

Religiously Unaffiliated Youth in Europe: Shifting Remnants of Belief and Practice in Contexts of Diffused Religion and Cohort Decline

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This study investigates the remnants and dynamics of religious beliefs and practices among religiously unaffiliated youth in Europe, comparing them with the older unaffiliated as well as with the religiously affiliated. Using EVS 2017–2021 data to test contrasting hypotheses of diffused religion and cohort replacement, the study draws three main conclusions. First, youth believe more on average and older age groups believe less when it comes to eschatological beliefs among both the unaffiliated and the affiliated. Second, youth practice less and older age groups practice more on average among both the unaffiliated and the affiliated. Third, the gaps in levels of religious beliefs and practices remain between the religiously unaffiliated and the religiously affiliated among younger populations, but this gap is now narrower for religious practices. Results confirm both hypotheses (diffused religion and cohort replacement) depending on the dimensions of religiosity at study.

Keywords: *unaffiliated, youth, Europe, affiliated, age groups, diffused religion, cohort replacement.*

Secularization in Europe is one of the most consensual findings in the sociology of religion today. Almost all agree that organized religion has been declining now for many decades across most parts of Europe (Molteni and Biolcati 2018, 2023; Voas and Doebler 2011). As Stolz (2020:300) shows in his recent synthesis of the secularization paradigm, it “is not that different from the neoclassical version of secularization theory—but its mechanisms are better spelt out and many of its elements have been tested empirically”. In other words, the secularization paradigm is here to stay. In the next years, at least for most of Europe, trends of religious decline do not show any inclination for change, although it is always difficult to predict exactly what will happen due notably to the growth of existential insecurity among some parts of the population (Norris and Inglehart 2004).

One of the key dynamics of the secularization process in Europe at the microlevel is growing nonreligious populations among younger birth cohorts. Nonreligion has long been a phenomenon found among some in Europe, but never to the extent that we now find it. Current social environments in Europe are less conducive to religious transmission from parent to child, and larger segments of younger populations are scoring lower on most religiosity indicators than ever before (such as on religious affiliation, frequency of religious service attendance, of prayer, and belief in God). Cohort replacement theory argues that less religious younger cohorts are replacing more

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religious older ones, which means that over the long-term people are increasingly less religious across Europe (Molteni and Biolcati 2018; Stolz, Biolcati, and Molteni 2021; Voas and Crockett 2005; Voas and Doebler 2011). Younger birth cohorts are more individualized and support key values of personal experience, autonomy, authenticity, and individual authority over and against institutional, formal, dogmatic, and externally authoritarian forms of religious life (Beck 2010; Bréchon 2004; Collins-Mayo and Dandelion 2010; Lambert et al. 1997; Taylor 2007).

Yet, there are some real-life complexities about the European religious landscapes that the secularization paradigm does not always account for, within an overarching trend of religious decline. Despite key trends of growing religiously unaffiliated populations among younger demographics, remnants of religiosity may still persist for some among these populations. The theory of diffused religion (Cipriani 1984, 2001, 2017) points to this idea, to the persistence of some remnants of religion even among atheists in countries with a religious tradition shared by the majority of individuals. Diffused religion goes beyond secularization and resists modernity, joining together believers and nonbelievers in a common ground mainly based on shared values such as a secular or civil religion (Cipriani 2017:247–48). Beliefs and practices tied to Christianity especially have long been prevalent in European societies, cultures, social institutions, and families, and some may persist in dispersed forms even among those in younger populations for the most part removed from regular interaction with religious groups. As Cipriani (2017:247–48) explains, socialization promotes the persistence of religious parameters beyond religious boundaries, like an invisible religion. Despite this persistence, diffused religion is not a traditional religion, meaning that only a few religiosity variables would be shared by both the religiously affiliated and unaffiliated.

Our study examines what the young religiously unaffiliated and affiliated share in terms of religious beliefs and practices, and the exact differences between them in terms of traditional religiosity. We also examine how the religiously unaffiliated have changed in terms of their rates of religious beliefs and practices across generations with the expansion of religious nonaffiliation among the young. Are the religiously unaffiliated becoming even less believing and less practicing among younger birth cohorts, as cohort replacement theory would argue? Or, as nonaffiliation has become a more widespread phenomenon among youth, does it encompass more diffused religious beliefs and behaviors than in prior generations? And are we seeing similar shifts across cohorts among the religiously affiliated? The overall goal of our study is to investigate the remnants and dynamics of religious beliefs and practices among religiously unaffiliated youth populations across Europe, comparing them with older unaffiliated demographics as well as with trends among the religiously affiliated.

CONTEXT

To be able to examine religiosity in younger age groups, we first have to delimit the concept of youth. Studies have defined youth as age ranges anywhere between 14 and 18 years at the lower limit to between 24 and 34 years at the upper limit. Probably the most common young adult age range used is that between 18 and 29 years. However, 34 years is also a useful upper limit, since the youth and young adult period of life is expanding among recent generations (the life period before family formation and career stability), mainly due to growing precarious work and recurrent economic crises as well as the expansion of higher education. These factors often result in delays in marriage, childbearing, and settling in a home, and have extended the period of life known as young or emerging adulthood (Arnett 2015).

When it comes to measuring religiosity, since the pioneer studies in France of Gabriel Le Bras in the 1930s focused on only one of its dimensions (church attendance; Le Bras 1931, 1937), the analysis of individual-level religiosity has come a long way. In the 1950s in the United States, Joseph Fichter introduced a multidimensional approach of analysis with four dimensions

(Fichter 1951), further developed mainly by Charles Glock and Rodney Stark (Glock 1959; Glock e Stark 1965; Stark e Glock 1968). These studies continue to impact research on religiosity to this day. While Fichter (1951) proposed a model with the dimensions of “creed,” “code,” “cult,” and “communion,” Glock in turn proposed five dimensions: experiential, ideological, ritualistic, intellectual, and consequential. Both these conceptual models of religiosity share three key dimensions: ideological (creed), ritualistic (cult), and consequential (code). Still, researchers including Stark and Glock (1968:16) long debated whether the consequential dimension is part of religiosity or instead derives from it. Thus, creed (belief) and cult (practice/behavior) have become the two key dimensions to measuring individual religiosity since the 1960s in the social sciences, and are indicators that may be found at varying levels among the religiously affiliated and unaffiliated.

Youth’s relationship with religion has changed over time. The growth of income and education, digitalization, and the influence of pop culture have been key dynamics among younger generations. Even among those following a religion, the way the young look at and understand God reflects this shift. In the concluding book of a longitudinal U.S. study, Denton and Flory (2020:7) consider that young people conceive of God not as a powerful being or force, but as a pocket God that they carry with them like a smartphone app—readily accessible, easy to control, and useful, but only for specific purposes. This desacralization or commodification of God goes hand in hand with three central values held dear by youth today: autonomy, consumerism, and experience (Gauthier and Perreault 2008, 2013; González-Anleo 2017; Wuthnow 2007). Autonomy, in that the individual is considered the central authority in his/her life, so he/she gradually detaches from traditional centers of external authority such as churches and religious leaders. Consumerism, an unavoidable aspect of the current market economy, permeates religiosity in two main ways: first, by looking at the sacred as an object, not as a person; and second, by picking and choosing beliefs, practices, and values like in a restaurant buffet (so-called bricolaging, patchworking, or tinkering). Experience, in that people first and foremost seek out lived “authentic” experiences that give them personal meaning, pleasure, and happiness and which are enabled by the market economy.

Despite these changes in the ways youth today do religion among those who are part of religious groups, the more visible trend in Europe has nevertheless been growing nonreligion among large segments of younger birth cohorts (Molteni and Biolcati 2018; Pew Research Center 2018; Stolz 2020; Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016). Saying one has no religion is not a new phenomenon in many European nations. Nonreligious identities such as freethinkers, secular humanists, and atheists have a long history on the continent dating some would say all the way back to the Reformation, but especially back to the 19th century (Berman 2013; Bubík, Rimmel, and Václavík 2020; Hyman 2010). More recently, 26 percent of all respondents 65 years or older in the fifth wave of the European Values Survey (EVS 2022) indicate they have no religion when asked about belonging to a religious denomination. What is new among recent cohorts is instead the size of religiously unaffiliated populations. In Czechia, for example, 83 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds say they do not belong to a religious denomination in the most recent fifth wave of the EVS; in France, 65 percent; in the Netherlands, 72 percent; in Spain, 51 percent; in Great Britain, 69 percent.

Religious affiliation is not the only religiosity indicator on the decline among youth. In Catholic Europe, for example, long seen as a bastion of religiosity compared with the more Protestant North and West, frequency of attendance at religious services among youth has declined in Slovenia (Flere et al. 2014:204; Dezelan and Lavric 2021:70), Spain (González-Anleo 2017:255), Hungary (Rosta 2013:320), Poland (Boguszewski 2012:6; Glowacki 2017:146), and has only remained stable in Croatia (Lavric, Tomanovic, and Jusic 2019:40). Belief in God and/or its importance among youth has declined in Austria (Heinzlmaier and Ikrath 2012:41), Croatia (Lavric, Tomanovic, and Jusic 2019:41), Slovenia (Flere et al. 2014:203; Dezelan and Lavric 2021; Lavric, Tomanovic, and Jusic 2019:41:71), and Spain (González-Anleo 2017:261;

González-Anleo Sánchez et al. 2020:68); while belief in life after death has changed little in Spain (González-Anleo 2017:261; González-Anleo Sánchez et al. 2020:68).

Younger birth cohorts are being born, raised, and socialized in environments where religion is much less prevalent now than in the past in most Northern, Western, and Southern European countries. Even in former Soviet countries in Eastern Europe, which existed under State-imposed secularism for many decades, younger populations living in the post-Soviet era show few signs of a large-scale return to religion (Borowik 2007; Müller 2008). Religious socialization is less common now, and so are the adult religious identities, beliefs, and practices that often stem from it (Bruce 2017; Crockett and Voas 2006). An exception to this trend in Europe can be found in nations from the former Yugoslavia (Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia), where religion continues to play a role in nationalistic turmoil (Voas and Doebler 2011).

There is a large body of literature showing that religiously unaffiliated populations score lower than more actively religious individuals on a whole variety of religiosity indicators, such as belief in God as well as frequency of prayer and religious service attendance (Pew Research Center 2018; Voas 2008; Voas and Crockett 2005). Yet we still know little about shifts across age groups within nonreligious populations themselves as nonreligion has become more socially acceptable and has shown wider appeal among the young. Although some assume that, once an individual states they have no religion in surveys, they are devoid of all forms of religion and spirituality in their lives, in reality there can be vestiges of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices that remain among some of the unaffiliated. Roberto Cipriani coined the term “diffused religion” in the 1980s, Grace Davie the term “believing without belonging” in the 1990s, and Robert Fuller the term “spiritual but not religious” or SBNR in the early 2000s as conceptualizations of this phenomenon (Cipriani 1984; Davie 1994; Fuller 2001).

The casual loyalty to religious tradition is well expressed by the term “fuzzy fidelity,” named by Voas (2009). Fuzzy forms of fidelity, such as infrequent religious practices and cherry-picking beliefs are often found among populations who remain affiliated to a religious tradition, especially Christian traditions in the context of Europe. Few among older living adults would want to completely break off their family and cultural ties with their religious affiliation, and potentially have to endure the social penalties and stigma in their surrounding environments that would go along with saying they had no religion. Those who took the extra step of religious nonaffiliation among older cohorts may thus be those in society who are the most devoid of all forms of religion and spirituality in their lives and who feel strongly about their nonreligious identities. Yet, as religious nonaffiliation has expanded in popularity among youth in Europe, perhaps now these more wide-ranging unaffiliated populations group together more of those youth with some diffused religious beliefs and practices, as well as hardened atheists and secular humanists. Here we are using Cipriani’s concept of diffused religion in a broad sense to encompass not just some shared values in society, but also some remaining diffused Christian beliefs and occasional practices that remain present in pop culture, art, music, and other areas of European societies (such as references to life after death, occasional forms of prayer, etc.) and that both religiously affiliated and unaffiliated youth may share to some degree.

According to this diffused religion framework, religiously unaffiliated youth would thus encompass a wider demographic and include more of those who still have certain vestiges of Christian beliefs and behaviors, compared with older religiously unaffiliated populations who, albeit smaller in proportional size among their cohorts, would score lower on all religious believing and behavior indicators. In other words, we might expect a compositional change among the religiously unaffiliated across birth cohorts: the few older unaffiliated composed more of the self-consciously secular, whereas the younger unaffiliated containing some with diffused forms of religious beliefs and behaviors. In this framework, younger religiously unaffiliated individuals would still pick up some religious beliefs and practices from members of their family, their friends and surrounding culture and society.

As diffused religious beliefs and behaviors shift more toward the religiously unaffiliated among younger cohorts, those fewer youth who remain religiously affiliated would be those who remain more involved with their religion and so would score higher on religious belief and behavior indicators than among older religiously affiliated living cohorts in Europe who were more prone to fuzzy fidelity. If members of older birth cohorts tend to have a nominal religious identity by default, whereas only seriously religious younger individuals state an affiliation, then we might expect young affiliates to be more religious than older affiliates. To summarize, we can put forward *hypothesis 1 (diffused religion)*: although the religiously unaffiliated remain less religious than the religiously affiliated overall, younger unaffiliated age groups will score higher on religious belief and behavior indicators than older unaffiliated age groups, and younger affiliated age groups will also score higher on religious belief and behavior indicators than older affiliated age groups.

Alternatively, *hypothesis 2 (cohort replacement)* based on cohort replacement theory, as framed in the current existing literature, would by contrast state that the younger religiously unaffiliated would be even less believing and participate even less in religious activities than the older religiously unaffiliated, due to younger cohorts being raised and living their lives in ever more secular social environments devoid of most forms of conventional religion in day-to-day life. Although a gap in religious beliefs and behavior would remain between the young religiously unaffiliated and the young religiously affiliated, both groups would see declines in religious beliefs and behaviors across birth cohorts.

DATA

This study's main objective is to empirically test these two contrasting hypotheses across European nations to establish how religious beliefs and practices have shifted across age groups among both religiously unaffiliated and religiously affiliated populations, and to ultimately develop a more complex understanding of secularization processes. The European Values Study (EVS) is the ideal data set with which to fulfil this objective. The EVS is a cross-national and repeated cross-sectional survey research program on individual attitudes, values, and characteristics. The fifth wave of the EVS launched in 2017 and included 36 countries, with data collection in most countries taking place between 2018 and 2020. In total, just under 60,000 people were interviewed. Our study focuses on those nations whose histories were dominated by Christianity. For this reason, we exclude from our analyses three of the EVS countries that do not share such histories, including Albania, Azerbaijan, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina. In total then, our study contains data from 33 European countries.¹

The EVS contains random samples of the adult population for each of its member countries. Sample sizes range from a low of 1003 respondents from Montenegro to a high of 3362 respondents from Denmark in the fifth wave, with average sample size at 1802 respondents for the 33 countries. The main EVS mode of data collection has been face-to-face personal interviewing. In the latest fifth wave, a few countries also used a parallel mixed mode where respondents were assigned either to face-to-face or web self-completion.²

To create scales for the dimensions of religious believing and behavior in order to compare scores between age groups of the religiously unaffiliated and affiliated, six variables from the fifth wave of the EVS were combined into two scales using principal-factor analysis: belief in God, belief in life after death, belief in Hell, and belief in Heaven for the believing dimension; and

¹For a list of countries included in the analyses, their sample sizes and their rates of religious nonaffiliation, see Table A.1 in the Supporting Information.

²The final data release in May 2022 of the fifth wave of the EVS were used for this study. More information on how the EVS data are collected can be found at <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

Table 1: Principal-factor analysis results, believing scale, 2017 EVS

<i>Believing: Original ordinal variables</i>	<i>Factor loadings</i>	<i>Communalities</i>
Do you believe in God? (No; Do not know; Yes)	0.584	0.342
Do you believe in life after death? (No; Do not know; Yes)	0.670	0.449
Do you believe in Hell? (No; Do not know; Yes)	0.802	0.644
Do you believe in Heaven? (No; Do not know; Yes)	0.868	0.754
Valid N	53,081 (missing values rate of 2.6%)	
Eigenvalue	2.188	
Cronbach's alpha	.830	
Total explained variance of model	55%	
Range	-1.050 (least believing) to 1.280 (most believing)	

Table 2: Principal-factor analysis results, religious behavior scale, 2017 EVS

<i>Religious behavior: Original ordinal variables</i>	<i>Factor loadings</i>	<i>Communalities</i>
How often do you attend religious services? (Never, practically never to more than once a week; seven categories)	0.722	0.521
How often do you pray outside of religious services? (Never to every day; seven categories)	0.722	0.521
Valid N	52,762 (missing values rate of 3.2%)	
Eigenvalue	1.043	
Cronbach's alpha	.778	
Total explained variance of model	52%	
Range	-0.951 (least religious) to 1.550 (most religious)	

frequency of religious service attendance and frequency of prayer for the behavior dimension.³ These six variables were those religiosity indicators included in the fifth wave of the EVS, measured in each EVS country, and best capturing beliefs and practices tied to Christianity that were once widespread across Europe.

Tables 1 and 2 contain the results from these two factor analyses.⁴ For the believing scale, all of the four belief variables load onto a single factor, and higher values on the single-factor scale represent more believing respondents. Model fit statistics are very good for this single-factor solution, with an eigenvalue above 2, a Cronbach's alpha score of .83, and 55 percent of model variance explained by the one factor. For the behavior scale, both religious behavior variables load onto a single factor, and higher values on the single-factor scale represent more religiously active

³Tables A.2 and A.3 in the Supporting Information contain country rates for each of these six variables and the two factor scales among those who do not belong to a religious denomination (religiously unaffiliated) and those who do belong to a religious denomination (religiously affiliated).

⁴Similar one-factor solutions are reached for each European nation included in this study when these two principal-factor analyses are run separately for each country.

respondents. Model fit statistics are good for this single-factor solution, with an eigenvalue above 1, a Cronbach's alpha score of .78, and 52 percent of model variance explained by the one factor.

As much previous literature has already indicated and as illustrated by the results in Tables A.2 and A.3 in the Supporting Information, religiously affiliated respondents score higher on both believing and behavior scales compared with the religiously unaffiliated in every European country included in this study.

MODELS

To compare levels of believing and religious behavior across age groups and across European countries among both the religiously unaffiliated and affiliated, we generated a series of mixed-effects hierarchical linear models (HLMs). In these models, individual respondents are nested within 33 European countries, and the believing and behavior factor scales are the dependent variables. Three age groups are compared, each as a binary dummy variable, representing different life stages: young adults 18–34 years; middle-aged adults 35–64 years; and senior citizens 65 years and older. As well as capturing different life stages, these age group binary variables capture differences between living generations at the time of data collection in 2017–2020: Millennials (18–34), Gen X and younger Boomers (35–64), as well as older Boomers and members of the Silent Generation (65+). The age groups binary variables are included as fixed and random effects in the HLMs.

To better isolate differences in levels of believing and religious behavior tied to age group specifically, we also included the following individual-level controls in the HLMs: gender, level of education, household income (binary variables for quartiles of monthly income levels as well as a binary variable for respondents with missing income data), place of birth, frequency of religious service attendance when the respondent was aged 12 (level of religious socialization) and religious tradition (for religiously affiliated respondents and models only). We also included in the HLMs the country-level covariates of GDP per capita, country rate of foreign birth, country rate of religious nonaffiliation, and country religious composition (strong majority Catholic countries where 60 percent or more of religiously affiliated respondents are Catholic; strong majority Orthodox Christian countries where 60 percent or more of religiously affiliated respondents are Orthodox Christian; strong majority Protestant countries where 60 percent or more of religiously affiliated respondents are Protestant; and mixed religious countries where no single religious tradition groups 60 percent or more of religiously affiliated respondents). These country-level covariates have been shown in past research to impact levels of believing and religious behavior in European populations (Stolz 2020).⁵ As an example, Model 3 for believing among the religiously unaffiliated can be written as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
 BELIEVING_{ij} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 AGE35 - 64_{ij} + \beta_2 AGE65 - 82_{ij} + \beta_3 FEMALE_{ij} + \beta_4 LEVELOFEDUCATION_{ij} \\
 & + \beta_5 FOREIGNBORN_{ij} + \beta_6 MONTHLYHHINCOMEMISSING_{ij} \\
 & + \beta_7 MONTHLYHHINCOMEQUARTILE1_{ij} + \beta_8 MONTHLYHHINCOMEQUARTILE2_{ij} \\
 & + \beta_9 MONTHLYHHINCOMEQUARTILE3_{ij} + \beta_{10} RELIGIOUSSOCIALIZATION_{ij} \\
 & + \beta_{11} GDP_j + \beta_{12} RATEFOREIGNBIRTH_j + \beta_{13} RATENORELIGION_j \\
 & + \beta_{14} ORTHODOXMAJORITY_j + \beta_{15} MIXEDRELIGIOUSCOMPOSITION_j \\
 & + \beta_{16} PROTESTANTMAJORITY_j + u_{1j} AGE35 - 64_{ij} + u_{2j} AGE65 - 82_{ij} + u_j + e_{ij},
 \end{aligned}$$

where i = religiously unaffiliated individuals within country j , and j = countries.

⁵Table A.4 in the Supporting Information contains descriptive statistics for each of these covariates.

RESULTS

Believing

Table 3 contains the results from the first series of HLMs measuring rates of belief among the religiously unaffiliated. Overall, religiously unaffiliated youth are more believing on average than the older religiously unaffiliated 65–82 age group. When combining samples from all European countries, respondents who do not belong to a religious denomination and who are 65 years or older score on average .165 points lower on the believing scale than religiously unaffiliated respondents aged between 18 and 34 (see Model 3 in Table 3), once sociodemographics, religious socialization, and country characteristics are controlled for. There is no statistically significant difference in average believing scores between the religiously unaffiliated 18–34 and 35–64 age groups.

The gap between youths and seniors when it comes to beliefs among the religiously unaffiliated also varies significantly between European nations, as indicated by the random effects included in Models 1–3. Figure A.1 in the Supporting Information contains the estimated coefficients by country for 18- to 34-year-olds, as compared with 65- to 82-year-olds, among the religiously unaffiliated. The results show that all European nations included in the 2017 EVS are characterized by higher rates of belief among younger religiously unaffiliated respondents as compared with older religiously unaffiliated respondents. This positive coefficient is statistically significant in all countries except for Finland and North Macedonia. The effect is strongest (coefficient above .25) in Croatia, Czechia, France, Montenegro, and Ukraine.

Higher rates of belief among the religiously unaffiliated can also be found among women, the lower educated, those who are foreign born, most of the lower (and missing values) income groups, those who were religiously socialized as children, and those living in majority Orthodox Christian countries (where individuals affiliated with Orthodox Christianity represent 60 percent or more of the religiously affiliated population).

In separate analyses, we analyzed each type of belief independently with generalized linear models (GLMs) and found that it is especially higher rates of belief in life after death and in Heaven and Hell that are driving the higher believing scores overall among religiously unaffiliated youth as compared with religiously unaffiliated seniors (see Table A.5 in the Supporting Information for these results). For example, in France 38 percent of religiously unaffiliated respondents 18–34 years old believe in life after death, compared with 16 percent among unaffiliated respondents 65 years or older.

Among the religiously affiliated (see Table 4), youth are also more believing on average than older religiously affiliated age groups. This includes both 35- to 64-year-olds (score on average .06 lower on the believing scale than 18- to 34-year-olds in Model 3) and 65- to 82-year-olds (score on average .1 lower on the believing scale than 18- to 34-year-olds in Model 3). Once the covariate for religious socialization is added in Model 2, this addition increases the 65–82 age group coefficient (larger differences with 18–34 age group) and decreases the 35–64 age group coefficient (smaller differences with 18–34 age group).

Like with the religiously unaffiliated, it is especially higher rates of belief in life after death and in Heaven and Hell that are driving the higher believing scores overall among religiously affiliated youth as compared with religiously affiliated seniors (see Table A.6 in the Supporting Information for these results). In the Netherlands, for example, 75 percent of religiously affiliated 18- to 34-year-old respondents believe in life after death, compared with 54 percent among religiously affiliated respondents 65 years or older. By contrast, affiliated seniors score significantly higher on average across all European nations when it comes to belief in God than affiliated 18- to 34-year-olds.

Table 3: Fixed and random effects on believing, among the religiously unaffiliated, HLMs

	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Age group 35–64 years; <i>ref. age group 18–34</i>	-.038	.020	-.038	.020	-.038	.020	-.035	.020
Age group 64–82 years; <i>ref. age group 18–34</i>	-.167 ^{****}	.033	-.167 ^{****}	.033	-.167 ^{****}	.033	-.165 ^{****}	.033
Female	.165 ^{****}	.015	.165 ^{****}	.015	.165 ^{****}	.015	.165 ^{****}	.015
Level of education (nine categories)	-.039 ^{****}	.004	-.039 ^{****}	.004	-.039 ^{****}	.004	-.039 ^{****}	.004
Foreign born	.197 ^{****}	.049	.197 ^{****}	.049	.197 ^{****}	.049	.198 ^{****}	.049
Monthly income—missing; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>	.137 ^{****}	.016	.137 ^{****}	.016	.151 ^{****}	.015	.150 ^{****}	.015
Monthly income—1st quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>	.118	.070	.118	.070	.134 [*]	.062	.129 [*]	.062
Monthly income—2nd quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>	.112 ^{**}	.042	.112 ^{**}	.042	.123 ^{****}	.037	.121 ^{****}	.038
Monthly income—3rd quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>	.093 ^{****}	.027	.093 ^{****}	.027	.101 ^{****}	.025	.100 ^{****}	.025
Frequency of religious service attendance at 12 years old (seven categories)					.062 ^{****}	.018	.062 ^{****}	.019
GDP per capita, PPP							-.000	.000
Country rate of foreign birth							.021	.512
Country rate of no religion							.103	.142
Majority Orthodox country; <i>ref. cat. maj. Catholic</i>							.293 ^{****}	.084

(Continued)

Table 3: (Continued)

	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Mixed religion country; <i>ref. cat. maj.</i> <i>Catholic</i>							.067	.069
Majority Protestant country; <i>ref. cat. maj.</i> <i>Catholic</i>							.088	.049
Constant	-.508***	.039	-.511***	.041	-.662***	.047	-.701***	.077
Between-country variance	Var.	SE	Var.	SE	Var.	SE	Var.	SE
Age group 35–64 years; <i>ref. cat. age</i> <i>group 18–34</i>	.002*	.002	.002***	.002	.002***	.001	.002***	.002
Age group 64–82 years; <i>ref. cat. age</i> <i>group 18–34</i>	.007***	.002	.009***	.002	.009***	.004	.008***	.004
Country intercept variance	.041***	.021	.034***	.012	.037***	.015	.011***	.005
Country intraclass correlation	7.3%		6.4%		7.0%		2.3%	
Residual variance	.520***	.031	.500***	.032	.486***	.028	.486***	.028
AIC	45,307.65		44,512.23		43,934.83		43,920.55	
BIC	45,330.78		44,620.2		44,050.51		44,082.52	

Note: $N = 16,522$. N countries = 33. Maximum likelihood estimation. Weighted for population size (pweight). Missing values rate of 5.8% from full religiously unaffiliated sample.
* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

Table 4: Fixed and random effects on believing, among the religiously affiliated, HLMs

	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Age group 35–64 years; <i>ref. age group 18–34</i>	-.068 ^{****}	.019	-.063 ^{****}	.019	-.064 ^{****}	.019	-.064 ^{****}	.019
Age group 64–82 years; <i>ref. age group 18–34</i>	-.078 [*]	.035	-.101 ^{**}	.033	-.102 ^{**}	.034	-.102 ^{**}	.034
Female	.171 ^{****}	.018	.159 ^{****}	.019	.159 ^{****}	.019	.159 ^{****}	.019
Level of education (nine categories)	-.012 [*]	.005	-.012 [*]	.005	-.012 [*]	.005	-.012 [*]	.005
Foreign born	.189 ^{****}	.066	.165 ^{****}	.062	.167 ^{****}	.062	.167 ^{****}	.062
Monthly income—missing; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>	.067	.038	.072 [*]	.035	.067	.035	.067	.035
Monthly income—1st quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>	.103 ^{**}	.039	.110 ^{**}	.038	.105 ^{**}	.039	.105 ^{**}	.039
Monthly income—2nd quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>	.061	.036	.068 [*]	.034	.064	.034	.064	.034
Monthly income—3rd quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>	.093 [*]	.042	.098 [*]	.042	.095 [*]	.042	.095 [*]	.042
Protestant; <i>reference category Catholic</i>	-.014	.055	.040	.049	.047	.050	.047	.050
Jewish; <i>reference category Catholic</i>	-.542 ^{****}	.093	-.491 ^{****}	.106	-.488 ^{****}	.105	-.488 ^{****}	.105
Muslim; <i>reference category Catholic</i>	.508 ^{****}	.082	.593 ^{****}	.086	.589 ^{****}	.089	.589 ^{****}	.089
Hindu; <i>reference category Catholic</i>	-.190	.141	-.097	.168	-.095	.168	-.095	.168
Buddhist; <i>reference category Catholic</i>	-.637 [*]	.249	-.521 [*]	.242	-.522 [*]	.242	-.522 [*]	.242
Orthodox Christian; <i>reference category Catholic</i>	.017	.104	.118	.104	.111	.108	.111	.108
Other religion; <i>reference category Catholic</i>	-.042	.078	.023	.084	.022	.084	.022	.084
Frequency of religious service attendance at 12 years old (seven categories)			.090 ^{****}	.008	.090 ^{****}	.008	.090 ^{****}	.008

(Continued)

Table 4: (Continued)

	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
GDP per capita, PPP							.000	.000
Country rate of foreign birth							-1.493*	.588
Country rate of no religion							.147	.147
Majority Orthodox country; <i>ref. cat. maj.</i>							-.030	.125
<i>Catholic</i>								
Mixed religion country; <i>ref. cat. maj.</i>							-.035	.070
<i>Catholic</i>								
Majority Protestant country; <i>ref. cat. maj.</i>							-.352***	.096
<i>Catholic</i>								
Constant	.281***	.048	.179*	.082	-.239***	.071	-.017	.144
Between-country variance								
Age group 35–64 years; <i>ref. cat. age group 18–34</i>			.002*	.002	.003*	.002	.003*	.002
Age group 64–82 years; <i>ref. cat. age group 18–34</i>			.018***	.006	.019***	.006	.019***	.006
Country intercept variance	.070***	.020	.063***	.018	.050***	.013	.021***	.005
Country intraclass correlation	9.4%		8.9%		7.4%		3.2%	
Residual variance	.681***	.017	.648***	.014	.626***	.013	.626***	.013
AIC	80,476.49		78,923.44		77,830.23		77,816.22	
BIC	80,501.80		79,100.61		78,015.84		78,052.45	

Note: N = 34,088. N countries = 33. Maximum likelihood estimation. Weighted for population size (pweight). Missing values rate of 6.6% from full religiously affiliated sample. *p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001.

The 18–34 age group coefficient on the overall believing scale, with the 65–82 age group as the reference category, also varies significantly between countries among the religiously affiliated (see Figure A.2 in the Supporting Information). Only in 14 of the 33 countries are religiously affiliated youths more believing than religiously affiliated seniors, with the strongest statistically significant positive coefficients found in Croatia, Czechia, France, and the Netherlands (coefficients above .3). In Denmark, Iceland, Lithuania, Portugal, and Slovakia, the opposite effect is present and statistically significant: religiously affiliated youth are less believing on average than older religiously affiliated respondents in these countries.

Overall, the believing gap between the religiously unaffiliated and affiliated does not change much between age groups (see results in Table A.7 in the Supporting Information). The rate of lower beliefs among the unaffiliated as compared with the affiliated is not statistically different between the 18–34 and 65–82 age groups (as indicated by the interaction terms between religious (non)affiliation and age group in Model 2 in Table A.7 in the Supporting Information). The believing gap between unaffiliated and affiliated is only slightly narrower among the 35–64 age group compared with the 18–34 age group.

To summarize so far, there seems to be a wider trend of increased believing among youths, driven especially by a small resurgence in the beliefs in life after death and in Heaven and Hell especially. Although the religiously unaffiliated remain less believing overall than the religiously affiliated, age differences in rates of belief are present among both affiliated and unaffiliated populations alike. This said, the age gap is more prevalent across European countries among the religiously unaffiliated. Although larger secularization processes are at play in Europe, with many religiosity indicators declining across age groups, these specific belief indicators seem to be somewhat resistant to this decline among current younger age groups and are part of a certain kind of diffused religion among European youth today.

Religious Behavior

Turning to the HLMs for religious behavior among the religiously unaffiliated (see Table 5), older age groups score slightly higher on the behavior scale than the 18–34 age group (.07 point higher for the 35- to 64-year-olds and .05 point higher for the 65- to 82-year-olds in Model 3). We find this age difference especially for frequency of prayer when separate HLMs are run for each of the two religious practice indicators (see Table A.8 in the Supporting Information for these results). For example, 8 percent of religiously unaffiliated respondents 18–34 in Finland pray at least several times a year, compared with 36 percent among religiously unaffiliated respondents 65 years or older. Age differences for the overall religious behavior scale are reduced when the religious socialization covariate is added in Model 2, but grow slightly again once country characteristics are added in Model 3 (notably country's religious composition).

Higher rates of religious behavior among the religiously unaffiliated can also be found among women, the lower educated, those who are foreign born, most of the lower (and missing values) income groups, those who were religiously socialized as children, and those living in majority Orthodox Christian countries, majority Protestant countries and mixed religious countries (compared with majority Catholic countries).

Age differences among the religiously unaffiliated when it comes to religious behavior also vary significantly between countries (see Figure A.3 in the Supporting Information). In 17 of the 33 countries, religiously unaffiliated youth score significantly lower on the behavior scale than religiously unaffiliated seniors. This negative coefficient for the 18–34 age group is strongest in North Macedonia and Finland. However, in Armenia, France, Georgia, and the Netherlands, 18- to 34-year-olds who are religiously unaffiliated score significantly higher on the behavior scale than their senior-citizen counterparts, going against the overall observed trend.

Among the religiously affiliated, youth also score lower on the religious behavior scale on average compared with older religiously affiliated age groups (35- to 64-year-olds score .13 higher

Table 5: Fixed and random effects on religious behavior, among the religiously unaffiliated, HLMs

	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Age group 35–64 years; <i>ref. age group 18–34</i>			.068***	.016	.060***	.018	.067***	.019
Age group 64–82 years; <i>ref. age group 18–34</i>			.100***	.021	.047*	.023	.052*	.023
Female			.137***	.024	.125***	.019	.125***	.019
Level of education (nine categories)			-.006	.004	-.008*	.003	-.008*	.003
Foreign born			.132***	.041	.105***	.039	.106***	.039
Monthly income—missing; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>			.033**	.012	.052***	.010	.052***	.010
Monthly income—1st quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>			.024	.037	.042	.028	.041	.028
Monthly income—2nd quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>			.024	.020	.037**	.014	.037**	.014
Monthly income—3rd quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>			.014	.015	.025*	.011	.025*	.011
Frequency of religious service attendance at 12 years old (seven categories)					.079***	.025	.079***	.025
GDP per capita, PPP							.000	.000
Country rate of foreign birth							-.476	.424
Country rate of no religion							-.099	.123
Majority Orthodox country; <i>ref. cat. maj. Catholic</i>							.431***	.087

(Continued)

Table 5: (Continued)

	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Mixed religion country; <i>ref. cat. maj.</i> <i>Catholic</i>							.115*	.051
Majority Protestant country; <i>ref. cat. maj.</i> <i>Catholic</i>							.137*	.056
Constant	-.556***	.046	-.680***	.049	-.878***	.058	-.961***	.100
Between-country variance	Var.	SE	Var.	SE	Var.	SE	Var.	SE
Age group 35–64 years; <i>ref. cat. age group</i> <i>18–34</i>	.003**	.002	.005***	.003	.005***	.003	.006**	.004
Age group 64–82 years; <i>ref. cat. age group</i> <i>18–34</i>	.005**	.004	.005**	.004	.008***	.004	.008***	.004
Country intercept variance	.063***	.030	.058***	.027	.055***	.020	.009***	.004
Country intraclass correlation	22.7%		22.0%		23.1%		4.8%	
Residual variance	.213***	.029	.205***	.028	.183***	.018	.183***	.018
AIC	26,491.10		25,772.83		23,416.97		23,381.99	
BIC	26,514.23		25,880.77		23,532.62		23,543.90	

Note: $N = 16,487$. N countries = 33. Maximum likelihood estimation. Weighted for population size (pweight). Missing values rate of 6.0% from full religiously unaffiliated sample.
* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

on the behavior scale; and 65- to 82-year-olds score .24 higher in Model 3 of Table 6). So, we find the same trend overall among the religiously affiliated as among the religiously unaffiliated: older age groups take part in religious behaviors more frequently on average. Yet, these age differences are larger among the religiously affiliated population than among the religiously unaffiliated, and they affect both frequency of religious service attendance and frequency of prayer among the religiously affiliated (see Table A.9 in the Supporting Information). The statistically significant negative youth effect on religious behavior among the religiously affiliated can be found in most countries (see Figure A.4 in the Supporting Information), except in Armenia, Croatia, France, Great Britain, Montenegro, and the Netherlands. In Armenia, France, and Great Britain, there is even a statistically significant positive youth effect among the religiously affiliated when it comes to religious behavior, 18- to 34 year-olds scoring higher on the behavior scale than 65- to 82-year-olds. By contrast, the negative youth effect is strongest in Portugal and Lithuania.

Although both the religiously unaffiliated and affiliated have seen declines in religious behavior among their youth, these declines have for the most part been steeper for the religiously affiliated. This has led to a significantly narrower gap in religious behavior overall between the unaffiliated and affiliated among younger respondents 18- to 34-year-olds than among the 35–64 and 65–82 age groups (see results in Table A.10 in the Supporting Information).

Although we observed higher rates of believing among religiously unaffiliated youth as compared with religiously unaffiliated seniors in the previous section of results, by contrast here we see lower rates of religious behavior among the younger unaffiliated as compared with the older unaffiliated. This negative youth effect on religious behavior also extends to the religiously affiliated, despite levels of religious behavior still remaining higher across age groups among the religiously affiliated than among the unaffiliated. Cohort replacement and religious decline across birth cohorts are well at play among both the affiliated and unaffiliated when it comes to religious behaviors.

DISCUSSION

These results support the diffused religion hypothesis (hypothesis 1) when it comes to some religious believing. Youth believe more especially in life after death, Hell, and Heaven than older age groups (65+) among both the unaffiliated and affiliated in many European countries. In other words, overall levels of belief in life after death, in Heaven, and in Hell are slightly higher among 18- to 34-year-olds in many European nations than among those 65 years and older. For example, 38 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds who were born and live in Denmark believe in life after death, compared with 29 percent among those 65 years or older. As another example, 34 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds who were born and live in France believe in Heaven, compared with 29 percent among French residents 65 years or older. Yet, when it comes to religious behavior, as well as to belief in God, more support is found for the contrasting cohort replacement hypothesis (hypothesis 2). Youth believe less in God, go less to religious services, and pray less than older age groups (35–64 and 65+) among the affiliated in most European countries. Unaffiliated youth in turn believe less in God on average than the unaffiliated 35–64 age group, and pray less in most European countries than older unaffiliated age groups. Consequently, we find support for both the diffused religion and cohort replacement frameworks in our study, depending on the dimensions of religious beliefs and practices analyzed. Diffused religion seems to be the better explanation among youth overall for eschatological beliefs, and cohort replacement the better explanation among youth overall for belief in God and religious behavior.

Looking at each belief and behavior indicator in more detail, belief in God is not solely a Christian belief. In fact, God can be regarded as a personal Christian God, or He/She/They can instead be understood as a supreme architect of the universe, a superior being or force, or even nature itself. As worded in the EVS, it is a very broad concept that does not only characterize

Table 6: Fixed and random effects on religious behavior, among the religiously affiliated, HLMs

	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Age group 35–64 years; <i>ref. age group 18–34</i>			.117***	.019	.129***	.021	.127***	.021
Age group 64–82 years; <i>ref. age group 18–34</i>			.272***	.041	.237***	.034	.237***	.034
Female			.214***	.017	.192***	.015	.192***	.015
Level of education (nine categories)			.011	.007	.010	.006	.009	.006
Foreign born			.296***	.063	.254***	.039	.257***	.039
Monthly income—missing; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>			.029	.036	.040	.028	.037	.028
Monthly income—1st quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>			.053	.031	.064*	.025	.060*	.025
Monthly income—2nd quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>			.020	.037	.033	.033	.031	.033
Monthly income—3rd quartile; <i>ref. cat. 4th quartile</i>			-.002	.026	.005	.021	.004	.021
Protestant; <i>reference category Catholic</i>			-.048	.080	.047	.070	.050	.071
Jewish; <i>reference category Catholic</i>			.086	.073	.222***	.059	.222***	.058
Muslim; <i>reference category Catholic</i>			.187*	.080	.331***	.076	.325***	.078
Hindu; <i>reference category Catholic</i>			.151*	.069	.309**	.105	.311**	.105
Buddhist; <i>reference category Catholic</i>			-.022	.170	.177	.200	.175	.200
Orthodox Christian; <i>reference category Catholic</i>			-.141	.074	.026	.072	.015	.073
Other religion; <i>reference category Catholic</i>			.111	.148	.220	.150	.218	.150
Frequency of religious service attendance at 12 years old (seven categories)					.156***	.008	.156***	.008

(Continued)

Table 6: (Continued)

	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
GDP per capita, PPP							.000**	.000
Country rate of foreign birth							-1.561**	.523
Country rate of no religion							-.090	.101
Majority Orthodox country; <i>ref. cat. maj.</i>							.138	.101
<i>Catholic</i>								
Mixed religion country; <i>ref. cat. maj.</i>							.165*	.067
<i>Catholic</i>								
Majority Protestant country; <i>ref. cat. maj.</i>							-.117	.084
<i>Catholic</i>								
Constant	.319***	.049	.009	.088	-.715***	.076	-.361**	.122
Between-country variance								
Age group 35–64 years; <i>ref. cat. age group 18–34</i>			.005***	.003	.008***	.004	.008***	.003
Age group 64–82 years; <i>ref. cat. age group 18–34</i>			.035***	.011	.028***	.009	.027***	.008
Country intercept variance	.074***	.018	.091***	.019	.060***	.012	.012***	.003
Country intraclass correlation	13.4%		17.2%		13.9%		3.1%	
<i>Residual variance</i>	.478***	.030	.439***	.026	.375***	.027	.375***	.027
AIC	68,160.59		65,502.94		60,409.31		60,372.80	
BIC	68,185.90		65,680.13		60,594.93		60,609.04	

Note: N = 34,107. N countries = 33. Maximum likelihood estimation. Weighted for population size (pweight). Missing values rate of 6.6% from full religiously affiliated sample. *p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001.

the degree of believing in a Christian God. Despite this broadness, religiously affiliated older age groups in traditionally Christian European countries believe more in God than religiously affiliated youth, supporting cohort replacement theory in that social environments now are less conducive to the transmission of this belief among younger cohorts even when they remain affiliated to a religion. Previous studies have shown mixed findings on this topic: either small differences between cohorts or slightly higher values among older cohorts when it comes to the belief in God (Boguszewski 2015:12; Duque 2014:119; IFOP 2021:13) or even higher values among youth (Senèze and Vaillant 2015). A contribution of our study is to disentangle these age trends between the religiously affiliated and unaffiliated, and between European nations.

The other three beliefs included in this study, in life after death, in Heaven, and in Hell, are a set of eschatological beliefs. Generally, European youth today have higher levels of eschatological beliefs than older age groups whether they are religiously affiliated or unaffiliated, although the exact vision of what life after death, Heaven, and Hell look like may have shifted across cohorts as well (if so, this would not be captured with this study's data). This seems to corroborate hypothesis 1 that young people are more influenced by diffused religion when it comes specifically to eschatological beliefs. Rates of eschatological beliefs still remain lower overall than rates of belief in God among youth in most European countries, but this gap is narrowing. A vehicle for this could be secondary socialization from various forms of pop culture, including series and movies (live action and animated), books, music, podcasts, games, and comics, where representations of various forms of the afterlife are common and which have become even more readily available since the 1990s due to the expansion of information communications technology (Campbell 2013). The fact that these beliefs and representations of the afterlife are somewhat elastic, interpreted by each according to his/her own views and needs, and potentially more removed from ties with Churches and organized religion (compared with the belief in God), may be factors driving their growing popularity among youth.

Frequency of service attendance is probably the oldest variable used in Europe to measure religiosity since Le Bras' seminal studies in the 1930s. It has long been used to measure the degree of Christian religiosity, as it is a more time-, effort- and resource-demanding practice carried out by those who are more involved with their church. The data in our study show that frequency of religious service attendance has declined among younger age groups, especially among the religiously affiliated, confirming cohort replacement theory and findings from previous studies (CIS 2022; Duque 2022:50; Molteni and Biolcati 2018:426; Senèze and Vaillant 2015; Stolz et al. 2021:355; Vezzoni and Biolcati-Rinaldi 2015:115). While eschatological beliefs are more elastic and do not imply much effort and sacrifice to be held, religious service attendance requires the existence of strong religious convictions, something that the religiously unaffiliated do not necessarily have, and investment of time in something that the religiously unaffiliated do not necessarily want to perform, regardless of age.

Finally, prayer is a different type of religious practice. Contrary to religious service attendance, prayer is a personal practice that can be performed quietly or loudly, alone or in a group, whenever, wherever and about whatever one wants. In terms of religious behaviors, prayer is the most flexible practice. Still, even this flexibility does not seem to be enough to attract more youth to the behavior, since we see lower frequency of prayer among both religiously unaffiliated and affiliated youth. This also supports cohort replacement theory. Prayer's flexibility seems to be less important than its Christian character of communication with God, angels, and the saints, a type of communication that has not been passed on intergenerationally to as many youths today. In the fifth wave of the EVS, the Spearman correlation coefficient between belief in God and frequency prayer is very strong at 0.655 overall, indicating there is a correspondence between level of prayer and belief in God among individuals, since prayer is most often directed to God or a higher power: less belief in God, less prayer.

Looking at differences between countries in terms of their religious composition, there are two types of countries that seem to stand out in this study's results: Orthodox-majority countries

and Protestant-majority countries. Religiously unaffiliated respondents living in majority Orthodox Christian countries score higher on both religious believing and behavior scales than those unaffiliated living elsewhere in Europe (in Catholic-majority, Protestant-majority, and mixed religion countries). Among the religiously affiliated, those in Protestant-majority countries have lower levels of religious beliefs than religiously affiliated respondents in all other types of countries (Orthodox-majority, Catholic-majority, and mixed). The higher importance of beliefs and practices in majority Orthodox Christian countries even among the religiously unaffiliated may be due to the links between Orthodox churches and national identities. In fact, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Orthodox churches became spiritual refuges and channels of identity, serving as key institutions that assured a safe haven in the midst of the social changes caused by the fall of communism (Bogomilova 2005:1–2). Another possible explanation is the generally lower degree of development of Orthodox-majority countries compared with Protestant-majority and Catholic-majority countries, confirming the theory of existential security (Norris and Inglehart 2004). Muller and Neundorf (2012:578) argue that “as democracies consolidate, the questions of national identity and the state–church relations will gradually be settled and the demand for religion gradually decline with further increases in living conditions”.

By contrast, the lower degree of believing in Protestant-majority (Scandinavian) countries among the religiously affiliated has been found in a number of previous studies where it is commonly referred to as “belonging without believing” or cultural religion (Astor and Mayrl 2020; Kasselstrand 2015; Lundmark and Mauritsen 2022). Many remain part of State Protestant Churches in these countries, even if removed from religion in most other ways. Religious affiliation is then the key aspect of diffused religion in these majority-Protestant countries, more so than religious beliefs. Contrary to Orthodox-majority countries, Protestant-majority countries are generally more developed with strong welfare states, which may also explain their lower levels of religiosity.

These findings allow us to add more nuance and complexity to Cipriani’s diffused religion theory. This theory is not only applicable to some religiosity indicators more than others among youth (believing in different forms of the afterlife especially), but the indicators showing signs of diffused religion may vary depending on which majority Christian tradition is present in a given context (religious beliefs and practices being more prevalent among the unaffiliated in Orthodox Christian countries; and affiliation with less belief being more prevalent in Protestant-majority countries).

CONCLUSION

The overall goal of our study was to analyze the remnants of religious beliefs and practices among religiously unaffiliated youth in Europe, comparing them with the older unaffiliated and with the affiliated while testing diffused religion and cohort replacement theories. This article shows three things. First, youth believe more on average and older age groups believe less when it comes to eschatological beliefs among both the unaffiliated and the affiliated. Second, youth practice less, and older age groups practice more on average among both the unaffiliated and the affiliated. Third, the gaps in religious beliefs and practices remain between the religiously unaffiliated and the religiously affiliated among younger populations, but this gap is now narrower for religious practices.

These results confirm both hypotheses (diffused religion and cohort replacement) depending on the variables. Consequently, our study adds complexity to basic secularization and cohort replacement frameworks of religious decline by showing that both diffused religion and cohort replacement theories can be useful for explaining different aspects of the current religious landscapes in Europe. On the one hand, diffused religion theory is applicable especially for eschatological beliefs among the indicators we measured in our study, and especially among younger age

groups across most European nations, with the influence of popular culture most likely playing a role. On the other hand, cohort replacement theory, the weakening of religious socialization processes across birth cohorts driving secularization, seems to hold especially for religious practice among youth. Our study does not disprove secularization theories with these findings, but rather complexifies them and deepens our understanding of some of the nuances of developments in contexts where religion has been on the decline for some time.

Of course, every study is limited by the data and indicators available to measure and to analyze, ours being no exception. For example, we were not able to measure less conventional spirituality indicators distinct from Christianity and potentially commonly found among youth (yoga and meditation practices, etc.) which are not systematically measured yet in the EVS. In fact, the complexity of the concept of religiosity, with its different dimensions (e.g., Fichter 1951), makes us cautious in our conclusions. Ideally, a deeper study on all dimensions with a few variables each would provide us with an even better understanding of the landscape. Yet, as many scholars have argued for some time, beliefs and practices are the two main dimensions of religiosity, which were used here.

Based on this, our study does make some important contributions to our understanding of European religious landscapes. We provide a much more extensive analysis of youth religiosity than ever before across 33 nations and two religiosity dimensions, with age group comparisons and for both religiously affiliated and unaffiliated groups. Our findings show that not all religiosity indicators follow a linear path of continued decline, even in more secularized contexts. Social life is more complex than that, and we believe that we have reached a stage in the development of the secularization framework that we can begin to model some of this complexity. To go theoretically further, new studies, with more dimensions, variables and empirical referents will be necessary to better refine the underlying theories.

It is important to keep in mind that overall levels of eschatological beliefs in Europe, despite seeing a bit of a rebound among youth in many European nations, still remain lower than levels of belief in God. The question also remains about how important these eschatological beliefs are for everyday decision-making and behavior among individuals. Yet, it is important to understand that, while many religiosity indicators decline among youth without the institutionalized socialization support of regular religious group activity in Europe, some indicators do not. Eschatological beliefs, which may have declined in the past prior to the data we analyzed here and among older birth cohorts as European societies came out of dominant Christian imaginaries, seem nevertheless able to survive and to even rebound among certain segments of youth populations with more diffused socialization through family members, friends and popular culture.

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