

# 13. SECULARIZATION AND VALUES:

EXPLORING CHANGES IN THE RELIGIOUS  
FACTOR IN PREFERENCES FOR OBEDIENCE  
AND AUTONOMY

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## **Abstract**

*Previous research, mostly US based, shows that religious beliefs and practice are related to parental values: religious individuals value obedience more and autonomy less as an important quality to teach children at home than their non-religious counterparts. One wonders how this 'religious factor' is in secularized Northwestern Europe. According to secularization theory, the association between being a religious person and the preferences for obedience and autonomy will weaken due to the loss of social significance of religion. An alternative theoretical perspective however predicts that this only happens in the first stage of secularization, after which the association might increase again as religious identities of those who remain religious may be strengthened in a secular world. Employing EVS data of Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, and the Netherlands for the period of 1981-2017, we find evidence for this U-shaped pattern in Germany, Great Britain and, for obedience only, in France. However, in Denmark and the Netherlands, the patterns are quite mixed and not in line with the theoretical perspectives. Future research could focus on the heterogeneity of both the religious and non-religious population to explain the trends observed.*

### 13.1 Introduction

The European Values Study (EVS) is all about values. However, what exactly values are is not so evident. As Loek Halman, who devoted his academic life to the study of values and values change, explains: “one of the reasons why a clear definition of values is lacking is that they are not directly observable or measurable. However, there is “a common-sense understanding” that values are rather basic in nature: they are deeply rooted motivations or principles that would guide norms, attitudes, beliefs and opinions” (Halman & Sieben, 2020: 1). Given this ‘functional’ definition, one may wonder whether the EVS project addresses values in a direct way, or that the questionnaires tap values more indirectly by referring to attitudes and opinions. However, a closer look at the EVS questionnaire reveals one particular battery of items that is rather closely related to the more general nature of values. These so-called parental values are defined as the criteria or standards used as a basis to evaluate which qualities are most desirable for children to be taught at home (Kohn, 1969). Since individuals attach more importance to those child qualities that they think will prepare children best for the requirements made by society’s future, parental values are seen as an important indicator for social change as well (cf. Inkeles, 1983 [1955]).

The primary focus in the literature has been on two of these values: *obedience*, i.e. the conformity to external rules and obeying adult authority, and *autonomy*, i.e. the ability to think for yourself and to reason independently (see Alwin, 2001). Scholars have established a clear link between these values and religion: religious denomination (Lenski, 1961), beliefs (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993; Starks & Robinson, 2005; 2007) as well as practice (Alwin, 1986; Xiao, 2000) are associated with a higher preference for obedience and a lower preference for autonomy. However, most of these studies on the so-called ‘religious factor’ (Lenksi, 1961) are US-based, described as one of most religious developed countries in the world (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). What about Europe? Loek Halman’s work on religion shows that there is a clear trend towards secularization in North-Western Europe (e.g., Halman & Draulans, 2004; 2006). One thus wonders what the association between religion and parental values is in this secularized part of the world. In this chapter, we will answer this question by employing data from five North-Western European countries present in all

five EVS rounds (1981, 1990, 1999, 2008, and 2017): Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Great Britain.

### 13.2 Secularization and the Religious Factor in Parental Values

Religious individuals in general prefer obedience more and autonomy less than those who are not religious. The reason for this religious factor can be found in religious doctrine. Religious teachings are traditional and conservative, promoting “divine and filial obedience” (Kim & Wilcox, 2014: 559). Religious people therefore find it important that children are obedient, while autonomy is not strongly encouraged (Starks & Robinson, 2007). In addition, religious messages are spread in religious services and in religious networks, and this will further strengthen these parental values (Starks & Robinson, 2005). However, in the process of secularization, religion gradually loses its social significance (Berger, 1967) and its encompassing role in prescribing traditional values and norms (Halman & Draulans, 2004). Religious institutions such as the church are no longer able to spread their messages through major institutional vehicles like the media, education and politics. Moreover, in secularized countries, the pool of devout people is smaller, which limits the opportunities for close networks with individuals of a similar religion (Perl & Olson, 2000). All this leads to a weakening “impact of religion on the micromotives of the citizens” (Dobbelaere, 1989:38). With respect to parental values, this means that religion simply is not an important driver anymore, making the gap between religious and non-religious individuals in preferences for obedience and autonomy smaller with higher levels of secularization.

However, thinking of the impact of secularization in a linear way may be too simplistic, as it does not consider how the process of secularization leads to changes in the (non)religious population. It is true that in the first stages of secularization, we would expect a diminishing religious factor, as indeed religious institutions lose ground in society and the social control function of religious networks weakens. However, these impacts are felt by the less religious individuals in society first. Secularization will disproportionately affect

the less devout believers: they have less and less incentives to stay connected with their religious congregations and therefore abandon the churches, leaving the religious community to the group of passionate and traditional believers (cf. Wilkins-Laflamme, 2014). Secularization thus produces a sort of purification of the religious population (Achterberg et. al, 2009; Sieben & Halman, 2014), while the non-religious population becomes more diverse. Individuals who choose to be religious in an otherwise secularized society, presumably do so not so much out of tradition or social pressure, but because the message spread by their religion appeals to them. This implies that the remaining religious individuals will more strongly adhere to traditional family values promoted by the churches, such as a preference for obedience and an aversion to autonomy as important qualities to teach children. Thus, in later stages of the secularization process, religion becomes more salient for those who remain religious, which will strengthen the religious factor in parental values.

This is reinforced by mechanisms of cultural defence (Achterberg et. al, 2009). Religious individuals in secularized societies may realize that their way of living is uncommon; they are deviant from or even stigmatized by the growing surrounding non-religious population (Hill & Olson, 2009). As a reaction to this, they will even more strongly hold on to their religious identity. In addition, religious individuals may feel that secularization is a threat to their religious communities, which may not be able to sustain themselves and the services they provide (Hill & Olson, 2009). To prevent this from happening, religious individuals become more actively involved in their congregation, which also facilitates interaction with individuals who share the same religious beliefs (social network function). Secularization thus leads to identity activation and more commitment among believers. This may be reinforced by the ‘supply side of religion’ (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987; Finke & Iannaccone, 1993): churches will mobilize their congregations in a ‘battle’ for believers. They increase their efforts not only to recruit newcomers, but also to bind current members to their congregations. This leads to more religious vitality and commitment (Finke & Stark, 1988).

To sum up, religious identities may become more salient as a reaction to the process of secularization itself. Secularization is seen as a threat to religious

culture, which makes that religious individuals more strongly hold on to their identity and to their religious practices and beliefs in a highly secularized society (Bruce, 2002; 2011). This implies that “that (non) religious identities become intensified and distinctions between religious and non-religious more pronounced” (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2016: 733). Thus, in the first stage of the process of secularization, the gap between religious and non-religious individuals in preferences for obedience and autonomy would become smaller, but in a later stage, this gap would increase again.

### 13.3 Data and Methods

We use data from five North-Western European countries that were present in all five survey rounds of the European Values Study (1981, 1990, 1999, 2008, and 2017): Denmark (final sample size = 8,075), France (n=7,084), Germany (n=10,401), the Netherlands (n=7,083), and Great Britain (n=6,588) (EVS, 2020a; 2020b). Since we are using mostly descriptive analytical techniques, we apply weights provided in EVS so that the distribution of the sample matches the distribution of gender, age (and in some rounds: education and region) within the country’s population.

Respondents were asked to choose up to five qualities they considered to be most desirable from a list of eleven qualities which children can be encouraged to learn at home. We construct two dummy variables which indicate whether the qualities ‘obedience’ and ‘independence’ (the latter indicating autonomy) were chosen or not. Respondents who picked more than five qualities were dropped from the sample (n=1,283). In addition, respondents indicated whether they are a religious person, not a religious person, or a convinced atheist. The latter two categories are combined to indicate being not religious. By aggregating this variable for each country in a specific round, the proportion of people who do not identify as religious at the time of survey indicates the level of secularization. This macro level variable ranges from 0.26 in Denmark in 1981 to 0.62 in Great Britain in 2017. Finally, we measure the religious factor by looking at the gap between religious individuals and non-religious individuals in preferences for obedience (or independence) in a specific country and year (cf. Kalmijn, 2010). For example, 22.9% of the religious individuals in the Neth-

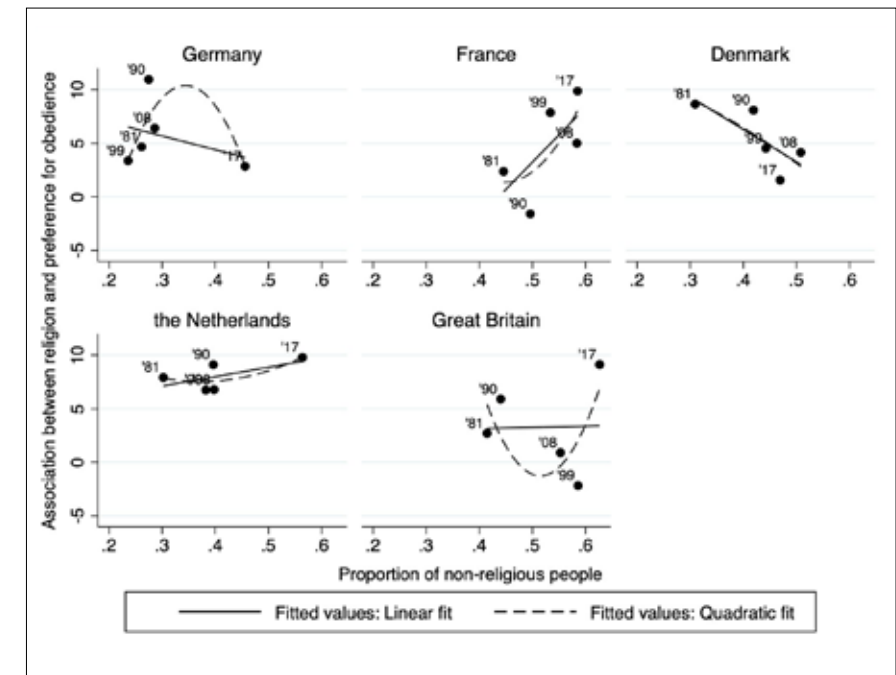
erlands in 1981 prefer obedience, and 15.0% of the non-religious. The gap is thus 7.9 percentage points, and this represents the association between religion and the preference for obedience (the religious factor) in the Netherlands in 1981. We will use aggregate-level bivariate analyses to link the associations between religion and parental values to the levels of secularization in each country and year. We present the results in a graphical way split by country in order to take into account country-specific contexts, such as religious heritage. For example, Denmark and Great Britain have a Protestant tradition, while in France Catholicism is more dominant. Germany and the Netherlands show a mix of Protestant and Catholic denominations.

### 13.4 Results

Figure 13.1 shows the gap between religious and non-religious individuals in preferences for obedience (as a measure of the religious factor) on the vertical axis, and the level of secularization on the horizontal axis for each country separate. The graphs first show that there is an overall trend towards higher levels of secularization in all five countries in the period 1981-2017. In addition, we see that, in general, religious individuals more value obedience as an important quality to teach children than their non-religious counterparts, since the gap in preference for obedience between these two groups is overall positive (the two exceptions being France in 1990 and Great Britain in 1999). However, the graphs display different patterns for the link between secularization and the religious factor. In Germany, we see that the gap between religious and non-religious individuals decreases with higher levels of secularization, as predicted by the secularization paradigm. Alternatively, we could think of Germany as being still in the first stage of secularization, which would confirm the second theoretical perspective as well. In Great Britain, where secularization is at higher levels than in Germany, we observe a U-shaped pattern between secularization and the religious factor, confirming the ideas of both weakening salience of religion in the first stage of secularization, and of purification and religious identity activation in a later stage. Moreover, in France, where levels of secularization in general are higher and increasing, we see that the gap between religious and non-religious individ-

uals in the preference for obedience increases with secularization. We could interpret this as France being in the second stage of secularization, where purification and religious identity activation among the remaining religious individuals lead to a stronger religious factor. However, Denmark and the Netherlands show a pattern that cannot be linked to these theoretical perspectives. In the Netherlands, characterized by a trend from rather low to higher levels of secularization, we see an increasing gap, while in Denmark, with rather low levels of secularization until 2008, a reversed U-shaped pattern is visible.

Figure 13.1 Secularization and the religious factor in the preference for obedience per country

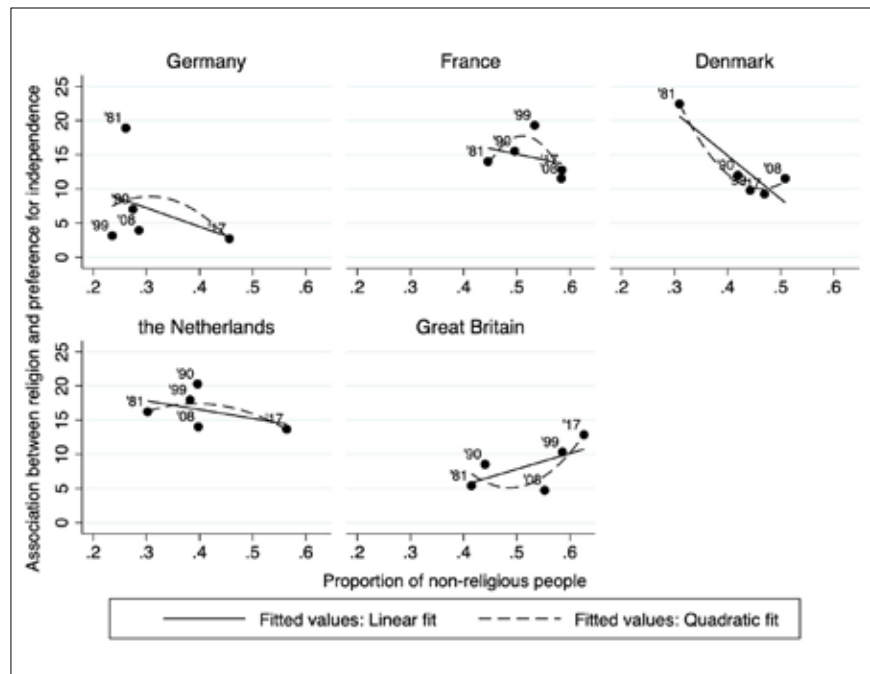


Source: EVS

Note: Plotted on y-axis: Percentage point difference between religious and non-religious populations in preference for obedience.

In Figure 13.2, the graphs are displayed with respect to the religious factor and the preference for independence. In all countries, we observe that non-religious individuals more often prefer this quality than their religious counterparts do. In Germany and Great Britain, we again find confirmation for the U-shaped link with secularization. The patterns in the other three countries are less clear and do not match with our theoretical expectations. The data points are quite scattered in Denmark and the Netherlands, while for France we observe a reversed U-shape.

Figure 13.2 Secularization and the religious factor in the preference for independence per country



Source: EVS

Note: Plotted on y-axis: Percentage point difference between religious and non-religious populations in preference for independence.

### 13.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we set out to investigate changes in the religious factor in parental values in five countries in North-Western Europe in the period 1981-2017: Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. In all countries, we confirmed findings from previous literature that religious individuals prefer obedience more and autonomy less than non-religious individuals. We also showed that all these countries experienced an overall trend towards higher levels of secularization, although starting points and speed are different. This variation in secularization made it possible to investigate two contrasting theoretical perspectives. The first maintained that secularization implies that religion loses its social significance, meaning that the gap between religious and non-religious individuals in preferences for obedience and autonomy would decrease with higher levels of secularization. The second perspective states that this happens in the first stage of the process of secularization only. Once a society is highly secularized, processes of purification and religious activation among the remaining religious individuals will strengthen the religious factor. We observed such a U-shaped pattern in Germany and Great Britain and, for obedience only, in France. However, in Denmark and the Netherlands, the patterns are quite mixed and not in line with our theoretical perspectives.

How to explain these variations? A first suggestion is that we maybe need to take a closer look at diversity in the religious landscape in the different countries. For example, Sieben and Halman (2014) showed that there is heterogeneity within and between religious denominations in the Netherlands when it comes to religious beliefs and parental values. Especially the Roman Catholic population, which are a large part of the religious Dutch, is rather diverse in this respect. Another line of thinking was suggested by Loek Halman himself when he stated that non-religious individuals “do not generally take anti-Christian stances” (Halman & Van Ingen, 2015: 624). The non-religious population may become more heterogeneous in the process of secularization, being a mix of atheists, agnostics, spiritual people, and former believers (who may range from individuals with strict anti-church sentiments to those who rather care for Christian values). This diversity may blur the association between religion and parental values, making it quite complex to arrive at theo-

retical expectations. Both suggestions call for more in-depth country studies focusing on heterogeneity within religious and non-religious populations to unravel the trends observed here.

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