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# The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe

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Two issues have been especially contentious in debates over religious change in Europe: the unity or diversity of the trends observed across the continent, and the significance of the large subpopulation that is neither religious nor completely unreligious. This article addresses these problems. An analysis of the first wave of the European Social Survey (ESS) shows that each generation in every country surveyed is less religious than the last. Although there are some minor differences in the speed of the decline (the most religious countries are changing more quickly than the least religious), the magnitude of the fall in religiosity during the last century has been remarkably constant across the continent. Despite these shifts in the prevalence of conventional Christian belief, practice and self-identification, residual involvement is considerable. Many people are neither regular churchgoers nor self-consciously non-religious. The term 'fuzzy fidelity' describes this casual loyalty to tradition. Religion usually plays only a minor role in the lives of such people. Religious change in European countries follows a common trajectory whereby fuzzy fidelity rises and then falls over a very extended period. The starting points are different across the continent, but the forces at work may be much the same.

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## Introduction

Europe is a key battleground in the sociology of religion. The facts are fought over by every school of thought and have been claimed to support the secularization thesis (Bruce, 2002), the market model (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994), or some third way (Davie, 2000, 2002). Two key issues have been especially contentious: the unity or diversity of the trends observed across the continent, and the significance of the large subpopulation that is neither religious nor unreligious. This article addresses these two problems.

One common objection to the secularization paradigm is that European countries display no common pattern of religious change. Some show high levels of affiliation, other have high levels of participation, yet others may be low in both but have not abandoned religion. Because there is no clear or common

pattern or trend, the argument goes, the standard story of secularization must be wrong. Perhaps no single explanation of the religious situation is adequate, such is the diversity one finds across the continent.

Based on an analysis of retrospective questions from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), Iannaccone (2003) suggests that the variety of religious trends he finds implies that secularization theory applies to few countries. Another prominent exponent of what one might call the 'ragbag thesis' is Andrew Greeley, whose avowed aim in a book entitled *Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millennium* is to dispute the 'dogma' of religious decline. He writes:

In fact, if one looks at Europe with a relatively open mind, prepared to be surprised by its complexity, one discovers a wide variety of religious phenomena.

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

Note that this approach does concede an important point: Europe is not a single entity but rather a collection of two dozen or more separate societies. If it is impossible to generalize about religious change in Europe, then the secularization thesis is indeed useless. If one can find a common account that works for these disparate countries, however, then the theory is potentially useful, especially if it may also apply elsewhere (e.g. in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, or even in Japan). While the sheer variety of history and culture across Europe makes unitary explanation a challenge, any hypothesis that survives testing in this arena has a considerable advantage.

## Data

The study described here is based on an analysis of the first wave of the European Social Survey (ESS). The data were collected in 2002/2003 in 22 nations (the 21 listed in Table 1 below, plus Israel). The second wave of the ESS, conducted two years later, is unfortunately less useful for present purposes because a key question on the importance of religion was not included.

The data were gathered using personal interviews supplemented by short self-completion questionnaires. A great deal of expert attention was devoted to sampling strategy, translation, methods, and quality assurance, with the highest possible level of cross-national comparability. In producing representative samples, obtaining a high response rate was a key objective. The standards of design and execution are exceptionally high. Comprehensive documentation is available online at <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

ESS data are archived in Norway, and are freely accessible at <http://ess.nsd.uib.no>.

## Religion—Questions and Scale Construction

The ESS provides better coverage of religion than most general purpose surveys, notwithstanding the organizers’ modest view that in this dataset religion is better used as an explanatory variable than as something to be studied in its own right (Billiet, 2003). The survey questions cover the three main areas of affiliation, practice and belief, as follows:

Affiliation:	current or past identification with a religion
Practice:	frequency of attendance at religious services, frequency of private prayer
Belief:	self-rated religiosity, importance of religion in respondent’s life

While the questions ‘how religious would you say you are?’ and ‘how important is religion in your life?’ do not measure beliefs directly, it seems likely that there is a strong association between these variables and strength of religious belief. A further set of items on involvement in church or religious organizations (membership, participation, giving, volunteering, and friendship) were excluded from the analysis presented here on the grounds that they show little systematic relationship with each other or with the other variables. National culture may have a strong influence; considerable numbers of people volunteered or made donations without being members and vice versa. Given that religious activity is already represented by attendance and prayer, these additional variables may be superfluous in any case.

There are three levels of affiliation (never belonged, previously belonged, and currently belong), while frequency of attendance and prayer are measured in seven categories. Respondents chose values between 0 and 10 to describe their religiosity and the importance of religion in their lives. One finds considerable heaping of responses on 0, 5, and 10, with lower frequencies in the adjacent categories. To produce more bell-shaped curves, and also to give these variables equal weight in a raw score when combined with the 7-point religious practice variables, the 11 categories were collapsed into 7. [The recoding was done as follows: 0, (1, 2), (3, 4), 5, (6, 7), (8, 9), 10].

For church attendance, the distribution is sharply skewed in the direction of ‘never’. Prayer, on the other hand, produces a U-shaped pattern, with most people at one extreme (frequent prayer) or the other (seldom or never praying).

**Table 1** Self-described belonging, religiosity, and importance of religion for ‘fuzzy’ respondents, ESS 2002

	Belong		Religiosity		Importance above av.
		Low	Low–med	Above av.	
Austria	68.8	13.5	65.2	21.2	18.9
Belgium	41.2	14.0	56.7	29.3	17.3
Czech Republic	35.8	18.1	64.8	17.1	14.9
Denmark	61.2	6.0	77.0	16.9	9.9
Finland	72.1	4.6	63.1	32.3	12.7
France	52.7	20.4	65.3	14.3	14.0
Germany	69.5	8.3	73.2	18.5	14.4
Greece	92.3	8.5	72.3	19.2	46.7
Hungary	69.9	10.1	75.8	14.1	15.3
Ireland	76.7	12.6	78.7	8.7	31.6
Italy	62.9	8.5	75.4	16.0	28.1
Luxembourg	78.8	18.1	71.7	10.1	19.3
Netherlands	28.9	9.1	55.0	35.9	10.1
Norway	53.2	6.1	78.3	15.6	10.0
Poland	88.9	7.0	88.2	4.9	38.6
Portugal	82.4	9.5	81.7	8.8	27.9
Slovenia	45.5	8.1	76.3	15.5	17.5
Spain	83.0	17.1	75.3	7.6	23.4
Sweden	28.7	12.5	68.5	19.0	10.7
Switzerland	58.7	8.7	67.1	24.2	12.7
United Kingdom	48.7	8.4	72.5	19.0	12.0
Average (unweighted)	61.9	10.9	71.5	17.5	19.3

One option would be to analyse each of these variables separately. Here, however, we are not especially interested in church affiliation, attendance, or belief for their own sake but rather as signs of individual religious commitment. We may conjecture that all six of these variables can be treated as observed indicators of a single underlying quality of religiosity. If so, then it would make sense to combine them into a scale measure of that latent attribute. Because each individual variable reflects the quality we wish to capture only imperfectly, a scale that draws on all of them collectively should be more valid and reliable than any one of them separately.

We might find, of course, that these variables seem to be measuring different things; perhaps, for example, there is a ‘private commitment’ dimension and a ‘public participation’ dimension. In fact, careful analysis shows that these variables do meet the key criteria for combination into a scale. In particular, they are highly correlated with each other and with the index of religiosity derived from them.

(As a concrete example of evidence for the assertion that the items are closely related, the declining trajectory of private prayer in Ireland is very similar to that for public worship. Of people born before the Second World War, 78 per cent pray every day, and

most of the remainder do so at least weekly; a mere 6 per cent pray only on ‘special holy days’, less often, or never. Of those born since 1965, the proportion praying daily is down to a just over a quarter and falling while the numbers seldom or never praying are a third and rising.)

Another possible objection is that respondents have been asked directly how religious they are; perhaps it is unnecessary or even unwise to use a different measure of religiosity. People are not necessarily the best judges of their own characteristics, though. They may feel themselves to be highly religious, but we might wish to moderate this assessment if they never go to church or pray (and conversely for people who practise a great deal and say that religion is personally important, without claiming to be especially religious). In any event, it is reassuring that the correlation between respondents’ subjective ratings of religiosity and the scale described below is very high (0.86).

The classical approach to measurement combines items that are highly correlated. If the value of a standard statistic such as Cronbach’s Alpha is sufficiently high (and in this case it is 0.87, which is excellent), the sum of the variable values would be used as a composite index of religiosity (which is assumed to be the underlying construct being

manifested through the responses). Such a procedure yields a fairly uniform distribution of scores over the range from least religious to most religious.

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

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

The requirements for constructing successful scale of this kind are substantially more onerous than under classical measurement theory. For example, the items must form a hierarchy from ‘easy’ to ‘difficult’; the characteristic curves that represent the probability of someone with any given level of the attribute ‘passing’ each item should not cross. (For further details see Embretson and Reise, 2000; Sijtsma and Molenaar, 2002; for applications to religious belief, see Van Schuur, 2003; Lüchau, 2007.)

The religiosity scale used here is a one-parameter IRT model, also known as a Rasch model. It was created using RUMM2020 software. The five polytomous variables described above formed a scale rated as ‘excellent’ according to the various tests in this package. The assignment of scores to each individual produces a scale that is more stretched than the ‘classical’ version; the distribution that results is roughly bell-shaped rather than rectangular. This picture is consistent with our intuition (and some

evidence) that most people are not far from the religious norm, whatever that happens to be in a given time and place, while some are much more or much less religious than average. The uniform distribution implied by the classical scores is less plausible.

The use of IRT methods was motivated by the conviction that this measurement model is the best in this context. It is worth noting, however, that the results that follow do not depend upon this choice; the classical scores show the same trends and contrasts. For a statistically sophisticated discussion of the cross-national construct equivalence of the items used, see Billiet and Welkenhuysen-Gybels (2004).

## Findings

For ease of presentation, 20 countries in the ESS 2002 dataset (leaving out Israel, about which something will be said later, and Luxembourg, which is much like Belgium on these measures) can be divided for convenience into groups of higher and lower average religiosity. Catholic countries are well represented in the former set, while northern and eastern European countries tend to be in the latter. Greeley and others claim that not only does average religiosity vary, there is no common pattern of change across these countries. They assert that although there has been decline in a few countries, religiosity is static or even increasing in most.

It is instructive to examine the mean level of religiosity by 5-year age group for each country in the sample. The first group encompasses all who were born prior to 1920; subsequent groups include those born during 1920–1924, 1925–1929, etc., through to 1980–1984. Figure 1 shows the generational differences for each country.

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

If we compare people born in the early 1980s with their grandparents’ generation (born in the late 1920s), we find an average gap of exactly 1 scale point across the 21 countries. The same two-generation difference in the index is found in most of the countries individually: a range from 0.88 to 1.27 in the religiosity score gap includes two thirds of the nations, the exceptions being Hungary, Ireland and Spain (higher

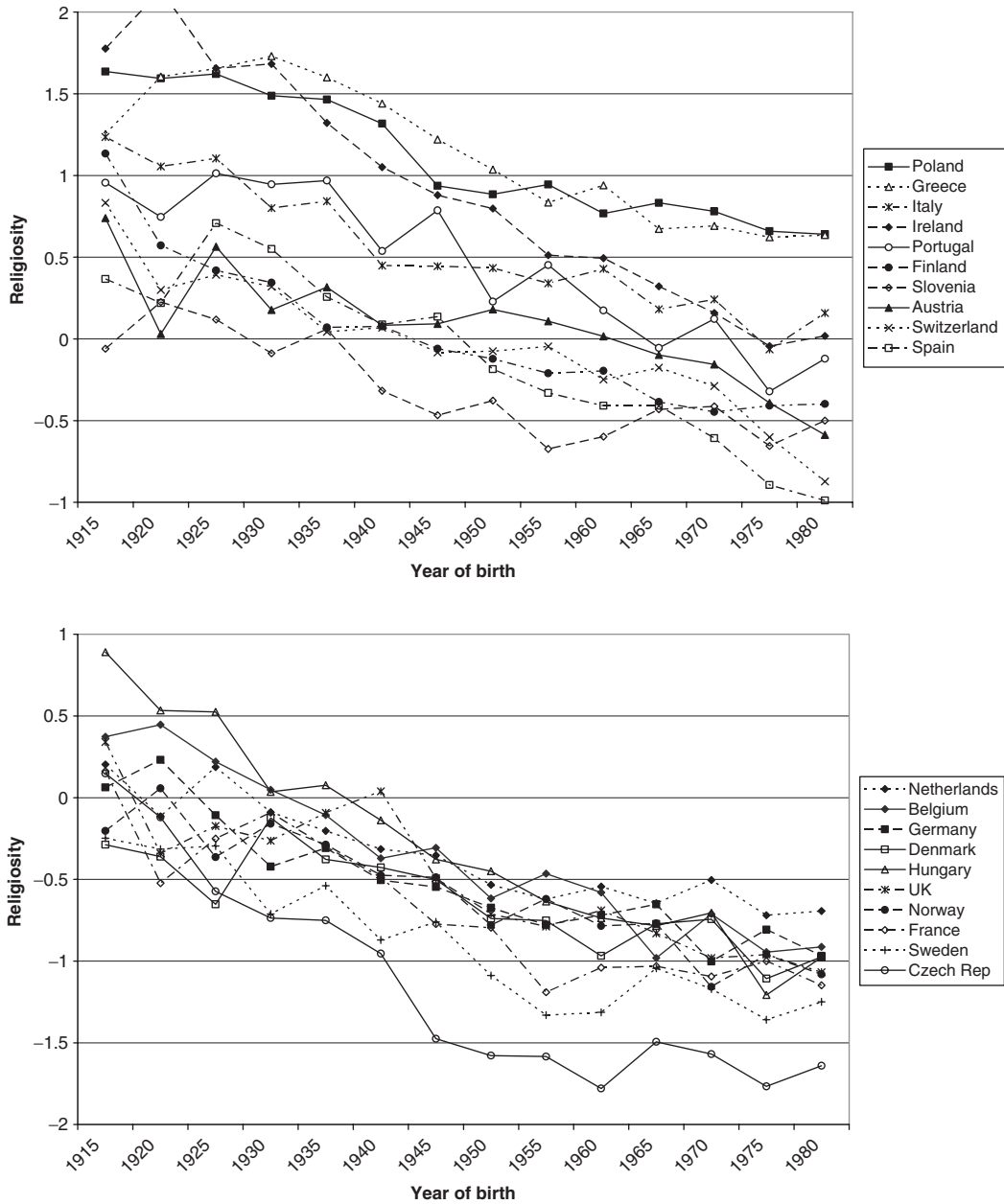


Figure 1 Religiosity by country and year of birth

and Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Slovenia (lower). To put it another way, the pattern of decline has been similar everywhere, with the result that the overall rank order by religiosity has been largely preserved from the early to the late 20th century; there has however been some regression to the mean. The more religious countries (particularly in the Catholic group) have

declined most; the more secular countries (especially in Scandinavia) have declined least.

In the most secular countries—the Czech Republic, Sweden, and France—the curve appears to flatten out in the last couple of decades. People born in the early 1980s are much the same in religious terms as those born in the early 1960s. It is tempting to suppose that

secularization has run its course, leaving a certain amount of religion to fight another day. There may be some truth in this finding: no one expects atheism to become universal. It is important to appreciate, though, just how low these levels are. Even ignoring the exceptionally low scores in the Czech Republic, the mean levels amongst French and Swedish adults would equate to being in the next-to-lowest response category on each religion question: almost never attending or praying and choosing values just one step up from ‘extremely unimportant’ (about religion in life) and ‘extremely unreligious’ (as a self-description). Of course we know that some people are religiously active, which thus implies that many others are indeed at the extreme end of the scale.

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

It is interesting (and reassuring) that in neighbouring or culturally similar countries the levels of religiosity and patterns of change correspond closely in these results. There is evidently an ‘Alpine’ pattern (Switzerland and Austria) and a virtually standard Benelux pattern (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg). Likewise the curves for Norway and Denmark are difficult to distinguish, and the graphs for Italy, Portugal, and Spain are similar. Finland seems markedly more religious than Sweden, however, and perhaps less surprisingly Catholic Ireland is very different from the predominantly Protestant/Anglican UK.

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

## Age or Cohort Effects?

There are two possible interpretations of Figure 1. The first is that religion is in long-term decline in northern, southern, western, and eastern Europe, and that this decline is essentially generational: each birth cohort is somewhat less religious than the one before. The alternative interpretation is that in every country on the continent people become progressively more

religious with age. On this view, there is no reason to expect decline, because the people who are highly secular today will be faithful tomorrow—or at any rate in 50 years.

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

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

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

Finally, we do possess some studies based on sophisticated longitudinal analysis that can help to identify the source of the changes. In Britain, it is quite clear that the differences should be explained on the basis of cohort and not age or period effects (Voas and Crockett, 2005; Crockett and Voas, 2006). Similar evidence is available for Germany (Wolf, 2008). Although we lack good material in English on other countries, a Dutch study of West Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Norway, Ireland, Italy, and Great Britain concluded that the gap between young and old in religiosity simply results from the fact that people born earlier in time are more likely to be religious.



To the extent that an age effect could be detected, it was in the opposite direction to the one suggested: older people are more likely to have lost religion than younger people (Te Grotenhuis *et al.*, 1997). The evidence we possess points unambiguously to the generational nature of religious decline, and gives no support to the conjecture that most Europeans enter adulthood relatively unreligious and gradually become devout as they go through life.

## Secularity versus Fuzzy Fidelity

Unlike Americans, Europeans are accustomed to the idea of state-supported religious education, religious broadcasting on network television, religious parties in the legislature, and so on. Perhaps as a result, some Europeans feel that they need protection from religious institutions. None the less, the implicit assumption seems to be that a modest dose of religion is good for people—or at least other people. The notion that God's function is to make children well behaved, strangers helpful, and shopkeepers honest means that outright secularism is less popular than one might suppose. But as we ourselves, having little desire for divine supervision, are mostly secular, the benign acceptance of public religion does little apart from frustrate secularists and religious leaders impartially.

As argued above, the religious changes we observe in Europe occur largely across rather than within generations. There is considerable stability in religious involvement over the course of adult life (especially on average, for people born during some period). That being so, the smooth continuous declines across birth cohorts shown in Figure 1 may represent a changing mix of the religious and secular, rather than a progressive dilution of religiosity at the individual level.

We know, though, that religious commitment is not dichotomous (so that people are either religious or non-religious). Despite dramatic shifts in the prevalence of conventional Christian belief, practice, and self-identification, residual involvement is considerable. Many people remain interested in church weddings and funerals, Christmas services, and local festivals. They believe in 'something out there', pay at least lip service to Christian values, and may be willing to identify with a denomination. They are neither regular churchgoers (now only a small minority of the population in most European countries) nor self-consciously non-religious. Because they retain some loyalty to tradition, though in a rather uncommitted way, we can call the phenomenon fuzzy fidelity.

(This kind of fuzziness is not the same as that discussed in Zinnbauer *et al.* (1997), where the term was used in reference to alternative spirituality.)

## The Fuzziness of Belief

None of the three main aspects of religious involvement—belief, practice, and affiliation—is unambiguous. If we take the rather strict view that religious people must accept specific articles of faith and know basic church doctrine, for example, then only a fraction of the population will qualify. If we suppose that accepting the existence of a higher power or an ultimate moral order counts as religious belief, the proportion will be much greater.

Opinion polls in Europe show high levels of belief, not merely in religious or quasi-religious ideas (such as reincarnation), but also in folk superstition: horoscopes, clairvoyance, ghosts, and so on (see Day, 2006 on the 'secular supernatural'). It is far from clear that these beliefs make any difference to the people claiming them. Studies on polling show that people are prepared to express opinions about almost anything, whether or not they have any knowledge or interest in the topic. Such 'beliefs' may be uninformed, held superficially, seldom acted upon, and relatively volatile. Feeling required to hold and even to express opinions is one thing; finding those issues important is another.

While 25 per cent of respondents in some European countries may say that they believe in reincarnation, one is not inclined to feel that they thereby express any basic truths about their own identities. The corollary, though, is that it is difficult to be too impressed by the apparent number of conventional believers. The argument here is not that the large subpopulation that acknowledges the God of our fathers—the memorably-styled 'ordinary God' (Davie, 1994)—is shallow or insincere. The point is simply that we cannot conclude from the fact that people tell pollsters they believe in God that they give the matter any thought, find it significant, will feel the same next year, or plan to do anything about it. While economists claim that there is no such thing as a free lunch, survey responses come very close.

In any event, one can no longer infer from the widespread inclination to believe in a broadly defined God that people are basically Christian. Opinion polls over recent decades suggest (even given the previous caveats about interpreting survey evidence) that the characteristically Christian beliefs—particularly in Jesus as the Son of God—have been in decline, and are now held by a minority (Gill *et al.*, 1998; see also

*The Tablet*, 18 December 1999, p. 1729). Many people would like to be known as 'spiritual' (the alternatives seem unattractive; who wants to be labelled a 'materialist?') and will therefore acknowledge a belief in something, but that something is less and less likely to be recognizable as religious doctrine. In the 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes survey, respondents who said they believed in God divided fairly equally between 'a personal creator God', 'a higher power or life-force', and 'there is something there' (Bruce and Glendinning, 2003).

Some people call themselves Christians but have few or no discernible Christian beliefs: they are considered in the next section. Among those fuzzy Christians who have religious or spiritual beliefs, we can distinguish two cognitive styles. Many entertain beliefs about their fate, the afterlife, a higher power, and the like that are quasi-religious but inconsistent with the teachings of the major Christian denominations. What we might call 'popular heterodoxy' combines elements of astrology, reincarnation, divination, magic, folk religion, and conventional Christianity. Such melanges are not particularly coherent, but those who hold them tend not to reflect deeply on their worldviews. In any event, the salience of these beliefs is typically rather low. In contrast, the 'Sheilaists' are more conscious of spiritual seeking. 'Sheilaism' was the self-applied label used by a respondent ('Sheila Larson', a young nurse) in *Habits of the Heart*: "I believe in God," Sheila says. "I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice" (Bellah *et al.*, 1985, p. 221). The number of self-conscious seekers is small. Heelas and Woodhead's pioneering attempt to identify people in a small English town who were in any way involved in what they termed the 'holistic milieu' put the figure at less than 2 per cent and over half of them denied that their involvement in reiki, yoga, aromatherapy, and the like was spiritual (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Voas and Bruce, 2007). Interest in psychological and physical 'well-being' was more common than spiritual seeking. A more substantial proportion of the population will privately follow a variety of self-spirituality. Those who are most engaged with the process may reject Christianity, but others will see their spirituality as consistent with Christian identification.

Of course people may call themselves Christian even if they have no religious beliefs. Many nominal adherents are lapsed agnostics: they used to have doubts, and now they just do not care. Arguably most are secular for all practical purposes. It is time to consider how people respond when asked 'what is your religion?'

## The Fuzziness of Christian Identity

Long after active religious participation has ceased, people may still want services for special occasions; after even that degree of interest has waned, they may still accept association with their religion of origin. The result is similar to a self-description as working class by the owner of a large business, or claims to Irishness by Americans who have a grandparent from Galway. Such personal identities may be personally meaningful, but the chances of passing them successfully to the next generation are slim. In any event, a characteristic tends to disappear from our self-description as it loses its social significance. Being a Muslim currently seems sufficiently salient that very few European Muslims would not describe themselves as such; for relatively few 'Christians' is the same true.

Most Europeans are still able to specify their religious background, just as they can name their birthplace, father's occupation, and secondary school, but whether these things make any difference to how they see themselves or the way they are perceived by others is not at all certain. Notoriously, many people who to all appearances are unreligious do choose an affiliation if asked, depending on the wording and context of the question. These nominal Christians comprise more than half the population in most European countries. The following description of three important subgroups is paraphrased from Day (2006).

Natal nominalists ascribe their Christianity to familial heritage alone. Typically they were baptised and attended church when they were young. They are unsure whether God exists, but in any case he does not play a part in their lives. They do not refer to any religion or deity in answer to questions about what they believe in, what is important to them, what guides them morally, what makes them happy or sad, their purpose in life or what happens after they die. Natal nominalists admit that they rarely, if ever, think about their religious identity. They assume religious identity is something one acquires through birth or early upbringing.

Ethnic nominalists describe themselves as Christian to position themselves as different from others. Like natal nominalists, Christian ethnic nominalists are not convinced about God, do not engage in religious practice and do not give the matter much thought. They differ in describing themselves as Christian as a way of identifying with a people or culture. They see themselves as belonging to a distinct group, which may be national (e.g. English as distinct from Welsh) rather than necessarily racial. In doing so, they clearly aim to separate themselves from other groups



(currently Muslims form the major ‘other’ for Europeans) that are identified with a different faith.

Aspirational nominalists describe themselves as Christian, and perhaps more specifically as part of an established church, because they want to belong to this group. It represents something to which they aspire. The emphasis on membership of a group is shared with ethnic nominalists, but the identity carries for them an additional notion of middle class respectability and confidence. In their view, the label is attached not simply to people like themselves but to people like they want to be.

### The Fuzziness of Religious Practice

Finally, while it is unusual to find unreligious people in church, religious practice can occur even among the secular. People accompany religious parents or spouses, go for the music, or hope to qualify their children for church-affiliated schools. Private prayer is frequently practised even by people who do not identify with a religion, attend services, or believe in a personal God (Bänziger, 2006); whether and to what extent such people are thereby shown to be ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘secular’ is debatable.

Religious ceremonies for rites of passage remain popular, though much less so than previously, and some occasional services with a strong social dimension (e.g. church weddings and baptisms or harvest festivals and the like) draw large congregations. Christmas attracts two and a half times as many people to the Church of England as appear on a normal Sunday. It seems very likely, though, that tradition and nostalgia rather than sporadic religious enthusiasm are largely responsible for high turnout at such times.

### Estimating the Reach of Fuzzy Fidelity

There are various ways, then, in which the connection to religion may be fuzzy rather than clear. Beyond all of these definitional and methodological issues, one question stands out: how much does religion matter to people? Many will believe in God, call themselves Christian, and appear in church on occasion, but does that suffice for them to be usefully regarded as religious?

We can try to estimate the relative sizes of the religious, wholly secular and fuzzy constituencies using data from the first wave of the ESS. One approach to classification is to use statistical techniques such as cluster analysis or, for categorical variables, latent class analysis (LCA). With religiosity it seems doubtful

whether LCA produces results that are sufficiently superior to those from an *a priori* classification to justify the methodological complexity. Because there is clustering at the upper and lower ends of a religiosity spectrum, the main issue is whether the middle range is subdivided or not. It is simple to demarcate the categories desired using explicit criteria, and the classes produced using methods like LCA tend not to be very different.

Advocates of these statistical approaches might argue that even if a simpler method does almost as well, their classifications still correspond better to the (assumed) latent traits. The problem is that an explicit *a priori* definition is much easier to interpret. In contrast, the categories identified inductively via LCA can be described in any number of ways, and it is open to debate whether the labels adopted are the best ones for people in a given category.

For the sake of clarity, then, it seems best to stipulate what terms like ‘religious’ and ‘unreligious’ mean in relation to the data available, rather than to apply the labels to respondents who have been grouped together by LCA. One option would be to use these descriptions for respondents who scored above or below certain threshold values on the religiosity scale created previously. It would not necessarily be clear what these values implied, however, and for the sake of transparency more explicit criteria based on fixed values of some of the variables would be preferable. Thus people will only be classified as religious if they rate themselves at 6 or higher on a scale from 0 (not at all religious) to 10 (very religious). In addition, they must either attend services at least monthly or, if not, describe religion as at least moderately important in their lives (6+ on the scale).

A rather strict definition of being unreligious would require the respondent to satisfy all of the following:

- attends only at major holidays, less often, or never;
- prays only at major holidays, less often, or never;
- rates self as 0, 1, or 2 on a scale from 0 (not at all religious) to 10 (very religious);
- describes the importance of religion in his/her life as 0, 1, or 2 on a scale from 0 (extremely unimportant) to 10 (extremely important).

These two categories still only account for barely half the population across the continent. In some instances, the proportions are even smaller; about 20 per cent of people in Denmark, for example, count as religious, with only fractionally more qualifying as unreligious. The residual, intermediate group is the largest in all except the most religious countries

(Greece, Poland, Ireland, Italy, and—marginally—Portugal).

One wants to know what characterizes this fuzzy middle half of the population. This group may simply be at intermediate (and possibly confused) stages between religion and irreligion. Alternatively, it may be distinguished from the others by characteristics on separate dimensions. A possible typology is as follows:

Conventionally religious	Actively observant Privately committed
Unconventionally religious/spiritual	Sheiliasm Popular heterodoxy
Nominal adherents	Natal nominalists Ethnic nominalists Aspirational nominalists
Non-religious	Agnostics Atheists

In the religion module of ISSP, the question on belief offers options that are sceptical ('I don't believe in God' or 'I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out') and religious ('I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it'). Judging from the numbers, it seems reasonable to suppose that most of those in the middle group identified here will fall into one or another of the remaining ISSP categories for belief:

- I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind;
- I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others;
- While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.

As for religious practice, few of these people attend church services except for weddings, funerals, and possibly on special occasions such as Christmas. Many never pray, but some do so weekly or even daily.

The proportions identifying with a religious group vary considerably from country to country depending on the cultural significance of denominational affiliation; see the first column in Table 1. In Greece, the figure exceeds 90 per cent, while in the Netherlands and Sweden it is below 30 per cent (somewhat surprisingly in the case of Sweden, where nominal membership in the national church is widespread).

In terms of general orientation, these respondents are by definition neither particularly religious nor unreligious. The large majority (about 70 per cent on average) place themselves at points 3, 4, or 5 on the 0–10 scale from 'not at all religious' to 'very religious'. The anomalies are interesting; in the Netherlands and Finland about a third describe themselves as more

religious than not (i.e. 6 or higher on the scale), while in Poland, Spain, and Portugal relatively few do so. It evidently does not seem paradoxical for some respondents in basically secular but historically Protestant countries to say that they are religious and at the same time that religion is not especially important in their lives.

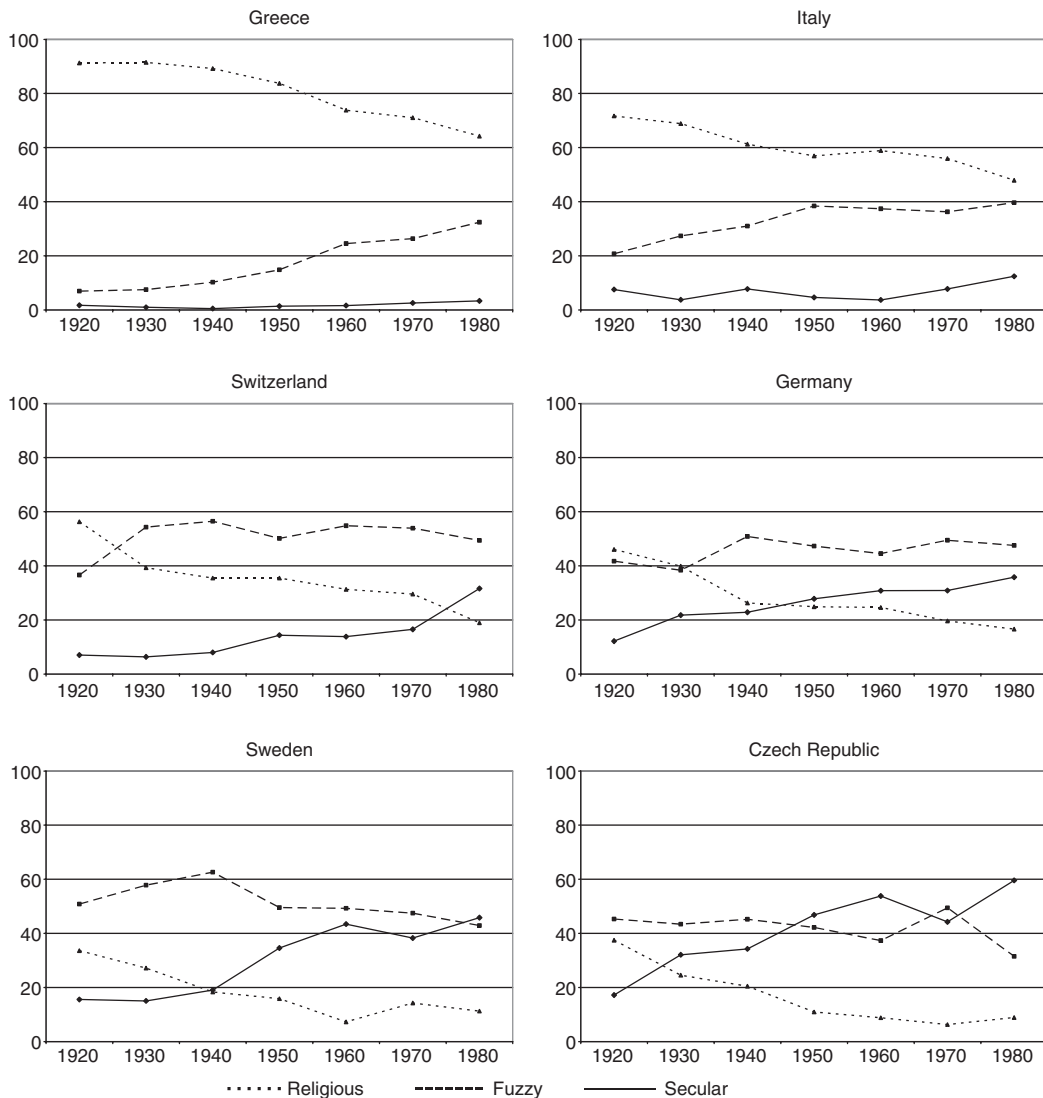
What is striking, in fact, is how little religion seems to matter to most fuzzy Christians. Only in the most religious countries do more than a quarter think that religion is personally somewhat important rather than unimportant. Elsewhere, the very large majority of these respondents see religion as not very important, and for a quarter or more it is very unimportant (0, 1, or 2 on the 0–10 scale).

The dominant attitude towards religion, then, is not one of rejection or hostility. Many of those in the large middle group who are neither religious nor unreligious are willing to identify with a religion, are open to the existence of God or a higher power, may use the church for rites of passage, and might pray at least occasionally. What seems apparent, though, is that religion plays a very minor role (if any) in their lives.

## National Distributions of Fuzzy Christianity by Year of Birth

Instead of looking just at average religiosity (as in Figure 1), it may be more enlightening to consider the three categories of religious, wholly secular, and in between. In every country, there is an evident decline in the relative size of the religious component of the population as one moves from older to younger generations, accompanied by growth in the wholly secular component (Figure 2). The intermediate group, though, has become larger over time in the most religious countries (e.g. Greece and Italy) and slightly smaller in the least religious (Sweden and the Czech Republic), with stability or modest growth in the middle group (e.g. Switzerland and Germany). These six countries—two at each end and two in the middle of the range shown in Figure 1—are illustrative, but the findings do not depend on the selection.

At first blush these results might suggest that critics of secularization theory are right after all; perhaps there is no single pattern that describes religious change in Europe. The mean religiosity scores plotted in Figure 1 might conceal important differences between subgroups. Recent work has tended to emphasize the 'patchwork' character of religion in Europe (Draulans and Halman, 2005; Halman and Draulans, 2006). The diversity of these countries in history, culture, and religious character is undeniable.



**Figure 2** Religiosity by decade of birth in six European countries

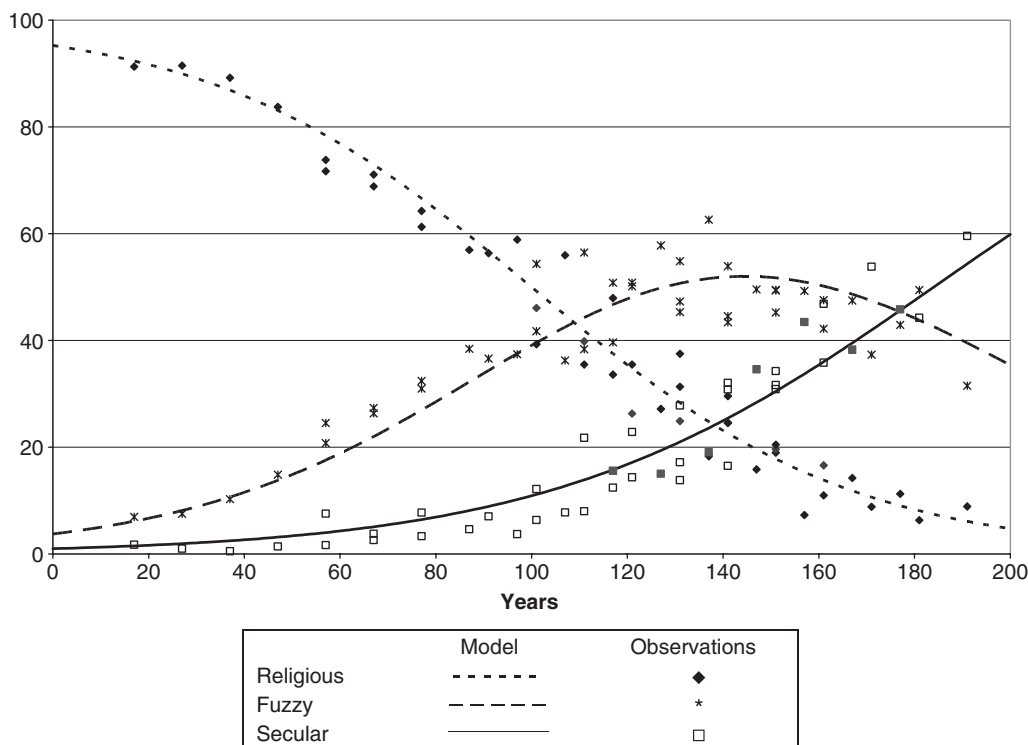
*Notes:* The vertical axis gives a percentage (of the relevant age group). On the horizontal axis, the years of birth are grouped as follows: pre-1925, 1925–1934, ... 1975–1984. The labels refer to the midpoints of these groups, e.g. 1945–1954 is marked 1950. The three categories are defined in the text. People identifying with any non-Christian religion apart from Judaism are excluded.

The crucial issue concerns the large subpopulation that is neither obviously religious nor entirely secular. The major debates over religious change in the modern world concern precisely this group. They can be seen as a sign of secularization, or conversely as a religious market waiting for the right product to come along. European sociologists of the ‘third way’ might see them as consumers of individuated religion or

non-institutional spirituality, or again as a group that believes without belonging.

In fact the apparently very distinct situations shown in Figure 2 proceed naturally from a common trajectory of religious decline. What varies is when the decline began and (to a lesser extent) how rapidly it is proceeding.

This theory rests on a single assumption: people stop being religious more quickly than they start being



**Figure 3** The trajectory of fuzzy Christianity: model and observations

Note: The observed values are those shown in Figure 2, where each country occupies a 60-year interval providing the best overall fit with the model.

wholly secular. Change, moreover, is typically very slow, because it is largely a generational phenomenon. There is therefore a long transitional period during which fuzzy fidelity characterizes an important part of the population. The crucial claim (which has in the past been difficult to substantiate but can be clearly supported with this evidence) is that this middle category is transient, not something that will persist indefinitely in a less regimented but still religious world.

Many different formulae are available as mathematical models of social change: trends might be linear, exponential, cyclical, or something else. A standard model for epidemics, population growth under resource constraints, and the diffusion of innovations, is the logistic (or S-shaped) curve. To make matters more concrete, assume that religious people account for 95 per cent of the population at the onset of secularization, with a highly secular minority of just 1 per cent; the remainder are fuzzy Christians. Change occurs gradually, but the religious group declines slightly faster than the secular proportion grows.

The pattern that results, projected over 200 years, is shown in Figure 3.

This very simple model of religious decline, slightly slower secular growth, and a middle category making up the difference between the two might appear to be merely a theoretical abstraction covering a period far too long to allow any proper test. The graph is remarkably successful, however, in representing the data from the 21 countries considered here. The onset of secularization varied from one country to another, and hence the national graphs in Figure 2 match progressively later segments of the model in Figure 3.

Each of the national graphs shows 60 years of religious change (assuming that the differences by year of birth do indeed represent cohort rather than age effects). If secularization happened at the same pace everywhere, then none of these graphs should need to be shrunk or stretched to fit the model in Figure 3. In fact, of course, there are some variations in the speed as well as the onset of secularization. Some countries such as Ireland and Spain have outstripped the rate of

change suggested here; others such as Austria and Italy are following the projection more slowly.

In a few cases, the model does not fit particularly well, even if one alters the time values on the horizontal axis. In France, for example, the size of the religious subpopulation has fallen relatively little in recent decades, and secular growth has been at the expense of fuzzy Christianity. In Denmark, the wholly secular subpopulation is not as large as one might expect, and fuzzy Christians are more prevalent than elsewhere. Overall, though, Figure 3 provides a very good representation of the full range of national experiences of secularization found across the continent. The individual points marked on Figure 3 show how well countries chosen to represent this range (from Greece at one extreme to the Czech Republic at the other) fit the model.

A number of scholars argue that the falls in churchgoing and other expressions of institutional Christianity are signs of religious change, not decline. They see the large constituency of fuzzy Christians as evidence that people continue, and will continue, to value the services provided by the churches they no longer attend. In their view, the relatively small size of the overtly secular population suggests that most people still want some kind of religious or spiritual involvement. If they are right, then we would expect to see continued growth, or at least stability at a high level, in the neither-religious-nor-secular population.

The theoretical model offered here, in contrast, predicts that not long after wholly secular people outnumber the religious, the proportion of fuzzy Christians will reach a plateau and then start to fall. Ultimately they will be overtaken by the completely secular subpopulation, which will continue to grow steadily.

This pattern is in fact the one we observe in the countries that have travelled furthest along a secularizing trajectory: France, Norway, Sweden, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Others—including the United Kingdom—will soon reach the point of fuzzy Christian decline unless there is a sudden change in the direction of secular and religious trends. Fuzzy fidelity is not a new kind of religion, or a proxy for as yet unfocused spiritual seeking; it is a staging post on the road from religious to secular hegemony.

## Concluding Comments

While there are indeed many interesting variations in European religion—countries may be high or low in affiliation, attendance, and belief—there is also a

single, inescapable theme. Religion is in decline. Each generation in every country surveyed is less religious than the last, measured by the best available index of religiosity. Although there are some minor differences in the speed of the decline (the most religious countries are changing more quickly than the least religious), the magnitude of the fall in religiosity from the early to the late 20th century has been remarkably constant across the continent.

There is a tension between the search for common patterns and describing the complexity of a situation. Despite the undoubted diversity that exists in Europe it is possible to identify common themes, with the rise and fall of fuzzy fidelity being one of the most important. The starting points are different across the continent, but the forces at work may be much the same. The consequences include the spread of indifference, which is ultimately as damaging for religion as scepticism.

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