invisible religion”).
3. Confronted with this tension, some people “choose” to give up or reject religious practice and beliefs, others opt to “return” to religion. These “chosen” religious reconstructions connect (not always consciously) traditional and modern elements, and distance themselves sharply from many other modern lifestyles. Often, “new” conversion experiences are celebrated, for example as “rebirthings” bound to another baptizing. More than a fifth of those respondents who saw themselves as “very religious”, recounted to have built a “new bond” to their religion.

### Built a new bond to my religion



4. These self-restrictions within the biographical universe often lead to a relatively high number of children. Established religious communities come under twofold pressure: if they stick to their prohibitions of certain options, they lose moderate members; if they compromise liberally with the “Zeitgeist” (i.e. accept new biographical options), they alienate “decisively religious” members with lots of children. Hence, battling on two fronts, they lose members nearly inexorably to resignations and insufficient numbers of children.

5. Secularizing process, then, have not stopped generally but have run into a demographic dead end. Worldwide and also domestically, communities that are still traditional or have “chosen” religion produce more children than secular population sectors, which are in fact shrinking. A growing portion of the young generation comes from households where religion is practiced “decisively.” Youth culture and thus also protest culture are taking on religious tones again, and influencing culture, the economy and politics, and thereby impugn the common – mainly secular – narratives of progress. Discriminatory efforts are counterproductive, since they intensify the social and cultural split, restrict the biographical options (especially professional options) of those who are thereby forced to choose, and as a result exacerbate the demographic discrepancy.

6. The current situation would thus be more aptly described as a demographically conditioned rise of religiosity among the younger generation than as a simple “return of the religions.” It is true that the targeted exclusion of “decisive” communities with lots of children from the variety of options in the modern biographical universe increases the divide separating them from secular and moderate population groups. But there is also an increase in the institutions and networks connecting these communities with the majority of society. Moreover, the children of religiously “decisive” parents need not always incline to greater religiosity and retreat from society – as the diverse scenes of young religious people (for example the aforementioned papal pilgrims) today clearly illustrate. By encouraging dialogue, encounters, mutual respect of religious freedom and above all by refraining

from exchanging defamation and discrimination, religious plurality can be dealt with and can unfold its positive aspects (as a demographic stabilizer in “ageing” societies, as a source of religious-cultural productivity, of familial, voluntary and global charity-related engagement, etc.). Countries and communities have the task and the opportunity to provide parents and children with targeted, demand-oriented support designed to acknowledge and reduce the biographical option-costs of having further children. Such child-friendly measures would stabilize their own populations for a medium-term time-frame and ease the demographic and cultural discrepancies between secular, moderate and decisively religious societies.

Given that further demographic invigoration of religious and associated topics and challenges is to be expected, we are of the view that the various sciences dealing with religiosity and religion must accept the task of subjecting their theories to greater empirical scrutiny and to public discussion. The global survey results reported by Inglehart and Norris and the data we have analyzed speak against essentializing trends in religious-cultural tradition and attributing to religious or ethnic communities supposedly altogether incommensurable attitudes about belief and lifestyle that legitimize exclusiveness as well as positive and negative discrimination.

In politics, in the public sector and in churches and religious communities, there is a pressing need for firm decisions and thus also for consultation. In our view, long neglect of the “religious factor” in science and in politics – especially in Germany and in Europe – has not always done justice to this need. For this reason, too, we hope that this article will lead to further religious-scientific, demographic and interdisciplinary discussions.

### **Literature and Notes:**

- i. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, “Sacred and Secular,” Cambridge University Press 2004, p. 231.
- ii. *ibid.*, p.233 f.
- iii. *ibid.*, p.216 f., p.235, p.241.
- iv. *ibid.*, p.231
- v. *ibid.*, p.70. (Religious participation in educational and social levels), p.232 (fertility rate)
- vi. N gives the number of individuals who responded to the question.
- vii. See Figures 4 and 5.
- viii. Cf. for example Meinhard Miegel in “Epochenwende,” Propyläen, p.183 ff.
- ix. Thomas Luckmann, „Die unsichtbare Religion,“ Suhrkamp 2005.
- x. Herwig Birg, „Die Weltbevölkerung,“ Beck 2004.
- xi. Birg 2004, p.76.
- xii. *ibid.*, p.110.
- xiii. *ibid.*, p.77.
- xiv. The proverbial narrow and broad path, Jesus as the “way, truth, life” in Christianity, the “Thora” as Hebrew provider of “(existential) direction,” the “Schariat” as Arabic path to the source of water in Islam, the “middle way” and the “eightfold path” in Buddhismus, the Chinese concept of the “Dao” (way, path), etc.
- xv. Birg 2004, p.117.

- xvi. When people who are not very or quite religious decide to have children, they have large families more frequently than people who are not religious, but clearly less frequently than people who are very religious (Figure 13).
- xvii. For a presentation of various explanatory models, see Gottfried Küenzlen, “Die Wiederkehr der Religionen,” Olzog 2003.
- xviii. Alan Wolfe, „The Transformation of American Religion,“ Free Press 2003.

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**Note on the origin of this contribution:**

The seminar “Religion and Demography” worked on and discussed various aspects of the topic (for example, comparisons between countries and religions) in plenum and in smaller groups. The presentation of the article was assisted by Mareike Zimmermann.

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