



# Explanations of changes in church attendance between 1970 and 2009



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 18 December 2014

Revised 6 March 2015

Accepted 6 April 2015

Available online 11 April 2015

### Keywords:

Secularization

Rationalization

Individualization

Religiosity

Longitudinal

Cross-national

## ABSTRACT

We deduce hypotheses from theories on religious change to explain changes in church attendance rates. Using a new dataset with 51 countries across a long period we apply panel regression models, which enable us to test well-known theories in a more strict and dynamic fashion than do cross-sectional studies.

Our results provide new evidence for a few old ideas, but also show striking lack of evidence for ideas that appear well-accepted. Tertiary education proved to be a strong predictor of changes in church attendance. Theories about individualization were also supported. The evidence of existential insecurity as a cause of change was ambiguous: economic development and life expectancy showed significant effects but income inequality did not. We found no support for theories on social globalization and social benefit policy. Finally, we found that income inequality and urbanization were driving forces of change during the 70s and 80s, but not since 1990.

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## 1. Introduction

Changes in church attendance in Western countries are somewhat of a puzzle. Declining church attendance rates have been reported in several countries, but in others the share of the population that goes to church seems stable, and some countries even seem to experience a religious revival. In this paper, we review both conventional ideas about changes in religiosity and a few more recent ones. Although there are many indicators of religiosity and religious practice, church attendance remains one of the most powerful predictors of the impact of religion on people's lives. When people visit church it means they are regularly exposed to religious messages, but more importantly, it means that they are integrated in religious communities. This strengthens the impact of religion due to behavioral confirmation and due to social pressure to conform to religious norms, and it produces positive side effects, such as enhanced informal support and care (Lewis et al., 2013), and social trust (Dingemans and Van Ingen, in press).

There is no lack of theories about factors that bring about religious change. Depending on the theory, the cause of religious change is attributed to rationalization, individualization, globalization, and changing existential (in)security among others. In our view, the main challenge in this literature is to disentangle these different processes of change and to find solid empirical tests that can show the explanatory power of the different theories. One main problem is that these causes of change are interrelated, some strongly. In the past this led scholars to consider several of these theories to be part of a larger paradigm: the secularization theory. However, more recent studies pointed out that not only the mechanisms that produce

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change are different across the theories, they sometimes also predict different outcomes (Bruce, 2002; Ruiter and Van Tubergen, 2009; Reitsma et al., 2012).

Part of the empirical challenge is to come up with a good research design. There are two reasons why there is a strong need for this. First, much of the empirical evidence is inconsistent; adherents of a certain theory often present findings that support their own theory and refute opposing ones. This leaves the current literature somewhat inconclusive: although it is demonstrated that societies are changing religiously, it remains unclear which processes are most important in explaining these changes (Voas and Doebler, 2011). Second, because of the many interrelations between the suggested causes of change there is a high risk of findings being spurious, i.e. if a certain factor that actually has an effect is left out this effect is picked up by other factors (through their correlation with these omitted factors). This is especially relevant in macro level studies, where correlations are generally high and the number of cases small. In our view, a proper research design should therefore incorporate strong controls for this.

The purpose of our current paper is to contribute to solving these empirical problems, by providing analyses of the *dynamics* of church attendance with data from multiple countries, which is something few studies have been able to do. Most prior studies that examined church attendance either examined a single country over time (e.g., Hayward and Krause, 2013; Hout and Greeley, 1987; Chaves, 1989; Firebaugh and Harley, 1991; Presser and Chaves, 2007; Schwadel, 2011) or examined multiple countries at one point in time (e.g., Ruiter and Van Tubergen, 2009; Halman and Draulans, 2006). The problem with the latter approach is that the explanations of differences (in church attendance) *between* countries can be very different from the explanations of differences *over time* (i.e., within countries), mainly because spurious effects arise more easily in cross-sectional analyses. The type of analysis we use in this paper (fixed-effects regression) has an important advantage in this respect: by construction, it controls for time-invariant factors. In other words, differences between countries that usually remain stable through time (e.g. cultural traditions, the political system, values) cannot cause spurious effects. By using this technique, by including the potential causes of church attendance together in one model, and by performing these analyses on a dataset that covers a period of 40 years (see below) we provide tests that are more solid than those of previous studies, and which are better able to assess which factors are the most important driving forces of *changes in church attendance*.

We created a dataset of aggregated country data of church attendance, which we pooled from several long-running social surveys. We then combined these data with external data from different sources, in order to add as many explanatory factors to our models as possible. Our final dataset spans a period of 40 years and includes 51 countries from all European regions, Australia and New-Zeeland, and the Americas. Our central research question is: *how can changes in church attendance in the past four decades be explained?*

On a side note, we also explore whether the *determinants* of church attendance have changed (our second, and secondary research question). Some of the suggested explanations of church attendance trends in the literature seem to have lost importance over the past 40 years (e.g. as differences between rural and urban areas become smaller, the process of urbanization may have lost some of its impact), whereas others seem to have gained importance (e.g. since the rise of the Internet social globalization may have gained impact). There is little theory on this topic, but with our data it is possible to explore these changes and draw some preliminary conclusions.

## 2. Theories of religious change

### 2.1. Church attendance and rationalization

A traditional version of secularization theory emphasizes the negative influence of rationalization on people's religiosity (Berger, 1967; Martin, 1978). Scientific rationalism is expected to undermine the cognitive basis of religious worldviews. However, the extent to which religion and science are incompatible is subject of debate (Stark et al., 1996; Dixon, 2008; Roth, 2010). A growth of scientific knowledge is assumed to have secularizing effects, not so much because of a direct confrontation between religious and scientific claims, but rather because scientific knowledge diminishes the need for religiosity (Bruce, 2002). Religion's cognitive function became redundant, because science gave people insight into, and control over areas which were mysteries before. Although it is argued that religion offers unique rewards, such as eternal life, recent studies demonstrate that religious and secular organizations do compete with each other for people's expenditure of time and money (Gruber and Hungerman, 2008; Stolz, 2010; Cohen-Zada and Sander, 2011).

Thus, people in rationalized societies no longer need religion to find answers to vital questions and no longer need religion in order to understand the world they are living in. We test this by looking at changes in the percentage of the population that completed a tertiary education, assuming that these people were more exposed to scientific and social scientific world views than those without tertiary education. Our *rationalization* hypothesis reads:

**H1.** An increase of the share of the population that completed a tertiary education causes a decrease of church attendance.

### 2.2. Church attendance and individualization

Another version of secularization theory emphasizes the negative effect of individualization on religious affiliation. Sociologists often refer to the process of social or functional differentiation, which is the separation between the different

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