

16. TRUST THY NEIGHBOUR:

CONTEXTUALIZING THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN NON-RELIGIOSITY AND TOLERANCE

Peter Achterberg

Christof van Mol

Abstract

Over the years, Loek Halman has had a vast interest in investigating religious change and its ramifications. In this chapter, his neighbours at the Department of Sociology study how people with different religious backgrounds differ in their tolerance towards neighbours. Based on the last wave of the European Values Study, they investigate under what conditions religious people and the religious ‘nones’ – agnostic, atheistic and spiritual-minded people – are more tolerant. Their findings indicate that non-religious groups are less tolerant compared to religious ones in more secularized countries. On the other hand, their findings also suggest that in more secularized countries, tolerance levels are somewhat higher.

16.1 Introduction

Throughout his career, secularization theory, the European Values Study (EVS), and international comparative research played a prominent role in the work of Loek Halman (see e.g. Halman & Draulans, 2006; Halman & Van Ingen, 2015; Sieben & Halman, 2014; Halman & Riis, 2002). In several of his papers, he also touched upon the issue of tolerance (see e.g. Muis *et al.*, 2019; Halman & Luijkx, 2008), which is an important sentiment for harmonious neighbour relations (Baumgartner, 1988; cited in Cheshire, Fitzgerald & Liu, 2019). As Loek is our close neighbour within the department of Sociology at Tilburg University, in this chapter we therefore focus on trust in neighbours, relying on the EVS. We particularly focus on the relationship between non-religiosity and tolerance. After all, in the academic literature, secularization is linked to both more and less tolerance (Nandy, 1988; Gorski & Altinordu, 2008). Our analysis makes two main contributions to scientific understanding of this relationship.

First, recent scholarship on the issue points to the importance of distinguishing between several groups among the so-called religious ‘nones’ (Lim, MacGregor & Putnam, 2010; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2015), that is, individuals who are not religious and/or no longer religious. Smith & Baker (2009) were among the first to suggest that ‘the nones’ should not be uniformly treated. They found distinct categories among the ‘nones’, who differ in their world-views and political outlook. While, of course, it will be unclear how to accurately define different categories among the unaffiliated, in this study, extending Smith and Baker’s distinction, we discern three categories: ‘atheists’, ‘agnostic people’, and the ‘spiritually-minded’. The first category consists of atheists, who do not affiliate with a religious denomination and deny the overall existence of a God (Bullivant, 2008). The second category consists of agnostic people, who are sceptical about the existence and nature of God and simply ‘do not know’ (Bullivant, 2008). They generally do not believe there is a way of finding out whether God exists. The last category consists of spiritually-minded, who generally appeal to “multiple traditions, styles, and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages” (Houtman & Aupers, 2007: 306).

Second, Loek Halman indicated in his work that secularization is particularly

associated with greater acceptance of abortion, divorce and euthanasia, but not homosexuality, in Western Europe (Halman & Van Ingen, 2015). However, the opinions of Eastern Europeans on these four issues appeared to be far more conservative. As such, Loek’s work underlines the importance of adopting an international comparative approach when analysing the relationship between secularization and tolerance. Tolerance, furthermore, generally correlates positively with trust (Frederiksen, 2019; Van Doorn, 2014), and international variation in levels of trust and tolerance are reported in other studies as well (see e.g. Borgonovi, 2012).

Consequently, in this chapter we study tolerance towards neighbours among religious ‘nones’, taking into account a variety of profiles that exist within this group, as well as how country-level differences in secularization affect trust in their neighbours.

16.2 Theory and Hypotheses

In the literature, two broad lines of thought can be discerned about the effects of secularization and Christian religiosity on trust and tolerance. On the one hand there are scholars who worry about the ‘dissolution of the moral space’ (Sztompka, 2002: 64) in advanced secularized societies. A similar view can be obtained from Etzioni (2001: 360), who argued that ‘without a shared moral culture, ordering life will have to rely on laws not undergirded by moral commitments, which (...) has numerous ill consequences. (...) social order most continually be constructed – or men (and women) be wolf to one another.’ Remarkably, this theoretical view is supported by ideas on the ties between religiosity and populist voting behaviour. In this literature, Christians are shielded or ‘inoculated’ against voting for intolerant radical right-wing parties, as Christians are sharing ideals of stewardship and solidarity, promoting mutual tolerance and trust between all sorts of groups (Arzheimer and Carter, 2009; Siegers & Jedinger, 2020). This theoretical perspective leads to the expectation that the religious ‘nones’ are less inclined to be tolerant towards their neighbours (hypothesis 1a) than their religious counterparts, and that this is especially so in highly secularized contexts (hypothesis 1b).

On the other hand, there is a far more optimistic perspective on the effects of secularization on trust and tolerance. In this view, the merits of modernization are put central stage. Emerson and Hartman (2006: 130), for example, argue that ‘modernization (...) squeezes out religious influences from many of its spheres and greatly reduces religion’s role in the others. (...) Given this vast pluralism, societies and their governments are able to claim less and less as common to all. What rise to the top as shared values are tolerance and acceptance. These become the core values of highly modernized societies.’ Similarly, Inglehart and Welzel (2005) also predict that in these highly modernized and fully secularized countries, a highly tolerant cultural climate is fostered. This view is supported by the literature on religiosity and populism. In this view, religiosity (might) foster(s) nativism, authoritarianism and intolerance of out-groups as it promotes a closed-mindset (Montgomery and Winter, 2015). Following this perspective, one might expect that the religious ‘nones’ are more inclined to be tolerant towards their neighbours (hypothesis 2a), and that this is especially so in highly secularized countries (hypothesis 2b).

16.3 Data and Measures

In order to test the two main hypotheses, we analyse the last wave of the European Values Study – in which Loek Halman played a pivotal role. We analyse all countries included in the data: Albania, Azerbaijan, Austria, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Belarus, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, North Macedonia, and Great Britain. In our analyses, we include information of 53,533 individuals in these countries – which means that about 3,197 individuals there were one or multiple missing values on their responses to the questions we included in the analysis.

For brevity’s sake, we only discuss the most relevant information about the measures we used. For more information about the measurements, the data

package on the website of the Open Science Foundation can be consulted.¹

In order to measure our dependent variable *tolerance towards neighbours*, we used the questions about which of the groups of people individuals would not like to have as neighbours. We constructed a scale based on ‘people of a different race’, ‘heavy drinkers’, ‘immigrants/ foreign workers’, and ‘drug addicts’. Additionally, there was information on the category of ‘homosexuals’, yet we decided to not include this information in the analyses reported here as previous research shows that there are very strong ties between religious background and acceptance of homosexuality (Halman and Van Ingen, 2015).² Factor analyses on the dichotomous responses on these four items yielded one factor with an eigenvalue of 1.76, explaining about 44% of variance within the four questions. The scale (which had a reliability $\alpha = 0.57$) was calculated as a mean score for each respondent who had at least three valid responses ($M = 1.55$, $sd = 0.28$). Higher scores on this scale stand for more tolerance toward all sorts of groups of neighbours.

Based on the question which statement comes closest to the respondents’ beliefs, we measured their *religious background*, our main independent variable. Persons who indicated that they believed that ‘there is a personal’ God (39%) were coded as religious persons and constitute our reference category. Persons who indicated that ‘there is some sort of spirit or life force’ (33%) were coded as spiritual-minded people. Those who chose ‘I don’t really know what to think’ (14%) were coded as agnostic people. And those indicating that ‘I don’t really think there is any sort of spirit, God or life force’ (14%) were coded as atheists.

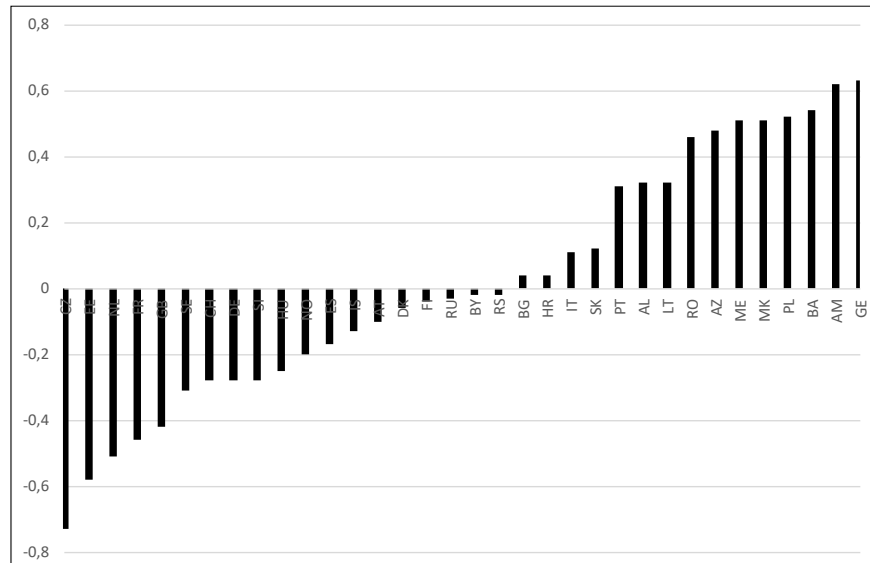
Our country-level variable, *nation-level religiosity*, is a construct of multiple items. At the individual level we used information about membership of a religious denomination (dichotomized), on belief in a personal god (used above as well), in church participation (on a seven point scale) and on confidence in the church (on a four-point scale). After standardizing the answers to these

¹ https://osf.io/v8hda/?view_only=e516ebc15e894dc996b9b45d63fcf6e3

² Inclusion of this item does not yield substantially different results than the ones presented in this chapter.

items, we constructed an individual-level scale ($\alpha = 0.76$) measuring religiosity, which we then, in a next step, aggregated to the national level. Higher scores on this measure for nation-level religiosity stand for more religiosity in a nation. Figure 16.1 shows average nation-level religiosity.

Figure 16.1 Differences in nation-level religiosity



Source: EVS 2020

In our analyses, we controlled for the effects of age, education, social class, and gender. Given the short nature of this chapter, we did not add control variables at the country level.

16.4 Results

In order to test the hypotheses, we estimated multi-level models using the Mixed-methods command in IBM SPSS Statistics 24. As a first step, we estimated an empty model, which allows to determine how much of the variance in the

dependent variable can be explained at the country level. The Intra Class Correlation indicated that about 18 percent of the differences in tolerance towards neighbours can be explained at the national level, indicating the need for a multi-level analysis. Next, we estimated two multi-level models to test our hypotheses.

Table 16.1 Multilevel regression models predicting tolerance towards neighbours

	Model 1	Model 2
Fixed effects	Main model	Interaction effects
Constant	1.578 (0.021)	1.584 (0.021)
<i>Religious background</i>		
Religious (=ref)	--	--
Atheist	0.003 (0.003)	0.011 (0.008)
Agnostic	0.002 (0.004)	0.005 (0.007)
Spiritual-minded	0.009 (0.003)**	0.006 (0.004)
Nation-level religiosity	-0.082 (0.055)	-0.113 (0.055)*
<i>Interactions</i>		
Atheist*Nation-level religiosity	--	0.086 (0.022)***
Agnostic*Nation-level religiosity	--	0.078 (0.019)***
Spiritual-minded*Nation-level religiosity	--	0.054 (0.012)***
Random effects		
Individual-level variance	0.066	0.065
Country-level variance	0.014	0.14
Slope atheist *10 ⁻²	--	0.125
Slope agnostic	--	0.092
Slope spiritual-minded	--	0.017
Deviance	6387.598	6292.242
DF	21	27

Source: EVS 2020

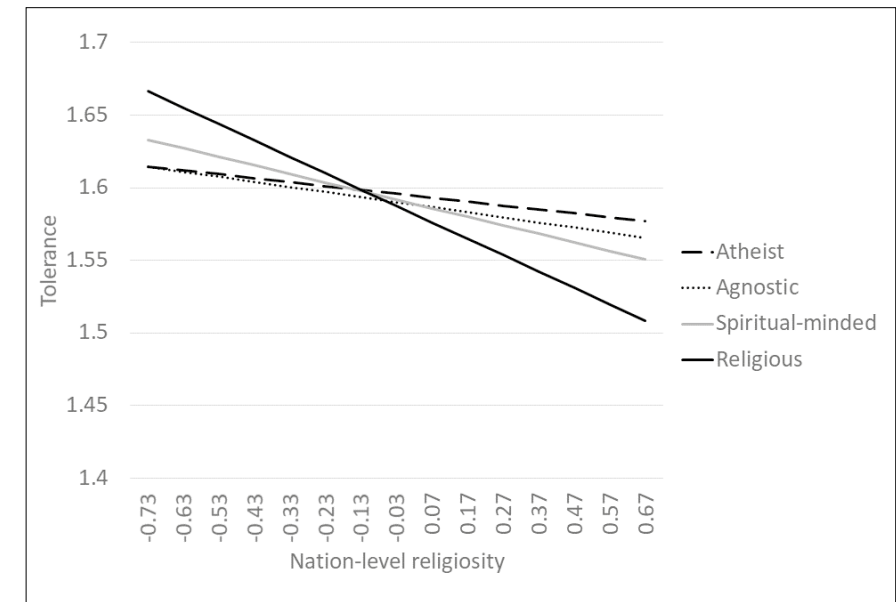
Notes: REML estimation, Bs and Standard Errors between brackets shown; N=53,533 in 34 countries; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (Two-sided tests for significance); the effects of the control variables (age, education, class, gender) are not shown here but can be consulted in the data package.

As can be observed in Table 16.1, we did not find much evidence in support for hypotheses 1a and 2a. In model 1, we only observe a correlation between spiritual-minded people and tolerance towards neighbours, indicating that, on average, spiritual-minded individuals are slightly more likely to be tolerant towards their neighbours compared to religious people. The other two non-religious groups, however, are equally tolerant towards neighbours as religious people. As such, hypothesis 1a and 2a can be rejected.

The second model adds two sets of estimations as compared to model 1. First, we added an estimation of the variances of the slopes for the effects of the religious background dummies. The results show that these are significantly different across countries. This is a prerequisite for the estimation of the cross-level interactions between these dummies and national-level religiosity, which is the second set of estimations that are added in model 2. Each of the three cross-level interactions is statistically significant.

Figure 16.2 graphs the interactions that are estimated in Model 2. The x-axis depicts national-level religiosity, and the y-axis shows the predicted tolerance towards neighbours for the three non-religious groups (as compared to the religious). The figure shows that the three non-religious groups are less tolerant than the religious group in more secular societies (the left-hand side of the figure), and that these groups are more tolerant towards neighbours in more religious contexts. This clearly refutes hypothesis 2b, while it is in favour of hypothesis 1b. As non-religious live in more secularized societies, they are less likely to be tolerant towards their neighbours compared to their religious counterparts. It needs to be noted though, that the general level of tolerance is higher in these nations than in more religious ones.

Figure 16.2 Predicted tolerance by the cross-level interaction of national-level religiosity and individual-level religious background



Source: EVS 2020

16.5 Conclusion

In this short chapter, we investigated the tolerance of the so-called ‘nones’. As is common in much sociological work, the chapter does not unequivocally lead to either the conclusion that secularisation leads to more tolerance or that it leads to less tolerance. Instead, the conclusion brings forward a far more nuanced conclusion. On the one hand, gloomy side thinkers are right in the sense that non-religious groups are less tolerant compared to religious ones in more secularized countries. On the other hand, our findings seem to indicate that in more secularized countries, tolerance levels are somewhat higher, showing how right more optimistic scholars are on this subject.

Either way, these findings warrant more research. Not only on future waves of

the EVS, which will show how these trends will develop. But more so, on the exact, underlying mechanisms that are at work here. These may answer questions as to why religious people are more tolerant in more secular nations, as well as what exactly explains the marked differences between the agnostic, spiritual-minded and atheist groups in their trust of neighbours.

As Loek himself indicated in his first scientific publication (Halman 1991, 140-141, authors' translation from Dutch): 'Dutch people are well known for their tolerance [...], but the numbers [of Loek's analysis] indicate that Dutch people do not excel in this compared to other countries.' Luckily, for us, Loek is not a very typical Dutchman. Only one (respectively two) walls separated our offices from Loek's office. Yet, Loek has always been an extremely tolerant neighbour.

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