

## How secularized is Germany? Cohort and comparative perspectives

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Christof WOLF

## How Secularized is Germany? Cohort and Comparative Perspectives<sup>1</sup>

*The author seeks to answer the question “How secularized is Germany?” on the basis of different perspectives and databases. The meaning of the term secularization is limited for this study to the decline of religiosity and its consequences, and a distinction is made between church-related and individual religiosity. First, evidence for the decline of church-related religiosity in Germany is presented. Next, it is shown that individual religiosity, i.e. religiosity not necessarily related to organized religion, is also declining. Then the analysis is extended to investigate the relationship between religiosity and non-religious attitudes. Taking two illustrative examples, it is claimed that religion today is far less salient for the way we live and see the world than it has been in the past. Finally, the focus of the analysis is broadened to an international perspective in which Germany is compared with other countries. The author ends with some thoughts on the future of secularization in Germany.*

**Keywords:** secularization · Germany · church · individual religiosity

*L'auteur cherche à répondre à la question: “Dans quelle mesure l'Allemagne est-elle sécularisée?”, en se référant à différentes perspectives et bases de données. Après avoir délimité la signification du terme de sécularisation au déclin de la religiosité et à ses conséquences, une distinction entre la religiosité liée à l'Église et la religiosité individuelle est opérée. Une première preuve du déclin de la religiosité liée à l'Église en Allemagne est présentée. Il est ensuite démontré que la religiosité individuelle, c'est-à-dire la religiosité qui n'est pas nécessairement liée à une religion organisée, est aussi en déclin. L'analyse est alors étendue, de manière à examiner la relation entre la religiosité et les attitudes non religieuses. En prenant deux exemples illustratifs, il est affirmé que la religion d'aujourd'hui est beaucoup moins saillante en ce qui concerne la manière dont nous vivons et voyons le monde qu'elle ne l'était auparavant. Le sujet de l'analyse est, enfin, élargi à une perspective internationale, dans laquelle l'Allemagne est comparée à d'autres pays. L'auteur conclut avec quelques réflexions sur le futur de la sécularisation en Allemagne.*

**Mots-clés:** sécularisation · Allemagne · Église · religiosité individuelle

## 1 Introduction

This paper will attempt to answer to the question “How secularized is Germany?” based on available empirical evidence. In order to do so it will first briefly explicate the meaning of the term secularization as used here, and characterize indicators of religiosity underlying the analysis. Then it will present empirical evidence for the extent to which the level of church-related religiosity has changed in Germany. Next the analysis turns to expressions of religiosity not necessarily related to organized religion. The relationship between church-related and individual religiosity in Germany is briefly explored. Then the analysis is extended to investigate the relationship between religiosity and non-religious attitudes. Finally the focus of the analysis is broadened to an international perspective in which Germany is compared with other countries. The paper ends with a discussion of the future of secularization in Germany.

## 2 Conceptual Issues

Answering the question posed in the title implies a clear understanding of the term secularization. Here this term is taken to mean *a decline of individual religiosity and a decline of the social consequences of religiosity*. In other words the analysis is confined to the level of individuals. That does not imply that either the significance of the organizational level of religion or the relationship between religion and state are disputed—for a broader definition see Bruce (2002: 3). A comprehensive analysis of secularization would have to critically investigate these fields too. This however cannot be accomplished here.

If secularization is defined as the decline of religiosity and its consequences then we have to measure these concepts. Within the European tradition, religion was equated with Christianity for a long time and Europe was referred to as Christendom (Davies, 1996: 7). Against this background it is understandable that most of the available indicators reflect Christian religiosity and church-related behaviour. While the prevalence of Christian and church-related indicators is adequate to describe the development of traditional religiosity, it is self-evident that they cannot capture other forms of religiosity or spirituality. If we trust newer observations on religious trends, it is these newer forms of religiosity and spirituality that are gaining importance and that are replacing traditional Christian religion (Davie, 2000; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). Unfortunately, most large-scale quantitative datasets, especially if they cover a long time-span, lack indicators that would be needed for an analysis doing full justice to these claims. However, the various forms of “new” or “alternative” religiosity tend to be less organized and more individualized than traditional Christian religiosity. So if we draw on indicators capturing this quality we can test the importance of “new” religiosity at least to some extent. At the same time this analysis can shed at least some light on an assumption that can be found in various theories of religion, i.e. the assumption that religion is universal either

because it serves universal functions (Luckmann, 1991a) or because humans have a universal, constant need (or as the proponents of the supply-side theory of religion would say: “demand”) for religion (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987).

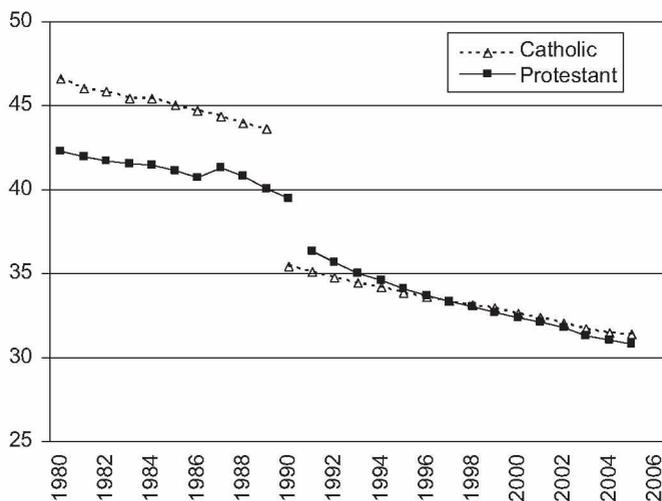
In the following analysis, church-related religiosity is captured by church membership and church attendance, the two standard measures of Christian religiosity. Individual religiosity is measured by praying and subjective religiosity. These two indicators must be seen together with the two on church-related religiosity. Devout Christians should have high values, non-religious people should have low values on both sets of indicators. The interesting question is, of course, how widespread is the combination of high levels of individual religiosity paired with low levels of traditional religiosity. This group, those who have turned away from church-based religion without giving up religiosity, should be of a notable size (Luckmann, 1991b; Davie, 2000).<sup>2</sup>

The degree of secularization can be assessed against different criteria. One obvious criterion is the development of religiosity and its social impact over time. In order to carry out such inter-temporal analysis, time-series data reaching as far as possible into the past are needed. A slightly different perspective on the longitudinal change of religiosity is obtained when the development is analysed on the basis of birth cohorts. If we compare older and younger cohorts, more about the character of the trend can be learned. Let us assume we observe a decline in religiosity. By applying cohort analysis we can find out if everybody is less and less religious, or if people’s religiosity is constant over their lifespan but each successive cohort is less religious than its predecessor – a cohort effect. The central question here is how do younger cohorts compare to older ones with respect to the relevant indicators. A different way to approach answering the question posed in the title of this paper is to engage in international comparison. In this case we would ask how secular Germany is compared to other countries. Of course the answer may vary with the countries (and time points) we choose for this comparison. In the following section the central question of this paper will be addressed by means of different analyses relating to all of these perspectives.

### **3 Empirical findings**

#### *3.1 The development of church-related religiosity in Germany*

Let us begin with an analysis of church-related religiosity. In the year 1980 almost 90 per cent of the population of West Germany belonged to either the Roman Catholic (47 per cent) or the Protestant Church of Germany (EKD: 42 per cent).<sup>3</sup> By 1989—before East and West Germany were unified in 1990—this share had declined to 84 per cent. At this point 27 per cent of East Germany’s population were Protestants and only 6 per cent Catholics. The vast majority of East Germans did not and still do not belong to a church or religious organization.



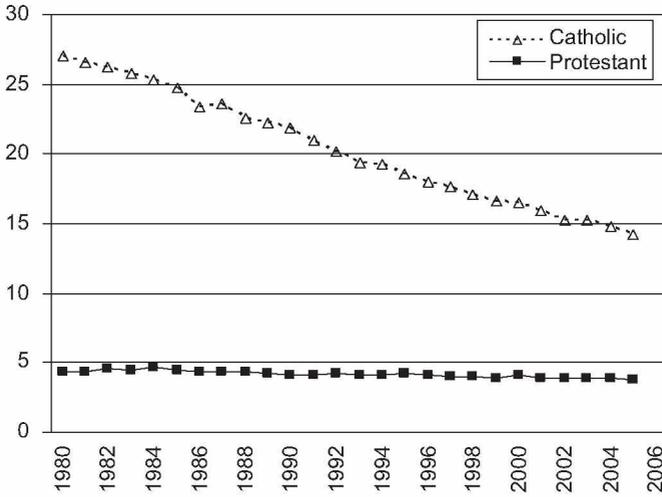
**FIGURE 1**  
**Catholics and Protestants 1980–2005, as a percentage of the total population<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> Before 1990/91 only West Germany, since then unified Germany.

*Data source:* EKD 2006; Bischofskonferenz 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007.

In unified Germany in 1991 the proportion of members of the two main churches was around 72 per cent. This proportion steadily declined and reached 62 per cent in 2005 (Protestants and Catholics both approximately 31 per cent). Of the remaining 38 per cent, around 4 per cent are Muslims, 3 per cent belong to other Christian organizations, 0.3 per cent are Buddhists, 0.2 per cent are Jews, 0.1 per cent are Hindus and 0.2 per cent belong to other religious groups (REMID, 2007). That leaves about 30 per cent of the population (24 million) not belonging to any religious group.

Over the last 25 years more than 7.6 million people have left the Catholic and Protestant Churches. Although this must have been a bitter experience for the churches, this process could have been seen as positive if the remaining members had become more committed. If we take church attendance as an indicator of commitment, however, this expectation is not met. On the contrary, attendance at regular Sunday services was already under 5 per cent among Protestants in 1980,<sup>4</sup> and continued to decline during the next two and a half decades (see Figure 2). During this time the Catholic rate of church attendance almost halved: it dropped from 28 per cent in 1980 to under 15 per cent in 2005. Thus, while more and more people have left the churches, the percentage of committed members among those who have not (yet) left has not increased but sharply decreased. The churches have not been able to turn the quantitative loss of members into a qualitative enhancement of their membership basis. Taken together, these findings clearly demonstrate a tremendous decline of traditional church-based religiosity in Germany.

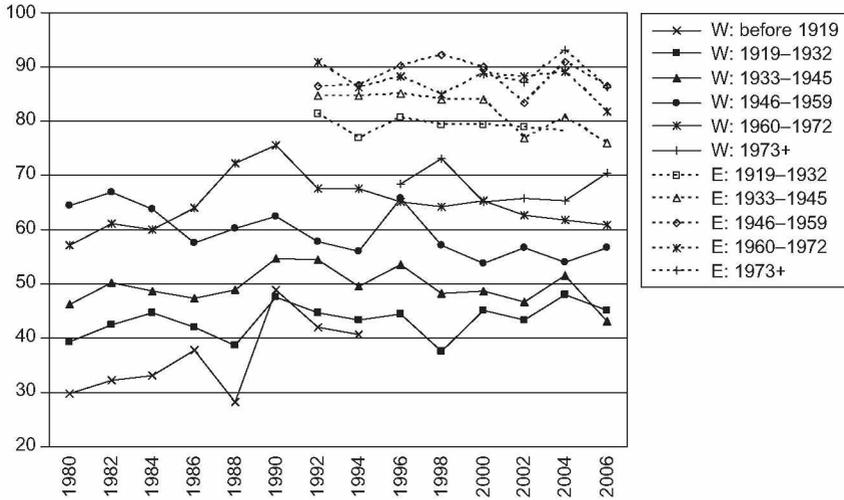


**FIGURE 2**  
**Attendance at regular Sunday services, 1980–2005, as a percentage of total membership**

Data source: EKD 2006; Bischofskonferenz 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007.

The data presented so far were taken from official statistical reports of the religious bodies concerned. They give information about general developments, but do not give any insight into the social structure of the process of secularization. Because this is possible on the basis of survey data the following analyses are based on the General Social Survey of Germany, the ALLBUS.<sup>5</sup> Figure 3 gives the proportion of adults in West and East Germany going to church very seldom or never for six different birth cohorts over the last 26 years. The demarcation of the birth cohorts corresponds with specific periods in German history.<sup>6</sup>

However, the different historical, political and economic periods do *not* seem to have had a lasting influence on the process of secularization. Instead each successive cohort shows a steady increase in the proportion not going to church.<sup>7</sup> The analysis so far shows that traditional Christian religiosity is declining mostly because each new cohort is less religious than its predecessors. Not only has membership in the two dominant churches declined, but attendance at religious services has also dropped off sharply. With respect to traditional church-related religiosity, these analyses confirm what is known from many other studies about the development of religion in Germany. Some have interpreted these findings as conclusive evidence for secularization. Others have cautioned against premature conclusions, pointing to the possibility that church-related religiosity has been replaced by other forms of religiosity.



**FIGURE 3**  
**Attending church “never” or “seldom” by birth cohorts in West and East Germany, 1980–2006, as a percentage of the cohort<sup>a</sup>**

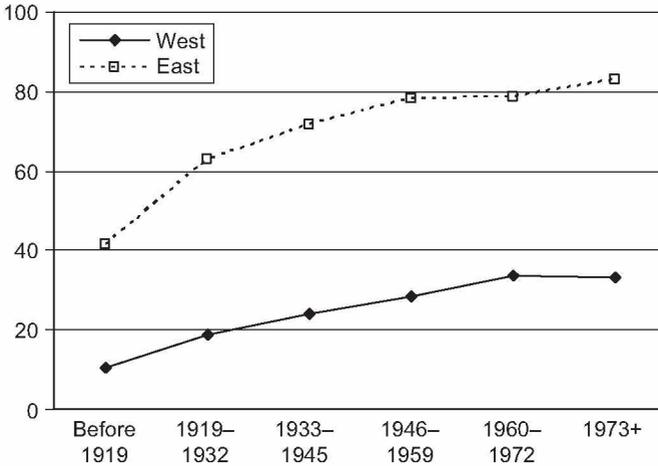
<sup>a</sup> Every point represents at least 100 individuals.  
 Data source: ALLBUS 1980–2006.

### 3.2 The development of religiosity beyond traditional churches

A decline of traditional church-related religiosity does not necessarily mean that people have given up religion altogether. Many have argued that people satisfy their need for religion by turning to other traditions, piecing together what they like. This phenomenon was dubbed religious *bricolage* (Dobbelaere, 1998; Luckmann, 1984: 105) or *patchwork religiosity* (Bleich, 2005). Thus it is assumed that while people turn their back on organised religion, they maintain a private religiosity and embrace “new” religions (Davie, 2002: 8)—a situation also characterized as “believing without belonging” (Davie, 2000: 6).

Two indicators can shed some light on these conjectures: praying and subjective assessment of religiosity. Praying is a form of religious behaviour that does not rely on an organizational context and it is not confined to the Christian tradition. Even more general is the question of the degree of religiosity. Because the question wording does not define or confine the type of religiosity, everyone can answer the question with respect to their own understanding of this term. As a result both indicators, praying and self assessment of religiosity, are capable of capturing all forms of religiosity including highly individualized or syncretistic forms.

In Figure 4 the proportion of respondents saying they never pray is given for different birth cohorts. In both East and West Germany this proportion steadily increases and reaches approximately a third of West Germany’s and



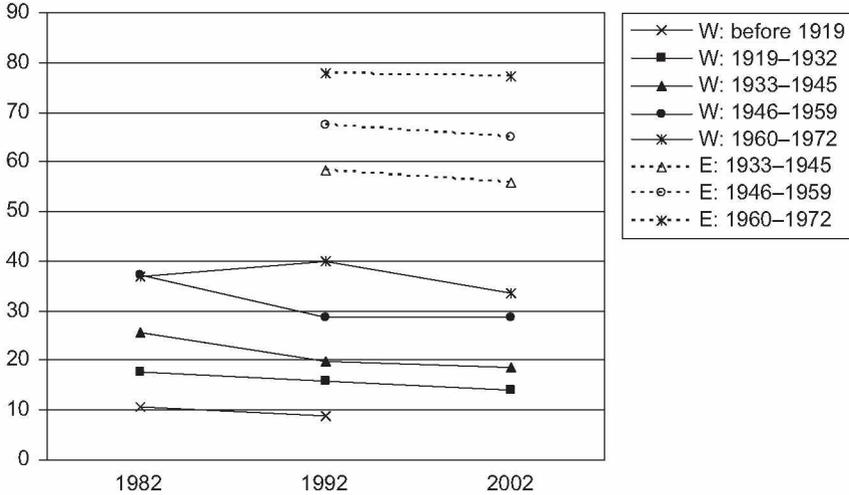
**FIGURE 4**  
**Proportion who say they never pray by birth cohort in West and East Germany**

*Data source:* ALLBUS, 1991, 1994.

over 80 per cent of East Germany’s younger cohorts. Taken together that means that over 40 per cent of Germans born after the Second World War never engage in this activity.

A similar picture can be found in Figure 5. Here the development between the years 1982 and 2002 of the proportion saying they are not religious is depicted. Over time this proportion declines slightly within each cohort; thus there is an ageing effect. The striking finding, however, is the clear difference between the cohorts, with each successive cohort describing itself as less religious than the one before it. Given that the term “religious” was deliberately not further specified in the item wording, i.e. respondents could interpret the term as they wished, the result strongly implies that a majority of East Germans and a sizable minority of West Germans are not religious in any way.

Several conclusions can be drawn from these findings. First, the decline of traditional church-related religion is not counterbalanced by an increase in less traditional, more individualized forms of religiosity. Second, among each cohort, but especially among the younger and the East German cohorts, the proportion of non-religious individuals is so high that the assumption that religiosity is a universal human need does not seem to be warranted. Third, there is no indication that the decline of religiosity, i.e. the process of secularization, will be reversed in the near future. That is to say, if people have not learned to be religious, have not learned to pray, have not learned to turn to religion for comfort, companionship, etc. they are unlikely to do so in the future.



**FIGURE 5**

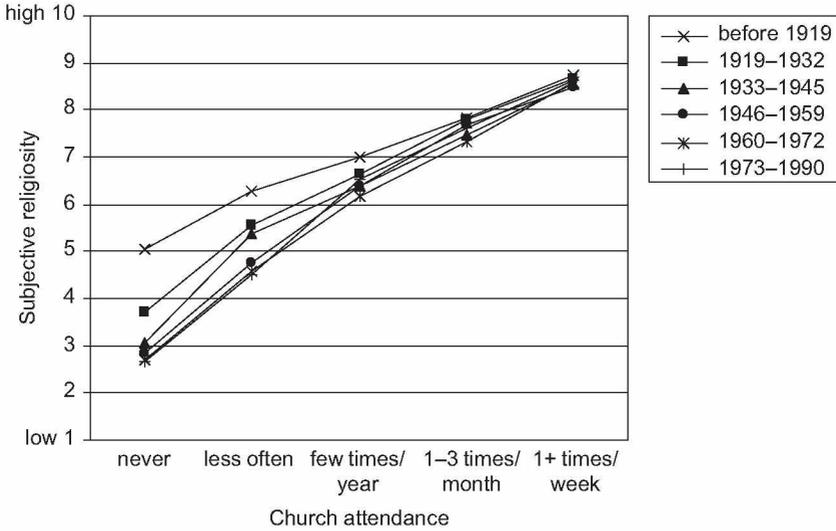
**Proportion saying they are not religious by birth cohort in West and East Germany<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> Values 1-3 on a 10-point scale.

Data source: ALLBUS 1982, 1992, 2002.

### 3.3 *The relationship between church-related and individual religiosity*

In the preceding sections church-related or traditional religiosity and individual religiosity have been treated separately. From the results that were presented so far, but also from common wisdom, it can be safely assumed that the two forms of religiosity are related. Those who belong to a religious group and go to church will perceive themselves as religious. As Figure 6 demonstrates, this assumption is clearly confirmed by the data. The more often respondents report going to church, the higher they score on self-assessed religiosity. If we look at the different cohorts, two points are noteworthy. First, the more often people go to church, the less do they differ with respect to individual religiosity. Or put differently, cohort membership begins to play a role the less often one goes to church. Especially among those never going to church, a sizable group claims to be at least somewhat religious. At first sight this result fits well into the claim that many who turn away from traditional religiosity do not give up their religiosity. Here, however, the second remarkable finding concerning the cohorts comes into play. If we look closely, it is the older cohorts showing a certain degree of incongruity between church attendance (traditional church-related religiosity) and their self-assessed religiosity. In addition it can be shown that almost all of them are members of religious organizations. The comparatively low attendance rate of the oldest cohort, then, is most probably related to health problems. In contrast, the younger, those who should theoretically be most interested in and explore “alternative” forms of religion, are the



**FIGURE 6**  
**Mean subjective religiosity by church attendance and birth cohort in Germany**

Data source: ALLBUS 1982, 1992, 2000, 2002.

most congruent. If they do not attend services, they are very likely to say they are not religious at all.

### 3.4 The social consequences of religion

While a decline of religiosity may be interpreted as signifying secularization such a development may lead to an increased salience of the difference between those who are religious and those who are not. Thus declining religiosity can actually lead to an intensification of discussions around religious issues and an increase of the importance of this dimension in social life.<sup>8</sup>

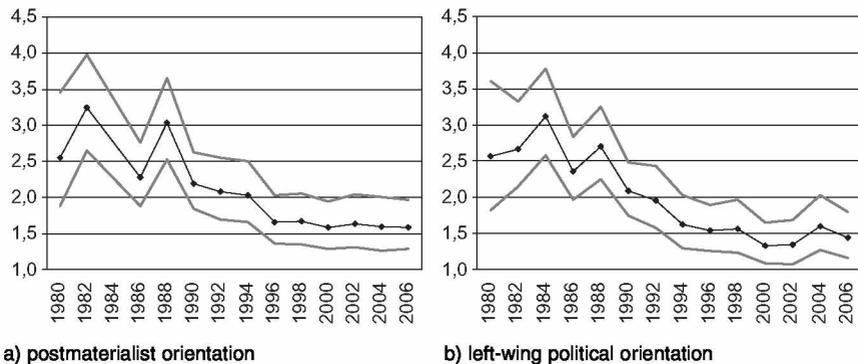
Traditionally religiosity was linked to many attitudes, behaviours and social structural variables: gender roles (Volz, 2000; Inglehart and Norris, 2003), voting (Mielke, 1991), family status and fertility (McQuillan, 2004; Wolf, 2007), education (Peisert, 1967) and occupation (Offenbacher, 1900; Weber, 2002 [1930]) to name but a few. Several studies show that the empirical relationship between religiosity and these characteristics has weakened (Dogan, 1995; Dobbelaere, Gevers and Halman, 2003; Wolf, 1996; Schnell and Kohler, 1995).

There is here neither the space to present the cited studies in greater detail, nor the opportunity to present a thorough investigation specific to this study. Instead, an illustrative analysis exemplifying the general trend of decreasing social consequences of religion must suffice. This illustrative analysis looks at the relationship between religiosity and political orientation on the left-right

scale as well as an analysis of the relationship between religiosity and post-materialism as defined by Inglehart. Church-related religiosity is associated with more traditional, more conservative attitudes whereas less religious people are less traditional, more liberal (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: 196–212). Therefore, it can be expected that people who are less religious significantly more often hold postmaterialist orientations than religious people, and that those who are less religious tend to be more inclined to the left, politically speaking, than those who are more religious.

As Figure 7 shows these expectations are met. The two graphs, (a) and (b), give the development of the (unconditional) odds ratios for never going to church and having postmaterialist or left-wing political orientations. As can be seen, both indicators are related to the absence of traditional church-related religiosity in the expected way; non-attenders are more likely to be classified as postmaterialists and as “leftists” than those who at least visit religious services from time to time. However, the strength of these relationships has *declined* during the last quarter of a century in West Germany. While the odds ratios were between 2.5 and 3 in the 1980s, they fell to just 1.5 by the middle of the 1990s. Thus, the social consequences of going to church have clearly declined in West Germany. The data for East Germany, which are only available from 1991, show a weak relationship between church attendance and postmaterialism or left-wing orientation that is generally lower than in the West.

Taken together with other findings of the decreasing importance of religiosity for various domains cited above, it can safely be concluded that religiosity has greatly lost its significance for those areas of life not directly related to religion. Therefore we can indeed assert that Germany is more secularized today than 25 years ago.

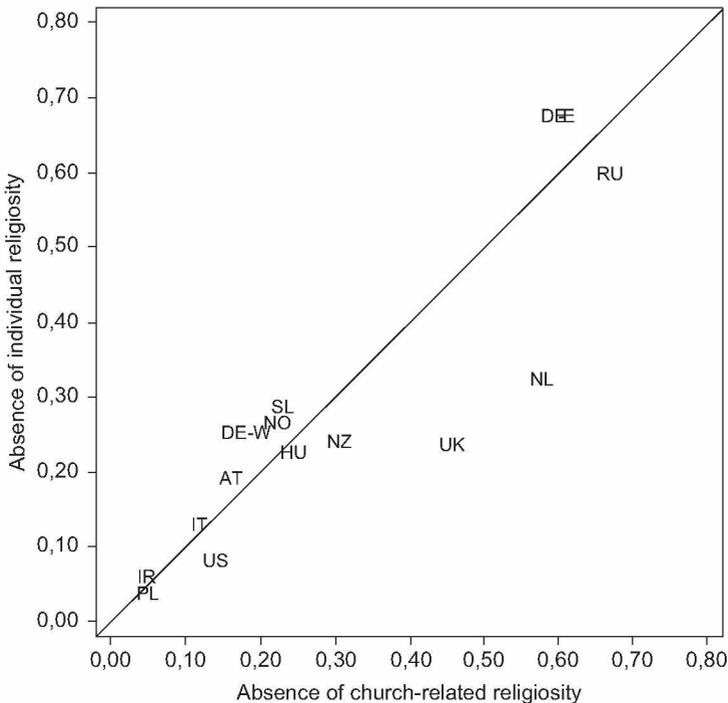


**FIGURE 7**  
**Relationship between never going to church and two attitudes in West Germany 1980–2006, odds-ratio and 95% confidence interval**

Data source: ALLBUS 1980–2006.

*3.5 The international perspective*

In this last empirical section we will put the German situation into an international perspective. Suitable data are provided by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) from 1991 and 1998. Because the ISSP has rather small samples in some countries, this study uses a combined dataset including information on 13 or, if East and West Germany are treated separately, 14 countries.<sup>9</sup> Although all these countries are dominated by Christians, they reflect different political histories and religious traditions. The study will draw on the same four indicators used for the analysis of the development in Germany: church membership, church attendance, praying and subjective assessment of religiosity. As was argued above, the first two of these are interpreted as indicators of church-related religiosity while the latter two are seen as indicators of individual religiosity. When the mean values of both indicators for each country are plotted against each other, we obtain the scatter plot given in Figure 8.<sup>10</sup>



**FIGURE 8**  
**Relationship between church-related religiosity and individual religiosity in 14 countries**

*Data source: ISSP 1991, 1998.*

The lower left hand corner in this chart indicates a population in which nearly everyone belongs to a religious group, goes to church, prays at least sometimes and describes themselves as at least somewhat religious. Empirically, Poland and Ireland can be found near this extreme point. The more one moves away from this corner towards the opposing corner of the chart, the higher the proportion of the population that is religious neither in a church-related nor in an individual way. Russia, East Germany and the Netherlands occupy a very similar position with respect to low levels of church-related religiosity. However, they differ with respect to individual religiosity, with the Netherlands being more religious on this dimension than the other two.

Interestingly, most countries are located around the bisecting line marking equal closeness to or distance from church-related and individual religiosity. Thus in most countries a decline in church-related religiosity is accompanied—which comes first cannot be decided on the basis of the current evidence—by an equal loss in individual religiosity. Among the countries included in the analysis, the UK and the Netherlands are notable exceptions. Here individual religiosity is much higher than would be expected on the basis of church-related religiosity.<sup>11</sup> The interesting question as to why the Netherlands and the UK differ from other countries in this respect must be more thoroughly researched and cannot be addressed here.

Compared with other countries in Europe, East Germany is extremely secular. Though it is far less secularized than the former GDR, West Germany still shows medium to high levels of secularization when compared to other countries.

#### **4 The future: more secularization or religious revival?**

How secularized is Germany and what are the likely developments in the future? Undoubtedly, East Germany is among the most secular countries of the world (Meulemann, 2004). The re-emergence of religion in East Germany that some commentators had foreseen after the breakdown of the GDR has not materialized. Neither church-related religiosity nor other religious forms have been able to gain ground in this former socialist territory (Pollack, 2000). West Germany is far less secularized. A majority of the population still belongs to a religious group, mostly the Catholic or a main-line Protestant church. However, even among church members we find very low levels of church attendance and a rather high percentage of people leaving the churches. As in East Germany, those who have left traditional churches behind do not seem to be drawn to alternative religious forms in large numbers. Finally, compared with other West European countries, West Germany shows medium to high levels of secularization.

The evidence presented in this paper, as well as the many results cited, can leave no doubt: Germans have turned away from the churches in large numbers and continue to do so. Furthermore, at the examination of the data from a cohort perspective has shown that each cohort is less religious than its immediate predecessor. Rather than turning to other forms of religion—or

becoming dedicated atheists—Germans who have left the churches are religiously indifferent: they just do not care (Kaufmann, 1989). In addition, religiosity or the absence thereof is far less salient for attitudes and behaviours today, and thus has fewer social consequences than formerly. In this sense Germany is more secularized today than in the past. But will this development continue?

Some developments may seem to counteract the general decline of religiosity. When the first draft of the European constitution was presented in 2003, a hot debate about the missing reference to God and to Europe's Christian tradition began. When Pope Benedict XVI visited Germany in the year 2005 to celebrate the 20th World Youth Day in Cologne, over one million people attended the concluding mass. Of further importance are the many recent violent events related to religion: the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001; similar attacks in Madrid in 2004, or in London one year later; the murder of Theo van Gogh in the year 2004 and assaults on mosques across Europe. These are just a few instances that seem to show that religion and religious differences continue to have a huge influence on our lives.

Religion may continue to be salient in the (international) political arena (Norris and Inglehart, 2004); religious events and religious stars may continue to attract large crowds, especially younger people. These events, however, do not lead to a reversal of the declining religiosity of Germany's (or Europe's) population. On the contrary: churches have lost and continue to lose members, and both those remaining in the churches and those not belonging to a religious group have become less religious and continue on this path (see Turner, 2005). As Glendinning and Bruce (2006) have noted, those who have turned away from traditional Christian religion do not normally believe in anything else. Once it's gone it's gone.

To be sure, the picture evolving from the analysis presented here is incomplete and gives only a rough outline of the most important aspects of the development of religiosity in Germany. The actual picture is much more colourful, varied, interesting and contradictory. However all these aspects are framed by the processes depicted above, and judged from current knowledge there is no trend strong enough to turn around the general decline of religiosity. In other words, the trends described in this paper, and thus secularization, will continue (also see Bruce, 2002).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at the 29th conference of the International Society for the Study of Religion which was held in Leipzig in 2007. For discussing this earlier version and providing many valuable suggestions, I owe thanks to George F. Bishop.

<sup>2</sup> The other incongruent combination (high level of traditional religiosity, low level of individual religiosity) has not gained interest in theoretical debates. It might be interpreted as an orientation towards religious conventions; if this occurs is an empirical question.

<sup>3</sup> Church membership, especially in the two large churches mentioned here, is clearly defined. The data presented in this section can be considered to be valid and highly reliable.

<sup>4</sup> The indicator used in Figure 2 is the average number of persons attending each service. If one looks only at services connected with Christmas there is actually an increase in church attendance from 26 per cent in 1980 to 36 per cent in 2005 (EKD, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> The ALLBUS was fielded for the first time in 1980 and since then every second year; more information on the survey can be found here: [http://www.gesis.org/en/data\\_service/allbus/index.htm](http://www.gesis.org/en/data_service/allbus/index.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Those born before 1919 were born in the German Empire (*Deutsches Reich*) under Wilhelm II; those born between 1919 and 1932 were born in the Weimar Republic, those born between 1933 and 1945 were born in the years of the Nazi rule and the Second World War; the next cohort, born between 1946 and 1959, was born in the reconstruction period of the immediate postwar years; those born between 1960 and 1972 were born in a phase of economic success, new self-confidence and educational expansion; the last period begins with the first oil crisis in 1973, at the start of a time of increasing economic difficulties and growing unemployment rates.

<sup>7</sup> If we analyse frequent church attendance we obtain a mirror image. In West Germany, the older cohorts show the highest rates of attendance (up to 40 per cent), while among the younger cohorts only 10 per cent to 15 per cent go to church at least once a month. In the East, the rates for regular attendance are below 10 per cent for all cohorts.

<sup>8</sup> It is also true that a situation in which individual-level religiosity remains constant the salience of religion for non-religious issues may decline.

<sup>9</sup> Austria (AT), East Germany (DE-E), West Germany (DE-W), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IR), Italy (IT), New Zealand (NZ), Norway (NO), Poland (PL), Russia (RU), Slovenia (SI), United Kingdom (UK), United States (US).

<sup>10</sup> The horizontal axis reflects the average of the country-specific proportions of those not belonging to a religious group and those not going to church. The vertical axis gives the country-specific proportions of those who never pray and those saying they are not religious (scale values 6 and 7 on a 7-point scale).

<sup>11</sup> In so far Davie's (2000: 619) dictum of "believing without belonging" does not seem to be totally out of place; although Voas and Crockett (2005) have convincingly shown that the British "neither believe nor belong".

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