KU LEUVEN

FACULTEIT SOCIALE WETENSCHAPPEN

In the Shadow of Secularization Theory:
Neglected Issues in the Social-Scientific Study of Spirituality

Paul TROMP

Proefschrift aangeboden tot het verkrijgen van de
graad van Doctor in de Sociale Wetenschappen

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1

Introduction: Neglected Issues in the Social-Scientific Study of Spirituality

Paul Tromp

Secularization and the Luckmann Legacy

Introduction

What is the fate of religion in society as the latter increasingly modernizes? This is clearly one of the pivotal questions in sociology since its classical beginnings (Durkheim 1973 [1898], 1995 [1912]; Weber 1948 [1919], 1963 [1922]) and *secularization theory* has provided an answer that became prevalent in mid-twentieth century sociology of religion: as the process of modernization unfolds, religion is increasingly threatened, ultimately resulting in societal, organizational, and individual secularization, i.e., secularization occurring both at the macro, meso, and micro levels of society (Dobbelaere 1981, 2002). The fate of traditional Christian religion in Western-Europe constitutes a case in point. There is no denying that compared to the heydays of the 1950's, it has meanwhile declined significantly and lost much of its former dominance, appeal and legitimacy. Secularization theorists show convincing explanations for this downward trend, but however useful and valuable these explanations have been for the sociology of religion, I argue that the discipline's traditional obsession with secularization theory also has a massive downside. By placing this theory on a pedestal, it has been overshadowing (or obfuscating) other important developments that have meanwhile been taking place in the religious landscape of the West. Noteworthy are the increase in spiritual self-identifications as well as the emergence and growth of a post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality. I argue that secularization theory's ascendancy in the sociology of religion has thwarted – intentionally or not – the social-scientific study of these two developments, thereby limiting the discipline's progress. Specifically, this unwanted situation has resulted in four neglected key issues which are explicated below. The first problem is directly tackled below while the other three issues are addressed as best as possible in the subsequent four empirical chapters. To be clear from the outset, the purpose of this dissertation is not to demonstrate that secularization theory is wrong or (un)tenable, but to indicate that it has diverted our attention away from four key issues in the social-scientific study of spirituality and to shine light on these questions.

Secularization as Structural Differentiation

Secularization theory's practically undisputed mainstay is the *thesis of structural differentiation*: as the process of modernization unfolds, society's various institutional realms increasingly separate from one another. The religious realm is not exempt and mutates into "one relativized sphere among other relativized spheres" (Chaves 1994, 752). Consequently, social functions no longer fall under the authority and responsibility of the church, but are increasingly handled by specialized institutions, each following its own specific logic. This differentiation process has had enormous consequences for the status of traditional Christian religion in modern western societies as it has lost its ability to morally overarch all of society as some sort of 'sacred canopy' (Berger 1967). More precisely, traditional Christian religion has been losing its collectively shared status, its monopoly on the religious truth, and its ability to influence the other institutional realms in society, such as the family, the economy, science, politics and art. Religion increasingly retreats from the public to the private sphere and increasingly loses its doctrinal coherence and social significance as a result, a process that is known as the *privatization of religion*. These developments enable citizens to make their own choices when it comes to religious matters, including the possibility of not being religious at all (Luckmann 1967; Wilson 1976, 1982).

Secularization as Privatization of Religion

Where Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) agreed about the way in which reality is socially constructed, they disagreed about the consequences of *religious privatization,* resulting in Berger's (1967) *The Sacred Canopy* and Luckmann's (1967) *The Invisible Religion,* undoubtedly two of the most influential works in mid-twentieth century sociology of religion. In Berger's view, the erosion of the Christian religious monopoly fuels the emergence of a range of co-existing and competing religious truth claims that subverts the plausibility of each of them, leading more and more people to become less and less religious. According to Luckmann, however, processes of *religious privatization* and *religious decline* do not necessarily and automatically coincide. He rather maintains that the former ignites a powerful process of *religious change* as it fuels the emergence of a "market of ultimate significance" on which religious consumers shop for strictly personal packages of meaning, based on individual tastes, preferences and likings (Luckmann 1967, 201).

The emergence and growth of these privatized types of religion also lay bare one of sociology of religion's major limitations, i.e., its traditional and one-sided focus on church membership and attendance, adherence to official church doctrines, participation in church rituals, on traditional Christian religion in short. This obscures profound transformations on the ground and makes these privatized types of religion more or less invisible (Idem). The latter have meanwhile come to be associated, also by Luckmann (1996) himself, with non-theistic and post-Christian 'alternative' spiritualities of the 'New Age' type (e.g., Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996). Others have meanwhile copied this description of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality as simply reflecting personal picks, varying from one individual to the next, from a pluralistic *market of ultimate significance*. Indeed, it has been incessantly portrayed as 'do-it-yourself-religion' (Baerveldt 1996), 'diffuse religion' (Bruce 2002), and "low-salience […] pick-and-mix religion" (Idem, 105; see also Hamilton 2000). Possamai (2003; 2005) has called it 'religious consumption à la carte' and 'consumer religion par excellence' with religious consumers shopping in a 'spiritual supermarket' (Lyon 2000).

Accounts of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality such as the ones just cited are omnipresent in the sociology of religion and beyond, and most of these interpretations can be traced back to, and are a legacy of, Luckmann's (1967) *The Invisible Religion.* Taken together, secularization theorists and Luckmann followers alike have created an image of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality as a privatized type of religion in two respects: 1) it is *culturally incoherent*, i.e., those concerned do not share a particular worldview, and 2) it is *socially and publicly insignificant*, i.e., it has no influence whatsoever beyond the strictly private domain. Indeed, these are two different but logically related aspects of privatization, because if post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality is indeed a privatized type of religion, and those concerned are just dabbling on their own behind closed doors, then there is also no type or form of religion that, in one way or another, can be brought into the public domain.

Both aspects of privatization are discussed and critically evaluated below. Since only the *cultural incoherence* claim is important for this dissertation, much more attention will be given to this aspect of privatization than to the other claim about *public insignificance*, not because the latter is less relevant than the former, but because the latter is not directly addressed in this PhD thesis. For that reason, it makes sense to start with the claim about *public insignificance* and to discuss the one about *cultural incoherence* thereafter.

Privatization as Public Insignificance

Prominent secularization theorists (Bruce 1996, 2002; Wilson 1976; 1998) have categorized post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality as a *cult* phenomenon, i.e., as a form of religious organization that rebels against institutionalized Christianity (Toews 2008). For Wilson, the emergence and growth of cults such as the post-Christian ones epitomize the decline of the social significance of religion. In his view, the New Age movement was nothing more than a (counter)cultural reaction against institutionalized Christianity and for that reason did not exert any social influence by itself (Idem). For Wilson, the post-Christian cults epitomize

> 'the religion of your choice,' the highly privatized preference that reduces religion to the significance of pushpin, poetry, or popcorns. They have no real consequence for other social institutions, for political power structures, for technological constraints and controls. They add nothing to any prospective reintegration of society, and contribute nothing toward the culture by which a society might live (1976, 96).

Bruce (1996, 224) has more recently argued something along the same lines, namely that most of what falls under the umbrella of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality is of "limited salience, even for the believers and practitioners" themselves. Even in the most favorable circumstances, when New Age beliefs and practices *do* impact people's lives significantly, e.g., resulting in profound internal transformations, corresponding external effects stay out. "There is little or no impact on the world at large. The state, civic society, the polity, and the economy remain unaffected" (Idem, 225). Socialization into post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality is moreover inconceivable for Bruce, asserting that "the transmission of diffuse beliefs is unnecessary and […] impossible" (2002, 99), causing it to die out inevitably.

As stated before, the claim about post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality being *socially and publicly insignificant* is not directly addressed in this dissertation, hence its critical evaluation is limited to a discussion of recent empirical findings about the transmission of New Age spirituality in Australia (Hoo 2021) (demonstrating its social significance) and Oprah Winfrey's overt endorsement and promotion of New Age spirituality in the United States (demonstrating its public significance). Readers seeking additional rebuttals of the 'insignificance claim' are referred to studies showing that socialization into New Age spirituality is possible after all (Aupers & Houtman 2006, see also Houtman & Aupers 2007;

Heelas 2006; Hammer 2004) and that the latter has meanwhile intruded the public realm of modern work organizations (Aupers & Houtman 2006, see also Aupers 2002)

Assuming that spiritual socialization is indeed possible, the next logical follow-up question is *where* it takes place? Sure, spiritual seekers read books, magazines and webpages, watch YouTube videos, listen to podcasts, use mindfulness apps, and meditate and contemplate *in private*, but it does not end there. They visit 'New Age' bookshops (Hanegraaff 1996), spiritual centers and retreats (Aupers 2005), holistic health fairs (Sutcliffe 2003) and mind-body-spirit festivals (Hamilton 2000). They attend study groups, discussion groups, classes, courses, trainings, programs and workshops (Bloch 1998; Roeland et al. 2010), both offline *and* online. Indeed, Misha Hoo (2021) has recently studied the Australian spiritual milieu and charted a "New Age Facebook network" that "facilitates the *exchange* of New Age ideas, experiences, services, and products […] and *promotes* ideologies of spiritual growth, awakening, love, and 'like-minded' community" (603, emphasis added). This online network of 'New Agers' has "extensive national coverage" and consists of no less than seventy interconnected Facebook groups that "act as *forums* for community engagement" (Idem, emphasis added). She surveyed over a thousand Australian 'New Agers' and found that conversations and discussions about spirituality were not only held between like-minded members of online Facebook groups. On the contrary, an absolute majority (i.e. 87%) "*openly discuss[ed]* their spiritual beliefs and practices with others including friends, family members, co-workers, acquaintances, and social contacts" (608, emphasis added). Moreover, a large majority (i.e. 74%) also *discussed* these matters with people who may not (yet) share the same views and who may not (yet) take part in the same activities as they do. So what we are witnessing here, both online and in the 'real' world, is what Besecke (2005, 179) has called an "evolving societal conversation about transcendent meaning".

Besides demonstrating its strong potential for social transmission, Hoo (2021) also provides evidence of actual intergenerational transmission of New Age spirituality. Examining why people initially got involved in New Age practices, she found that 20% of her respondents were actually raised by family members who were engaged in spiritual activities at the time. During their childhood, they were exposed to the spiritual pursuits of their parents, subsequently became involved themselves, and have retained these interests as grownups. This process of spiritual socialization has the potential of repeating itself once

this new generation of seekers[1] has their own children, beholding both their parents *and* grandparents' spiritual engagement. But it does not end with mere passive observations. Of those respondents raising kids, nine out of ten actually teach their children about, and involve them in, their own spiritual practices. Of course, not all these kids stay engaged with New Age activities when they grow older, but it does show the strong potential of New Age spirituality being transmitted from one generation to the next. In fact, every fifth seeker currently active in the Australian spiritual milieu owes their participation to their parents, corroborating earlier evidence of spiritual socialization.

Post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality is not completely invisible to the public eye either. New Age shops, centers, fairs, and festivals are all situated in the public sphere. Take for instance St James's Church Piccadilly in the heart of London where New Age activities are fostered and premier New Age leaders such as Marianne Williamson and Eckhart Tolle have been invited to speak (Chryssides 2007; Alternatives, n.d.). Oprah Winfrey even featured these two New Age celebrities in her American talk show, which is indeed the "highest-rated talk show in television history" (Rose 2009). Besides giving them a platform, Oprah openly and enthusiastically endorsed Williamson's book about *A Course in Miracles*, the latter being a channeled work that is often referred to by critics as the 'New Age Bible'. Knowing Oprah, she handed out free copies of Williamson's book to everyone in the audience, she read aloud some of her favorite passages, and said it was one of her favorite books, making it a *New York Times Bestseller* in no time. Years later, Williamson has taught *A Course in Miracles* on a daily basis *for an entire year* to millions of listeners of *Oprah & Friends*, i.e., Oprah's own radio channel. Listeners were of course strongly recommended to buy of copy of the 'New Age Bible' for their own reference (Smith 2007). Oprah has also recommended two of Eckhart Tolle's books to her audience, first *The Power of Now* in her magazine *O* with an average readership of 2.4 million (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2011), later *A New Earth* in *Oprah Book's Club,* a segment of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* with millions of viewers a day. Both books benefitted greatly from Oprah's public endorsement, they both quickly became *#1 New York Times Bestsellers* thereafter. Only four years after it was first published, five million copies of *A New Earth* had already been sold in North America alone with nearly 3.5 million of them immediately after Oprah's endorsement. She also teamed up

[1] to borrow a term from Roof (1993).

with Tolle to create a ten-part series of webinars with each episode being devoted to a discussion of one of the book's chapters. These webinars have been accessed at least 35 million times and may have been responsible for the other 1.5 million copies sold. These examples clearly show that post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality is neither invisible to the public eye nor publicly insignificant, corroborating earlier evidence cited by Aupers and Houtman (2006). Watching television, listening to the radio, visiting bookstores and even churches all expose the general public to New Age beliefs and practices, providing therefore ample opportunities for curious and seeking individuals to engage with New Age spirituality.

Privatization as Cultural Incoherence

Sociologists of religion who have studied post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality extensively as well as those who have merely observed it from a critical distance, have claimed it to be *culturally incoherent*, i.e., with those concerned not sharing a particular worldview. With his voluminous monograph on *'New Age' und moderne Religion,* Christoph Bochinger (1994) clearly falls into the former category, but nevertheless concludes that "'New Age' is not an even remotely homogeneous 'Weltanschauung' or 'Ideology'" (135). Rather than referring to an underlying worldview that is culturally coherent, 'New Age' is nothing more than a "heuristic field", a "phantom", a "syndrome", and a "label" (129, 35, 24, 35; see also Hanegraaff 1996, 377-380 for a critical discussion of Bochinger's work).

Despite a view somewhat less radical than Bochinger's, prominent secularization theorist Steve Bruce (2002) has nevertheless characterized post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality as a "diffuse" and "precarious" type of religion that "makes a shared life unlikely" (91). It is moreover "hard to pin down" because it comprises a "series of *loosely* interrelated themes" (2011, 102, emphasis added). It is a "low-salience world of pick-and-mix religion" (2002, 105) that lacks the power and authority to overrule the "fissile tendencies of personal preference" (2011, 114). "For all its talk of community, the New Age is the embodiment of individualism" (1996, 225). Hence, a shared life cannot be sustained, a shared faith cannot be created, agreements cannot be reached, the mutation of ideas cannot be averted, making doctrinal cohesion virtually impossible (1996; 2000; 2002; 2011).

Besides Steve Bruce, other prominent sociologists of religion like Robert Wuthnow and James Lewis have made similar, but somewhat less pronounced, comments about post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality. Whereas Wuthnow called it an "eclectic mixture of beliefs

and practices" (1998, 175) and a "do-it-yourself faith oriented towards good feelings" (2003, 23), Lewis is somewhat more ambiguous in his remarks. On the one hand, he acknowledges "[t]he existence of […] a coherent subculture" (1992, 2), but simultaneously describes it as "amorphous" and "vague" (Idem, 5), making it hard to determine where New Age spirituality begins and where it ends.

Finally, also lesser well-known sociologists like Anna Kubiak struggle with "defining the New Age" (2007, 255) and "grasping the […] phenomenon" (Idem, 257). In her view, "there is nothing which can be designated New Age because it is not possible to delineate its borders or to clearly characterise participants in Aquarian spirituality" (Idem, 255). One New Ager may be ""practising Reiki and the other bioenergy therapy", they nevertheless "may have nothing in common" (Idem, 257), i.e., they do not even remotely share a common worldview or ideology. She even goes so far as to assert that "no structure or border […] can be drawn between New Age and such phenomena as the ecological movement, feminism, fantasy and science fiction" (Idem, 255). Similar to Bruce, she calls New Age spirituality a "diffused religion" that is in "constant transgression" (Idem).

However, when we turn our attention to a more specialized literature on post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality (e.g., Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Campbell 2007), it becomes all the more evident that we cannot accept the aforementioned claims as truth. Indeed, compared with the two most important manifestations of traditional Christian religion, viz. 'Church' and 'Biblical Christianity' (Woodhead 2004), New Age spirituality is profoundly different. Seen from the latter's perspective, the former two manifestations are both deeply problematic, 'Church Christianity' for emphasizing hierarchism, sacramentalism and sacerdotalism (hence, corresponding largely with Catholicism) and 'Biblical' Christianity for underscoring strict obedience to theological and moral conservatism (hence, corresponding largely with Protestantism). For New Age spirituality does not conceive of the sacred as a transcendent personal God who has created the world and who makes demands on believers. It rather understands the divine as an immanent, diffuse, and impersonal spirit, life force or energy that is – and always has been – present in the world and the cosmos. It as such replaces the Christian dualism between God and creation by holism, i.e. the notion that at a deeper level invisible unity exists, because everything within the cosmos is in fact connected through this divine spirit, energy or life force (Campbell 2007). This implies that the world is neither inanimate nor soulless, but rather that the cosmos is alive,

changing and evolving constantly. Due to the omnipresence of the sacred, it can also be found within each and every individual in the form of a spiritual self that most of the time remains concealed underneath a self that is viewed as ordinary, mundane, socialized, and false (Houtman and Tromp 2021). With this, the Christian notion of sacerdotalism is dismissed because the 'laity' are now no less sacred than the 'clergy'. In Heelas' (1996, 19) words, "the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the 'Self' itself is to experience 'God', 'the Goddess', the 'Source', 'Christ Consciousness', the 'inner child', the 'way of the heart', or, most simply and [. . .] most frequently, 'inner spirituality'".

Rather than salvation in the traditional Christian sense – i.e., being released from suffering by an eternal life in the Kingdom of God – its New Age rendition takes shape as an escape from the pressures and demands made by society and its institutions. This can be achieved by 'listening to one's heart' or one's 'inner voice', i.e. one's personal feelings, intuitions, and emotions, understood as emanations of the spiritual self that lies within. In seeking salvation from suffering adherents of New Age spirituality thus rely on an epistemology of personal experience, also known as gnosis, rather than on an epistemology of belief, which holds "the ultimate truth" to be "revealed to man from some transcendental sphere" (Hanegraaff 1996, 519).

New Age consequently heavily relativizes the authoritative status of external sources and treats religious traditions, dogmas, creeds, clergy, charismatic leaders, and self-proclaimed experts who claim to have a hold on the absolute and exclusive truth with suspicion. Instead any human being is seen as capable of having direct experiential access to the sacred. Adherents of New Age spirituality are therefore radically de-traditionalized and anti-authoritarian, rejecting "voices of authority associated with established orders […] even rejecting 'beliefs'", (Heelas 1996, 22) to the effect that "prescriptions of others, of tradition, of experts, of religious texts, and all such external sources are not considered legitimate" (Adams & Haaken 1987, 502-503). Indeed, they are 'epistemological individualists' (Wallis 1984, 100) with "voices of authority emanating from experts, charismatic leaders and established traditions being mediated by way of inner experience" (Heelas 1996, 21). In the end, then, "there is […] no other authority than personal, inner experience" (Hanegraaff 1996, 519).

While external sources are therefore denied authority, they are not dismissed altogether. This is because deep down all religious traditions are held to be identical,

interchangeable, and equally valid because they ultimately all worship and refer to the same divine and universal spiritual source. Hence, elements from various traditions are freely combined in ways that make sense to the individuals in question (Houtman and Tromp 2021). These notions are known as perennialism and bricolage, respectively. Needless to say, the least dualistic and most mystically-oriented religious traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Gnosticism, Islamic Sufism, Jewish Kabbalah and Christian mysticism) are New Age's favorites (Hanegraaff 1996), precisely because they prioritize personal spiritual feelings and experiences of the divine over religion's institutional, doctrinal, dogmatic and ritual aspects (Houtman & Tromp 2021).

On the basis of the previous discussion, claims about post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality being *culturally incoherent* cannot be sustained. A thorough examination of a more specialized literature (e.g., Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Campbell 2007) in fact reveals a solid set of logically interrelated ideas (or core tenets) that are central to the worldview of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality. Although some of the claims made by Luckmann and his followers are not totally misplaced, like the ones about spirituality's alleged eclecticism and individualism, they are rather superficial and limited, because they overestimate the diverse, fragmented and individualized character of the holistic milieu. What these observers of New Age have failed to notice is that this individualism is in fact a distinctive feature of those active in the holistic milieu and therefore collectively embraced by the latter, to the extent that it almost reaches the status of a "dogma of non-conformity", as Houtman and Tromp (2021, 47) have put it. As spiritual practitioners and teachers all strongly encourage participants to 'listen to their hearts', to 'follow their own spiritual paths', and to take their personal feelings, intuitions and emotions seriously, they actually motivate their clients and group members to engage in individual practices of spiritual seeking and bricolage. Indeed, taking this advice to heart almost inevitably results in a milieu that *appears* rather diverse, fragmented and individualized from the outside, because when everyone starts following their own spiritual paths, then everyone will, almost by definition, end up with very different (combinations of) activities. All these individual journeys are moreover far from being straightforward as the preferences and interests of these spiritual seekers are generally short-lived. Rather than committing themselves to merely one specific idea, group or practice, they usually combine a full range of them. In and around Kendal alone, a relatively small town in England, Heelas and

Woodhead (2005, 24) encountered no less than fifty-three distinct spiritually significant activities varying from "aromatherapy to Buddhism, circle dancing to the Alexander Technique, [and from] naturopathy to reiki" with some of those seekers indeed participating in more than one activity at a time. Critics usually cite precisely this radical pluralism and diversity of the holistic milieu to demonstrate that post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality is incoherent, fuzzy, diffuse and eclectic. A closer look reveals however that this type of spirituality is in fact "socially constructed" with those adhering to it being "socialized into a spiritual discourse about the self" (Houtman & Aupers 2007, 317; see also Hammer 2004; Heelas 2006), i.e., a culturally coherent and collectively shared ideology or *Weltanschauung* that encourages, stimulates, produces, and therefore ultimately accounts for the omnipresence of spiritual seeking and bricolage in the holistic milieu (see also Houtman & Tromp 2021). In conclusion, the diverse, fragmented and individualized character of the holistic milieu "*results from* rather than *contradicts* the existence of a coherent doctrine of being and well-being" (Aupers & Houtman 2006, 206, emphasis in original).

"Studying Religious Decline Is More Important than Studying Religious Change"

Since the end of the Second World War, massive cultural changes took place in the religious landscape of the West. First and foremost, the traditional Christian religion that flourished in the 1950's has meanwhile declined significantly and lost much of its former dominance, appeal and legitimacy (e.g. Norris & Inglehart 2011; Tromp, Pless & Houtman 2020, 2022; Pless, Tromp & Houtman 2020, 2021). Secondly but no less important, the 'New Age movement' emerged in the bosom of the counterculture of the 1960's and 1970's (Roszak, 1969) to reach its "full development" in the 1980's (Hanegraaff 1996, 12). A few decades later, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Hammer observes that "[t]he New Age *movement* may [already] be on the wane, but the wider New Age *religiosity* shows no sign of disappearing" (2004, 75, emphasis in original, see also Fuller 2001). Experts of New Age have in fact argued that this type of spirituality has become increasingly widespread in the West ever since (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Campbell 2007; Houtman & Aupers 2007). This New Age *religiosity* can be understood as a "doctrinally and historically related group of doctrines and rituals codified in a set of texts" (Hammer 2004, 75) and, among other influences, grew out of either 'esoteric spirituality' (Hanegraaff 1998), 'formless mysticism' (Heelas 1996), or both (Woodhead 2011). A third and equally

remarkable development has been the emergence of the catchphrase 'spirituality' as the new buzzword in the religious field, giving rise to self-identifications of 'being spiritual but not religious' and 'being both religious and spiritual' (e.g. Fuller 2001; Ammerman 2013, to be further discussed in "Spiritual But Not Religious?" section below).

These simultaneous developments (i.e., the decline of traditional Christian religion, the rise of New Age, and the increase in spiritual self-identifications) have been widely identified as pivotal processes of religious change. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) for instance put forward the idea of a 'spiritual revolution' that may be under way, one in which the 'subjective-life spirituality' of the 'holistic milieu' gradually supersedes the 'life-as religion' of the 'congregational domain'. Or to put it simply: 'religion' is slowly giving way to 'spirituality'. Building on the work of Troeltsch ([1931] 1956), Campbell (1978, 147) similarly regards "the contemporary transformation of religion […] as a transition from 'church religion' to 'spiritual and mystic religion'", a gradual process which he has more recently described as an 'Easternization of the West', i.e., a development in which the dualistic worldview the West has known for centuries is gradually superseded by its Eastern monistic counterpart (Campbell 2007).

What the previous two works in fact represent is a popular position in the scholarly debate on religious decline and religious change in the West that can be summarized as follows: 'Religion (broadly conceived) is not declining but rather changing in its nature. Spirituality does not constitute an intermediate step between the traditional Christian religiosity of the past and the outright secularity of the future. Rather, spirituality is here to stay and constitutes a lasting replacement for religion. Its emergence and growth should be understood as evidence against secularization theory. Spirituality is therefore not the debris of something that once was and that is now disappearing. Rather, it is an independent and coherent religious tradition that is becoming increasingly important and widespread in the West whereas that old religious tradition of the past (i.e., traditional Christianity) is meanwhile moving in the opposite direction.'

Although these students of religious change are not denying the decline of traditional Christian religion per se, their main focus lies on mapping and describing these non-traditional types of religiosity and spirituality that have been emerging and growing in the West since the counterculture of the 1960's and 1970's. In other words, they seem to find the study of religious change more important and more interesting than the study of

religious decline. They often rely on qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observations and content analyses, as well as on secondary literature (e.g., Ammerman 2013; Fuller 2001). While these methods and techniques are undeniably useful for studying *what* these non-traditional types of religiosity and spirituality are all about, they are rather useless for studying the alleged *growth* of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality in the West. Admittedly, a 'body count' of the holistic milieu in Kendal, as provided by Heelas and Woodhead (2005), is clearly better than having no data at all, however, the findings of just one relatively small town in England cannot safely be extrapolated to the remainder of Western-Europe. Moreover, an one-off 'body count' does not teach us much about growth over time. And even if it could, this research practice suffers from so many shortcomings that it is actually better to avoid it altogether (Houtman, Heelas & Achterberg 2012). We therefore need to rely on the questionnaires of the large internationally comparative survey programs such as the European Values Study (to be discussed in more detail below).

On the other side of the debate, one can find sociologists of religion like David Voas and Steve Bruce who have traditionally found the study of religious decline much more important than the study of religious change[2]. The notion that both processes have been taking place simultaneously has not been given much serious consideration. They believe that (traditional Christian) religion is on its way out, so the notion that radically different types of religion (such as post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality) are emerging and growing cannot be true. Although not everyone in this camp totally denies the existence of the latter, they do emphasize that in sheer numbers these new forms of religiosity and spirituality cannot compensate for the loss in traditional Christian religion. These scholars therefore acknowledge that religion is changing but would not spend too much time on studying these non-traditional types of religiosity and spirituality in too much detail because these incoherent and insignificant phenomena will not last and are as such incapable of replacing good-old Christianity. In their view, these phenomena merely constitute an intermediate stage between the traditional Christian religiosity of the past and the outright secularity of the future. In other words, these fuzzy phenomena are part of the process of

[2] hence, the title of this section.

religious decline itself, they are the debris of a collapsing Christianity, and their emergence and growth should be understood as evidence in favor of secularization theory.

So on the one hand, there are scholars who firmly assert that traditional Christian religion has been declining. Not only do they make such claims, they can also back them up with convincing empirical evidence (e.g., Bruce 2002; Brown 2001). On the other hand, there are students of religious change who claim that post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality has become more widespread in the West since the 1960's (e.g., Heelas & Woodhead 2005), as well as scholars who are critical of such a view (e.g., Voas & Bruce 2007; Bruce 2002). This second situation is clearly different from the first, because neither adherents nor adversaries of the 'spiritual growth' claim have been able to provide irrefutable empirical evidence for their point of view, simply because hard and solid quantitative evidence does not (yet) exist. Initially, I found it astonishing that so many scholars have been writing about the topic of spirituality in general, and about post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality in particular, making all sorts of claims, but the pivotal question – *whether or not this type of spirituality has become more widespread in the West since the 1960's* – has not been answered convincingly yet. However, this quickly becomes much less surprising after carefully examining the questionnaires of today's large internationally comparative survey programs. They hardly contain items about spirituality (broadly conceived), let alone that they include a decent scale with which to measure a post-Christian 'New Age' worldview. Neither do these survey programs reach back to the 1960's when this type of spirituality emerged in the bosom of the counterculture. Thus, if we want to go back in time and study processes of religious change in the West from the 1960's onwards, if we want to study the alleged diffusion and growth of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality in the West**,** available data disallow us to operationalize this type of spirituality in a truly reliable and valid fashion. There is no way of tackling this methodological shortcoming in a fully convincing manner, but in the following two empirical chapters (i.e., 2 and 3) I am nevertheless able to come up with some second-best options.

Obviously, I am not the first (and hopefully not the last) researcher who attempt to answer the pivotal question raised above. Other students of religious change have gone before me and they too stumbled upon the same data issue and were therefore also forced to rely on second-best options. One is analyzing one-shot survey data from the Netherlands and comparing the young and the elderly to then interpret any differences found as cohort

effects that indicate religious change rather than life cycle effects that have emerged as people grew older (Houtman & Mascini 2002). Another solution is analyzing cross-national and longitudinal survey data from the World Values Survey and making use of a rather crude measure for post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality that is predominantly based on what adherents of the latter reject, namely traditional Christian religion and secular rationalism (Houtman & Aupers 2007). Even though these measures and analyses leave much to be desired, what the two studies have in common is that they both suggest that post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality has expanded, especially in those western countries in which traditional Christian religion has declined most. In the subsequent two chapters, another two serious attempts are made to answer the pivotal question of whether this post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality has become more widespread in the West since the 1960's.

In summary, today's large internationally comparative survey programs are very useful for documenting the decline of traditional Christian religion, but not for detecting the emergence and growth of types of religiosity or spirituality that deviate from the traditional Christian model (such as post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality). This methodological problem has recently only aggravated in the European Values Study (1981-2017) as one of the few items with which one can measure spirituality (broadly conceived) was excluded from the fifth wave[3]. This rather depressing situation is clearly a disadvantageous consequence of the two key issues raised above, i.e., 1) the commonly held misconception that post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality is culturally incoherent and socially and publicly insignificant, and 2) sociology of religion's traditional focus on studying religious decline rather than religious change. These two problems are obviously related, because as long as post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality is not recognized for what it is – an independent and coherent religious tradition – it remains a footnote in a story about secularization and the decline of traditional Christian religion in the West. Religious change with one type of religion becoming less important (i.e., traditional Christianity) and another one becoming more significant (i.e., New Age spirituality) cannot take place in that case.

I argue that these two issues are not coincidental, but have in fact a common cause, namely sociology of religion's traditional obsession with secularization theory. The

[3] i.e., a yes-or-no question about *whether people take some moments for prayer, meditation or contemplation*.

sociological study of spirituality in general, and of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality in particular has been thwarted – intentionally or not – by secularization theory's ascendancy in the sociology of religion. In other words, it turns out to be rather difficult to do a serious, systematic and quantitative study of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality's significance because of the constant overshadowing (or obfuscating) that is caused by putting secularization theory on a pedestal. Indeed, taking secularization theory too seriously leads to the two key problems mentioned in the previous paragraph (as well as to a third and a fourth key issue[4] which are respectively introduced in the sections "Spiritual But Not Religious?" and "The New Age Gender Puzzle" below).

The two subsections above[5] have already dealt with the first key problem in the social-scientific study of spirituality (i.e., the one about incoherence/insignificance). Chapters 2 and 3 will address the second key issue (i.e., the one about decline/change) by examining processes of religious decline and religious change in tandem. This is important because studying these processes separately merely provides one-sided views of how the religious landscape of the West has evolved over time. Chapter 2 therefore tests the thesis of religious decline, central to secularization theory, *alongside* theories of religious change that assert something completely different, namely that religion in Western-Europe has not so much declined but rather changed profoundly (i.e., from a traditional Christian religiosity toward a post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality). Moreover, studying decline and change separately does not take into consideration that these two processes may in fact be closely related to one another with the former causing the latter (and vice versa).

Chapter 3 subsequently zooms in on the influential work of one of the scholars that is only briefly discussed in chapter 2, i.e., Grace Davie (1990; 1994) and her well-known and much-debated 'believing without belonging' thesis (e.g., Voas & Crockett 2005; Aarts et al. 2008; Reitsma et al. 2012; Tromp et al. 2020). More specifically, it systematically explicates and tests this thesis by studying processes of religious change in twenty Western-European countries that have been experiencing religious decline to a greater or lesser degree. Contrary to the often-held notion that religion declines unequivocally, Davie rather asserts

[4] 3) study from scratch what people actually mean when they say they are spiritual, thereby overlooking a whole body of specialized literature that explains what this spirituality may be all about, and 4) ignore key issues within the social-scientific study of spirituality itself such as the 'New Age gender puzzle'.

[5] i.e., "Privatization as Public Insignificance" and "Privatization as Cultural Incoherence".

that the religious landscape of Western-Europe can increasingly be defined as 'believing without belonging'. Despite the fact that the latter has become a major new buzzword in debates about religion, her thesis has as yet strangely enough not been tested critically and convincingly. Admittedly, this is also easier said than done, because Davie herself defines the two concepts rather loosely. The unfortunate result is not one unambiguous and crystal-clear thesis, but in fact two different - and not mutually exclusive - theories on religious change that run crisscross through each other in her book. The first theory is about a *de-institutionalization of Christianity* and this has become the 'standard' interpretation of 'believing without belonging'. The second theory is about a *spiritualization of religion*, a markedly different theory indeed that has either gone unnoticed, or has been neglected, by many a scholar writing about 'believing without belonging'[6]. Although unconvincingly, only the popularized 'standard' interpretation has been tested thus far, leaving the more plausible theory about a *spiritualization of religion* to remain untested at all. Given that one first needs to take post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality seriously and subsequently needs comparative longitudinal survey data with sufficiently suitable spirituality items, this is perhaps not so surprising. Chapter 3 clearly does the former and makes the best of the latter, and then critically tests both theories on religious change derived from Davie's thesis.

In summary, what follows are two empirical chapters that study processes of religious decline and religious change simultaneously. Chapter 2 is descriptive and examines the veracity of the two previously discussed trends, i.e., the decline of traditional Christian religion and the rise of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality in Western-Europe. Given the existing empirical evidence, there is little reason to doubt the former, but all the more reason to seriously doubt (and therefore study) the latter. Chapter 3 is explanatory as it studies whether the decline of traditional Christian religion and the alleged growth of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality are in fact connected to each other, i.e., whether the decline of the former gave rise to the expansion of the latter. More specifically, it systematically tests the two theories on religious change derived from Davie's 'believing without belonging' thesis by studying to what extent the decline of traditional Christian religion is responsible for religious transformations, both within and beyond Christian religion.

[6] Notable exceptions are Reitsma et al. 2012, Aarts et al. 2008, Glendinning 2006, and Voas & Crockett 2005.

Spiritual But Not Religious?

Thus far, I have been discussing religious decline and religious change in the West with a conception of the latter as the downturn of traditional Christian religion and the rise of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality. Religious change can however also be understood as the transformation of Christian religion itself. Indeed, another shortcoming of secularization theory is that the question of whether Christian religion has been rising or falling actually does not make a whole lot of sense, because that implies the immutability of the Christian tradition even though "theological positions, ethical norms, and liturgical forms" have been altered throughout the centuries (Streng, n.d.). The same goes for the religiosity of ordinary Christians. If Davie's (1994) observations are correct, then Christian religiosity has not so much declined[7] but rather changed profoundly in the past century or so. Whereas "religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment" have undeniably lost their former importance and significance for many Christians in Britain and Western Europe more generally, "feelings, experience[s] and the more numinous aspects of religious belief" have not (Davie 1994, 4). One way of interpreting this claim is that present-day Christians now attach much more value to the *spiritual* dimension of their tradition than to its *religious* elements. Contemporary Christians are allegedly much more *spiritual* than *religious*, in short. How much more? So much more that they no longer self-identify as being religious? If that is true, then they may have been responsible for the by now rather popular self-identification of being 'spiritual but not religious' (Lipka & Gecewicz 2017). Or have not they gone that far and rather self-identify as 'both spiritual *and* religious'? That is a difficult question to answer, especially because Davie's assertion can also be interpreted as a rejection of traditional Christian religiosity and an endorsement of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality, rendering 'spiritual but not religious' a self-identification exclusively for 'New Agers', and 'both spiritual and religious' a category reserved for contemporary Christians.

The emergence and growth of this relatively new 'spiritual but not religious' category seemingly surprised and confused many researchers in the field, particularly those who had been using the two terms interchangeably and must therefore have held the conviction that *religiousness* and *spirituality* are, to a large degree, overlapping concepts (e.g., Miller & Martin 1988). This may (or may not) be true for those self-identifying as 'both religious and

[7] at least much less than what proponents of secularization theory have traditionally believed.

spiritual', but for the 'spiritual but not religious' the two terms are clearly different and non-overlapping because they approvingly embrace the former and purposefully reject the latter. On the other hand, there were scholars like Wade Clark Roof (1993) who must have held the conviction, just like the 'spiritual but not religious' themselves, that *religiousness* and *spirituality* are clearly different, non-overlapping and mutually exclusive concepts. This conclusion can be drawn from the way in which he structured his survey, because it first gauged people's religious self-identification, and then *only* non-religious respondents were asked whether they considered themselves to be spiritual. The possibility that some people may self-identify as 'both religious *and* spiritual' apparently did not cross his mind, even though the findings of subsequent studies would suggest that most Americans in fact see themselves in this way (e.g. Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Marler & Hadaway 2002).

Be that as it may, it was probably Roof's (1993) (serendipitous) discovery of the 'spiritual but not religious' category in the early 1990s that set a completely new research tradition on religious and spiritual self-identifications in motion. The latter's expansion accelerated with Zinnbauer et al.'s (1997) attempt to 'un-fuzzy the fuzzy' with their seminal work on how a sample of religiously diverse Americans defined *spirituality* and *religiousness*. Marler and Hadaway (2002) subsequently explored the relationships between spiritual and religious self-identifications for a large sample of American Protestants. Ammerman (2013) has more recently tried to figure out what people actually mean when they use the term 'spirituality' by means of an inductive discourse analysis of conversations with ninety-five Americans. Even more recently, Steensland et al. (2018) have studied *what spirituality means and to whom* by means of analyzing nationally representative survey data from the United States. This research tradition obviously extends beyond these four studies, but for the third key issue that will follow shortly there is no need to discuss them all here.

Just like Davie (1994), students of the spirituality label seem to understand religious change not so much as the decline of the Christian tradition and the rise of a post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality, but rather as the transformation of Christian religion itself. Hence, the implicit assumption in this body of literature is that the only 'real' religion out there (i.e., Christianity) remains reasonably intact. Sure, it may change somewhat here and there, experiencing the divine may become more important than merely believing in it, and preferences for certain labels may change, too. People may increasingly use the term *spirituality* to describe their own faith, but that does not necessarily mean that they no

longer consider themselves *religious* (because usually they do, especially in the United States). So rather than opposing (or replacing) the Christian faith, spirituality may in fact be an element (or extension) of the latter.

Now, the third key issue in the social-scientific study of spirituality has precisely to do with the emergence and expansion of this research tradition on spiritual (and religious) self-identifications. Although not completely without merit, it does steer away from the previously discussed decline-or-change debate. More importantly, it overlooks a whole body of specialized literature that explains what this spirituality may be all about. Indeed, this is the clearly distinct, pre-existing and previously discussed research tradition on post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality (e.g. Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Campbell 2007). Without speculating too much about how they could have missed these seminal works, it is not implausible (or unthinkable) that those sociologists of religion who support the Christian tradition rather see it changing than declining, let alone that it has to make way for a completely different religious tradition, i.e., a secularized rendition of western esotericism that is essentially *post-Christian* in nature. The possibility that good-old Christianity is not so much declining but rather changing is naturally encouraging for those scholars who sympathize with the Christian tradition and/or are Christian themselves (e.g., Grace Davie and Nancy Ammerman). Regardless of the exact reason, I find it both strange and problematic that a whole new research tradition had to be set afoot to study (from scratch) what people actually mean when they say they are spiritual even though an already existing body of specialized literature on New Age spirituality clearly suggests that 'spiritual but not religious' (in a western context) refers to affinity with the latter and disdain for traditional Christian religion.

Chapter 4 addresses this third key issue precisely by connecting these two areas of expertise, viz. the pre-existing research tradition on post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality and the more recently emerged one on spiritual self-identifications (Tromp, Pless & Houtman, forthcoming). It stimulates a critical and much-needed intellectual dialogue between them by studying *whether 'spiritual' self-identifications signify affinity with post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality?* Answering this question is important for the progress of both research traditions as well as for the decline and/or change debate. First of all for the specialized literature on post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality. As the 'New Age' label has meanwhile lost much (if not most) of its former traction as a self-designation (Fuller 2001; Hammer 2004),

students of 'New Age' are left with two pressing questions. Is it merely the label 'New Age' and the New Age *movement* that have waned whereas New Age *spirituality* continues to live on in self-identifying 'spiritual' people? Or has New Age *spirituality* meanwhile disappeared, too, so that people using the term 'spirituality' refer to either secular (e.g., well-being, vitality etc.) or Christian religious matters (e.g., experiencing God's divine presence)? Secondly for the literature on spiritual self-identifications, it is important to figure out *to what extent these spiritual self-identifications signify affinity with New Age* because this research tradition appears to be in the process of reinventing the wheel, often relying on an inductive approach and taking an emic perspective, studying definitions of spirituality from scratch without a very strong theoretical foundation. Moreover, as long as they remain closed to the independent and culturally coherent religious tradition called post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality, they run the risk of drawing the wrong conclusions. Thirdly and finally, it is important to answer this question for the decline and/or change debate, because it teaches us something about the prevalence of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality in contemporary western societies as well as the extent to which traditional Christian religion has meanwhile declined and/or changed. Whereas students of the spirituality label may not particularly welcome religious decline with open arms, there are of course also sociologists of religion who put secularization theory on a pedestal so that it overshadows (or obfuscates) everything else that is emerging and changing in the religious landscape of the West. Indeed, taking secularization theory's empirical validity for granted leads to the conviction that the emergence and growth of the 'spiritual but not religious' category is merely an intermediate stage between the traditional Christian religiosity of the past and the outright secularity of the future. The increasing popularity of the spirituality label is therefore part and parcel of the process of religious decline itself and should be understood as evidence in favor of secularization theory, not against it. Initially, most people are 'both religious and spiritual' (e.g. Zinnbauer et al. 1997, Marler & Hadaway 2002), but over time more and more people become disappointed and disillusioned with religious institutions, lose their confidence and faith in religious leaders, and increasingly exchange a religious self-identification for a spiritual one, resulting in the growth of the 'spiritual but not religious' category. Because these people are no longer involved with organized and institutionalized religion, it is just a matter of time before this residual spirituality fades away, too, resulting in a fully secular society with most people self-

identifying as 'neither religious nor spiritual'. As long as scholars are convinced that religion is on its way out (and/or that there is no other religion than Christian religion), then the notion that a new and radically different type of religion is meanwhile gaining ground cannot be true. People may call it spirituality and may self-identify as being spiritual, but they are merely referring to a lighter, diluted, and less committed version of Christianity.

Given the previous discussion, there are, in my view, ample reasons to draw connections between the various bodies of literature on secularization theory, spiritual- and religious self-identifications and post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality.

The New Age Gender Puzzle

Thus far, I have been discussing secularization theory as well as two common conceptions of religious change in the West, viz. 1) as the decline of traditional Christian religion and the rise of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality, and 2) as the transformation of Christian religion itself so that people increasingly prioritize feelings and experiences of the divine over Christianity's institutional, doctrinal, and ritual aspects (Davie 1994). At the same time, we have also been witnessing an increase in spiritual self-identifications. 'So far, so good', one could say, but there is at least one important caveat: these theories are usually about people in general, and I, too, have been writing about all these (alleged) changes as if they apply to all people to the same extent, even though some scholars have argued that the transformation of the western religious landscape is in fact much less straightforward.

In "Gendering Secularization Theory", Linda Woodhead (2008), for instance, highlights the importance of drawing a distinction between men and women, because they have been experiencing processes of modernization very differently (with the latter developments being, according to secularization theory, important antecedents of religious decline). Since secularization theory is predominantly about people in general, this sex (or gender) dimension has disappeared completely out of sight, even though it should take a prominent place in scholarly debates about religious decline and religious change in the West. In its current and rather general form, secularization theory is able to convincingly explain how processes of industrialization have caused many men to turn their backs on the churches during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Vincett, Sharma & Aune 2008). Most women, on the other hand, remained loyal churchgoers in the same period, thereby keeping the churches alive and well in the industrial era. General secularization theory therefore falls

short when it tries to invoke the same processes of industrialization to explain both men's and women's (non)religious behaviors with.

It was not until the 1960's that women began to walk away from the churches in great numbers, too (Brown 2001; Brierley 2003). The decline of traditional Christian religion in the West has really taken off ever since. The popularity of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality has allegedly increased in the same period and region, mainly due to women taking an interest in this alternative to traditional religion. The latter two developments are however hard to explain with a general secularization theory that predominantly focuses on men. Hence, sociologists of religion should take differences between men and women much more seriously than they have done so far (Woodhead 2008). Pew Research Center (2016) has answered Woodhead's call by writing a report about the gender gap in religion with women being generally more religious than men, particularly among Christians. They found that "women working in the labor force are less religious, on average, than women outside the labor force […]. As a result, the religious gender gaps between women working in the labor force and men are much smaller than the gaps between women not working for pay and men" (60). However, what *exactly* makes women working in the labor force less religious than their non-working counterparts is left unexplored. Thus, secularization theory still needs to be 'gendered' in order to fully understand the processes just described.

The same holds for theories on religious change, they too are usually about people in general, even though empirical evidence has shown time and again that women make up the most part of the holistic milieu. Both processes of change (i.e., the decline of religion and the rise of spirituality) are therefore 'gendered' in the sense that the Christian tradition has lost many female followers since the 1960's whereas the post-Christian 'New Age' tradition has gained a whole lot of women ever since. *But what is actually the reason why women are so overrepresented in the holistic milieu and the New Age spirituality it institutionalizes?* This question is well-known in a more specialized literature as the 'New Age gender puzzle', i.e., the recurrent – but not yet satisfactorily explained – observation that far more women than men take an interest in New Age spirituality, as well as become active in the holistic milieu, than men (Houtman & Mascini 2002; Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Houtman & Aupers 2008; Manevska 2009; Trzebiatowska & Bruce 2013; Keshet & Simchai 2014; Hoo 2021). It is the fourth and final unresolved key issue in the social-scientific study of spirituality that is addressed in this dissertation (specifically in Chapter 5).

At first sight, this 'New Age gender puzzle' may appear largely unrelated to secularization theory, hence it is not so surprising that many sociologists of religion – especially proponents of secularization theory – have largely ignored or overlooked this particular key issue. In my view, this is clearly a missed opportunity, because understanding why post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality is so appealing for a particular group of women[8] will undoubtedly also disclose some of the reasons why women have been walking away from the churches in such large numbers since the 1960's. Indeed, the notion that the rise of New Age spirituality and the decline of traditional Christian religion in the West since the 1960's are in fact two closely related developments does not sound far-fetched at all given the key role that women have been playing in both processes, viz. their enhanced engagement with the former and increased withdrawal from the latter. It may well be the case that many women have turned to the holistic milieu, and the New Age spirituality it institutionalizes, precisely *because of* their dissatisfaction with, and disapproval of, traditional Christianity. Solving the 'New Age gender puzzle' will therefore also contribute to a greater understanding of secularization, in short.

Chapter 5 specifically tests a theory that Heelas and Woodhead (2005) put forward in *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality,* but that has not been tested systematically yet. With their *subjectivization thesis,* they introduce contrasting and allegedly gendered notions of autonomous selfhood, viz., *individuated-* and *relational subjectivism.* They argue that men more typically endorse the former that fails to spur spiritual longings whereas women more naturally embrace the latter that does do so. In other words, women are generally more into New Age than men *because* women more often than men embrace a mode of *relational autonomous subjectivism* that is also cultivated and emphasized in the holistic milieu itself, and in the New Age spirituality it institutionalizes (Idem, 105). This explanation, in turn, should solve the puzzle and with that one of hardest key issues within the social-scientific study of spirituality itself. Finally, if it turns out that relational subjectivism and adherence to traditional Christian religion are also negatively associated with each other, then this could help explain why western women have been walking away from the churches in such large numbers since the 1960's.

[8] i.e., middle-aged, white, well-educated, middle- and upper-class women who are employed in white-collar and social service occupations (Keshet & Simchai 2014; Hoo 2021).

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2

A Smaller Pie with a Different Taste: The Evolution of the Western-European Religious Landscape (European Values Study, 1981-2017)

Paul Tromp, Anna Pless, and Dick Houtman[9]

Abstract

Background: The thesis of religious decline, central to secularization theory, has become massively contested among social-scientific students of religion. Its critics observe not so much decline, but rather change in the religious landscape of Western Europe, in effect pointing out that the decline of Christianity's traditional institutional, doctrinal and ritual dimensions should not be mistaken for a decline of religion *tout court. Purpose:* In this research note, we address this ongoing debate among sociologists of religion by studying whether traditional Christian religiosity has declined in Western Europe over the past four decades, and whether the same applies to religiosity more broadly conceived. *Methods:* To examine these trends over time, we analyze data from the European Values Study (1981-2017) for nineteen Western-European countries. More specifically, we carry out multi-level linear- and multi-level logistic regression analyses. *Results:* We demonstrate that both traditional Christian religiosity and religiosity more broadly conceived have declined, with the former declining at a much higher pace than the latter. We also find that those who continue to be religious and/or spiritual deviate increasingly from the traditional Christian model. Thus, when one does encounter religiosity, it is much more likely to be non-traditional religiosity than was true in the past. *Conclusions and Implications:* We conclude that religion has declined, whether one understands it narrowly as traditional Christian religiosity, or more broadly. Even though new forms of religiosity and spirituality cannot compensate for the loss in traditional Christian religiosity, they do make up an increasing portion of the overall declining religious pie. Finally, we reflect on the limitations of the data from the European Values Study (1981-2017) and make an urgent call for better survey data, especially by including more suitable questions with which to measure types of religiosity and/or spirituality that deviate from the traditional Christian model.

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Keywords

Religious decline, religious change, secularization, traditional Christian religiosity, religiosity broadly conceived, European Values Study

Introduction

The thesis of religious decline, central to secularization theory, has become massively contested among social-scientific students of religion. Its critics observe not so much decline, but rather change in the religious landscape of Western Europe, in effect pointing out that the decline of Christianity's traditional institutional, doctrinal and ritual dimensions should not be mistaken for a decline of religion *tout court.*

Various scholars have meanwhile influentially critiqued the thesis of religious decline. Whereas Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005, 7) suggest that a 'spiritual revolution' may be unfolding, one in which 'life-as religion' (i.e. "those forms of religion that tell their followers to live their lives in conformity with external principles to the neglect of the cultivation of their unique subjective-lives") is increasingly giving way to 'subjective-life spirituality' (i.e. "those forms of spirituality […] that help people to live in accordance with the deepest, sacred dimension of their own unique lives"), Colin Campbell (2007, 41) even goes so far as to observe "a fundamental revolution in Western civilization, one that can be compared in significance to the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the Enlightenment". He understands the latter as an 'Easternization of the West', observing that the *dualistic* religious worldview that has historically characterized the West is increasingly being replaced by its eastern *monistic* counterpart.

While the above-mentioned authors understand processes of religious transformation as epitomized by the spread of spiritualities of life of the 'New Age' variety, Grace Davie is more cautious in pinpointing the precise features of the newly disseminated varieties of religion in Western Europe. Her 'believing without belonging' thesis asserts that in Britain, and more generally in Western Europe, "some sort of religiosity persists despite the obvious drop in practice. The sacred does not disappear – indeed in many ways it is becoming more rather than less prevalent in contemporary society" (Davie 1994, 43). Somewhat more specifically, Davie holds that "religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment display an undeniable degree of secularization", while "feelings, experience[s] and the more numinous aspects of religious belief" persist to a remarkable

degree (Davie 1994, 4-5). Suggesting that many of those who consider themselves religious and/or spiritual nowadays increasingly prioritize feelings and experiences of the sacred while simultaneously relativizing (or even rejecting) Christianity's traditional institutional, ritual, and doctrinal aspects,[10] she largely bypasses the difficult question to what extent this embrace of religion's numinous aspects (i.e. those features suggesting the presence of the divine) can still be meaningfully understood as Christian and/or should basically count as post-Christian ('spiritual, but not religious'). Her analysis is however quite explicit about how those concerned are certainly not religious in a traditionally Christian sense.

Taken together, the authors mentioned above suggest four different but interconnected changes in the religious landscape of Western Europe. First, the traditional Christian conception of the sacred as a transcendent personal God has allegedly ceased to be the only way in which people conceive of the divine, because more immanent conceptions of the sacred such as an omnipresent spirit or life force that exists and operates 'within' have become increasingly widespread. Second, the traditional Christian epistemologies of faith are held to no longer be the only ways through which people arrive at the religious truth (be it through the acceptance of God's Word as revealed in the Bible, as in Protestantism, or through its Catholic counterpart which provides more leeway for the authority of the Church). This is because an experiential epistemology of direct personal and spiritual experience of the sacred has allegedly become increasingly common. This applies not only to today's Charismatic/ Pentecostal/ Evangelical churches, which all foreground the significance of direct contact with the Holy Spirit, but also to basically post-Christian spiritualities of life. Third, it is suggested that a moral individualism that grants moral primacy to individual liberty, autonomy, personal authenticity, and self-determination, nowadays exists alongside a Christian moral traditionalism that is informed by a higher divine authority and in that sense 'external' to the individual. Fourth, it is suggested that the traditional Christian organizational form of a church that unites believers who attend its services is accompanied by (or competing with) less institutionalized religious or spiritual

[10] Note that this rendition of Davie's 'believing without belonging' thesis is distinct from its 'standard' interpretation, according to which people continue to hold on to traditional Christian beliefs without attending church services (i.e. a de-institutionalization of Christianity). See Tromp, Pless and Houtman (2020) and Cortois and Tromp (2021) for a decomposition of Davie's argument into two different theses.

movements and networks in which the boundaries between insiders (members) and outsiders (non-members) are harder to denote.

In summary, the general point that critics of the decline of religion thesis make is that what we have been witnessing in Western Europe over the past decades is a shift away from the traditional Christian religious model (with its characteristic conception of the sacred, epistemology, moral traditionalism, and social organization), but not the decline of *religiosity more broadly conceived* (which also takes alternative ways of being religious and/or spiritual into account). Therefore, in what follows we study *whether traditional Christian religiosity has declined in Western Europe,* and *whether the same applies to religiosity more broadly conceived*[11]*.*

Conceiving of religion in a general and non-specific way, we adopt Davie's cautious approach that refrains from making distinctions between specific manifestations of religion like New Age, (neo)paganism, Charismatic Christianity, and other strains of non-traditional Christianity. A more practical reason for opting for 'the big picture' is that working with more fine-grained religion measures is not possible due to a lack of sufficiently specific data (more on this in the next section).

Methods

Data

We make use of the European Values Study (EVS), a repeated cross-sectional dataset with currently five available waves (1981, 1990, 1999, 2008, and 2017), covering a time period of nearly four decades (EVS 2011). Our sample comprises nineteen countries, all of which have a Christian heritage, and in none of them did Communist rule suppress religion at any time during the period under study. Concerning the case of Germany, only respondents from West-Germany are included. An overview of included country-wave combinations together with their sample sizes can be found in Supplementary Table 1.

Studying the evolution of the Western-European religious landscape is obviously complicated by the arrival of non-European migrants with non-Christian religious identities

[11] By focusing on these two research questions, we simultaneously address the imbalance in the scientific study of religion, as observed by Marion Burkimsher, that "considerably more effort has been put into trying to explain the trends than in critically assessing what the trends actually are" (2014, 433, emphasis in original).

in the period under study. We deal with the resulting bias pragmatically by excluding Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, or 'Other' according to their responses to the question *What is your religious denomination?* This comes down to excluding 3,925 respondents (3.7%) from our sample (valid N = 105,229) that we in effect limit to those who are affiliated with Free church/Non-denominational church/Non-conformist/Evangelical, Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic, or have no religious denomination. Excluding the aforementioned religious categories does not change anything substantially to our findings, which are as such robust.

Supplementary Table 1. Sample Sizes of the Eighty-One Contexts Included in the Analyses

	European Values Study wave					
Country	1981	1990	1999	2008	2017	Total
Austria	0	1,418	1,479	1,457	1,561	5,915
Belgium	1,017	2,723	1,795	1,441	0	6,976
Denmark	1,166	1,015	995	1,484	**3,252**	7,912
Finland	0	573	1,015	1,117	1,183	3,888
France	1,171	976	1,584	1,428	1,745	6,904
Germany (West)	1,289	2,079	995	1,038	1,662	7,063
Iceland	907	682	923	794	1,579	4,885
Ireland	1,205	989	996	996	0	4,186
Italy	1,338	2,003	1,988	1,506	2,232	9,067
Luxembourg	0	0	1,170	1,539	0	2,709
Malta	464	391	1,002	1,493	0	3,350
Netherlands	1,153	974	951	1,491	2,256	6,825
Norway	1,015	1,213	0	1,051	1,085	4,364

Portugal	0	1,172	973	1,508	1,181	4,834
Spain	2,283	2,609	1,194	1,247	931	8,264
Sweden	938	993	1,003	1,152	1,179	5,265
Switzerland	0	0	0	1,171	3,030	4,201
Great Britain	1,092	1,457	918	1,431	1,686	6,584
Northern Ireland	**296**	298	971	472	0	2,037
Number of respondents	15,334	21,565	19,952	23,816	24,562	105,229
Number of country-wave combinations	14	17	17	19	14	81

Note: The average number of respondents per country-year combination is 1,299.
The country-wave combinations with the lowest and highest sample sizes are bold and underlined.

Operationalization

Traditional Christian Religiosity

To study whether traditional Christian religiosity (with its characteristic conception of the sacred, epistemology of belief, moral traditionalism, and social organization) has declined in Western Europe, we measure it with a scale that consists of four components.

First, its conception of the sacred is measured with the question: *Do you believe in God?* The response options comprise: 0 'No' and 1 'Yes'.

Second, adherence to the traditional Christian epistemology of belief is measured with questions about whether or not one believes in (1) hell, (2) heaven, and (3) life after death. The response options comprise: 0 'No' and 1 'Yes'. We performed a principal component analysis to find out whether these three items could be transformed into a single scale that still contains most of their information. This proved possible, with one single principal component that was strongly correlated with the three items (factor loadings of respectively 0.85, 0.89 and 0.80) capable of capturing no less than 72.0% of their variance. We therefore constructed a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.802) by assigning mean scores on the three items to all respondents with valid scores on at least two of them.

Third, adherence to moral traditionalism is measured through the evaluation of five types of behavior traditionally understood as transgressing traditional Christian moral principles concerning how to live (and die) properly as specified by a higher divine authority. The following operationalization of moral traditionalism is consistent with other studies in the field (e.g. Pless, Tromp & Houtman 2020, 2021). Respondents are asked the extent to which they deem (1) homosexuality, (2) abortion, (3) divorce, (4) euthanasia, and (5) suicide justifiable. Response categories were mirrored into 1 'always justified' to 10 'never justified'. A principal component analysis showed that these five items could be subsumed under one component, explaining 61.3% of the variance. The factor loadings of the five items are respectively 0.79, 0.85, 0.85, 0.76 and 0.66. Subsequently, a reliable scale was constructed (Cronbach's alpha = 0.839) and scale scores were assigned as means to all those with valid scores on at least four of the five items[12].

Fourth, acceptance of traditional Christianity's social organization is measured with the question: *Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?* We recoded the response categories into a variable ranging from 1 'never, practically never' to 7 'more than once a week'.

Finally, a principal component analysis showed that these four aspects of traditional Christian religiosity (i.e. belief in God, traditional Christian beliefs, moral traditionalism, and church attendance) could be subsumed under one component, explaining 61.0% of the variance. All four items/subscales had high and positive loadings on the first factor (0.79, 0.80, 0.72 and 0.82, respectively) and could be combined to form a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha based on standardized items = 0.786). The final traditional Christian religiosity scale is constructed by taking the mean of the four standardized items/subscales. We set the minimum requirement to receive a scale score at three valid answers.

Religion Broadly Conceived

To study whether religiosity more broadly conceived has declined in Western Europe, we need a measure that is general and non-specific enough to accommodate traditional types of Christianity alongside reconstructions that have shifted away from the latter. The

[12] The question on homosexuality was not asked in Malta (1981) and Italy (2008), and the one on abortion not in Denmark (1990). This is not a major issue because a respondent does not need valid scores on all five items in order to receive a scale score.

advantage of such a general and non-specific religiosity measure is that it allows us to capture as many ways of being religious and/or spiritual as possible, while simultaneously minimizing the risk of overlooking some of these. Such a measure also solves the problem of the lack of data sources that are sufficiently rich to enable precise distinctions between various alternative ways of being religious and/or spiritual (e.g. between Charismatic Christianity and New Age spirituality (Campbell 2007, Heelas 2002)) – a problem that does not remain limited to the European Values Study, to be sure, but also applies to the other large international survey programs (Houtman, Heelas & Achterberg 2012).

Because we do not want our general religiosity measure to be either too broad or too narrow[13], we measure religion broadly conceived with the following three questions. The first one reads: *which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs?* The response options comprise: 1 'There is a personal God', 2 'There is some sort of spirit or life force', 3 'I don't really know what to think', 4 'I don't really think there is any sort of spirit, God or life force'. We dichotomize this variable by recoding conceptions of the sacred as a personal God and some sort of spirit or life force as '1' and the other two responses as '0'. The second question reads: *independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are: a religious person; not a religious person; or a convinced atheist?* Those who consider themselves religious were coded as 1 'religious', and the two remaining categories were coded as 0 'being not religious'. The third question reads: *do you believe in re-incarnation?*[14] The response options comprise: 0 'No' and 1 'Yes'. Responses to the latter two questions (i.e. a religious self-identification and a belief in re-incarnation) are added to the first question about one's conception of the sacred to also capture those who neither believe in a personal God nor in some sort of spirit or life force but nevertheless self-identify as a religious person and/or belief in re-incarnation. People who answer at least one of these three questions in the affirmative are categorized as being 'religious in a general and non-specific sense'. This results in a dichotomous variable with 0 'neither religious nor belief

[13] See Davie (1990, 462), Bruce (2002, 199-203), and Voas & Crockett (2005, 12-13) for a discussion of this matter.

[14] This question was not asked in Great Britain 1999, giving respondents in that particular country-wave combination less of an opportunity to be 'religious in a general and non-specific sense'. For that reason, we also ran the analyses without Great Britain 1999. This does not change anything substantially to our findings, hence the results are robust.

in re-incarnation nor belief in a personal God, spirit or life force' and 1 'religious and/or belief in re-incarnation and/or belief in a personal God, spirit or life force'.

In order to test whether religiosity (either traditional Christian or more broadly conceived) has declined, we use *time* as our main explanatory variable. In order to keep our models as parsimonious as possible, we treat *time* as a continuous variable with 0 '1981', 1 '1990', 2 '1999', 3 '2008', and 4 '2017' rather than computing dummy variables for the five waves of the EVS.

Control Variables

Finally, to make sure that the observed trends are not due to the changing composition of the population in the different contexts under study, we statistically control for age, gender, and education. *Age* is a continuous variable that ranges from 15 to 82 years and older. *Gender* is a nominal and dichotomous variable with 0 'men' and 1 'women'. *Education* is measured with a question that asks respondents about their age when they completed their education. This variable ranges from 0 'no formal education' to 10 '21 years and older' (with 1 'less than 12 years'; 2 '13 years'; 3 '14 years'; 4 '15 years'; 5 '16 years'; 6 '17 years'; 7 '18 years'; 8 '19 years'; 9 '20 years' in between) and we treat it as continuous.

The descriptive statistics of all the variables that will be included in our models can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics	N	MIN	MAX	M	SD [a]
Traditional Christian religiosity (scale)	100,999	0	1	0.49	0.24
Traditional Christian ontology of the sacred					
Belief in God	97,319	0	1	0.73	
Traditional Christian epistemology of belief (scale)	94,693	0	1	0.40	0.41
Belief in hell	94,289	0	1	0.25	
Belief in heaven	93,791	0	1	0.44	
Belief in life after death	89,721	0	1	0.53	

Traditional Christian morality (scale)	100,189	1	10	5.96	2.46
Justifiable: homosexuality	98,498	1	10	5.44	3.56
Justifiable: abortion	101,132	1	10	5.88	3.17
Justifiable: divorce	102,515	1	10	4.86	2.99
Justifiable: euthanasia	100,153	1	10	5.78	3.24
Justifiable: suicide	99,805	1	10	7.85	2.70
Traditional Christian social organization					
Church attendance	104,650	1	7	3.19	2.04
Religion broadly conceived (scale)	104,903	0	1	0.79	
Religious person	100,110	0	1	0.61	
Belief in re-incarnation	89,688	0	1	0.24	
Belief in a personal God / some sort of spirit or life force	101,715	0	1	0.71	
Time	105,229	0	4	2.20	1.38
Age	104,839	15	82	46.7	17.8
Women	105,173	0	1	0.53	
Age when education completed	101,809	0	10	6.54	2.99

[a] Standard deviations are not shown for dichotomous items.

Analyses

The respondents were surveyed in different countries and in different years, hence we use multilevel analysis to account for the hierarchical nature of the data and for possible similarities between different respondents from the same context. On the individual-level, we have 105,229 respondents that are nested in eighty-one country-wave combinations on the contextual-level. To answer our first research question, whether traditional Christian religiosity has declined in Western Europe, we use multilevel linear regression analysis with respondents' levels of *traditional Christian religiosity* as the dependent variable. To answer

our second research question, whether religiosity more broadly conceived has declined in Western Europe, we use multilevel *logistic* regression analysis with respondents' levels of *religiosity more broadly conceived* as the dependent variable. In both analyses, our main explanatory variable is *time* and we statistically control for respondents' *age, gender,* and *educational level.* Both analyses are carried out with IBM SPSS Statistics 27, running a generalized linear mixed model with robust covariances, and the default covariance structure for random effects, i.e. variance components. The probability distributions for the linear and logistic models are respectively normal and binomial. The link functions are respectively identity and logit. For the models predicting respondents' levels of *traditional Christian religiosity* and *religiosity more broadly conceived*, the algebraic representations are respectively:

$Y_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10}(\text{time})_{ij} + \gamma_{20}(\text{women})_{ij} + \gamma_{30}(\text{age})_{ij} + \gamma_{40}(\text{educational level})_{ij} + u_{0j} + \varepsilon_{ij}$.

$\text{logit}_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10}(\text{time})_{ij} + \gamma_{20}(\text{women})_{ij} + \gamma_{30}(\text{age})_{ij} + \gamma_{40}(\text{educational level})_{ij} + u_{0j}$.

Results

Trends in Traditional Christian Religiosity

The first model in Table 3 is a null model with three estimated parameters, i.e. a fixed intercept, a random intercept (i.e. the between-context variation in intercepts), and a residual (i.e. the variation in individual scores within contexts). This way we partition the variance in traditional Christian religiosity into its within- and between-context components. The information in the null model enables us to calculate the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) which tells us how much of the variance in traditional Christian religiosity lies between contexts. If the ICC is smaller than 0.05, then there is no real need to perform a multilevel analysis. In that case, a single-level analysis conducted at the individual level would suffice (Heck, Thomas & Tabata, 2014). Our results demonstrate that a multilevel analysis is preferred over a single-level analysis as the ICC is approximately 0.30 (i.e. 0.0184 / (0.0184 + 0.0421).

In the second model and concerning our first research question, we find that, on average, traditional Christian religiosity has declined in Western Europe. The effect of time on traditional Christian religiosity is negative and highly significant (b = -0.0473, $p < 0.001$). In other words, with each wave, people are becoming less religious in a traditional Christian way.

Table 3. Multi-level Linear Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Respondents' Traditional Christian Religiosity for Nineteen European Countries (EVS 1981-2017).

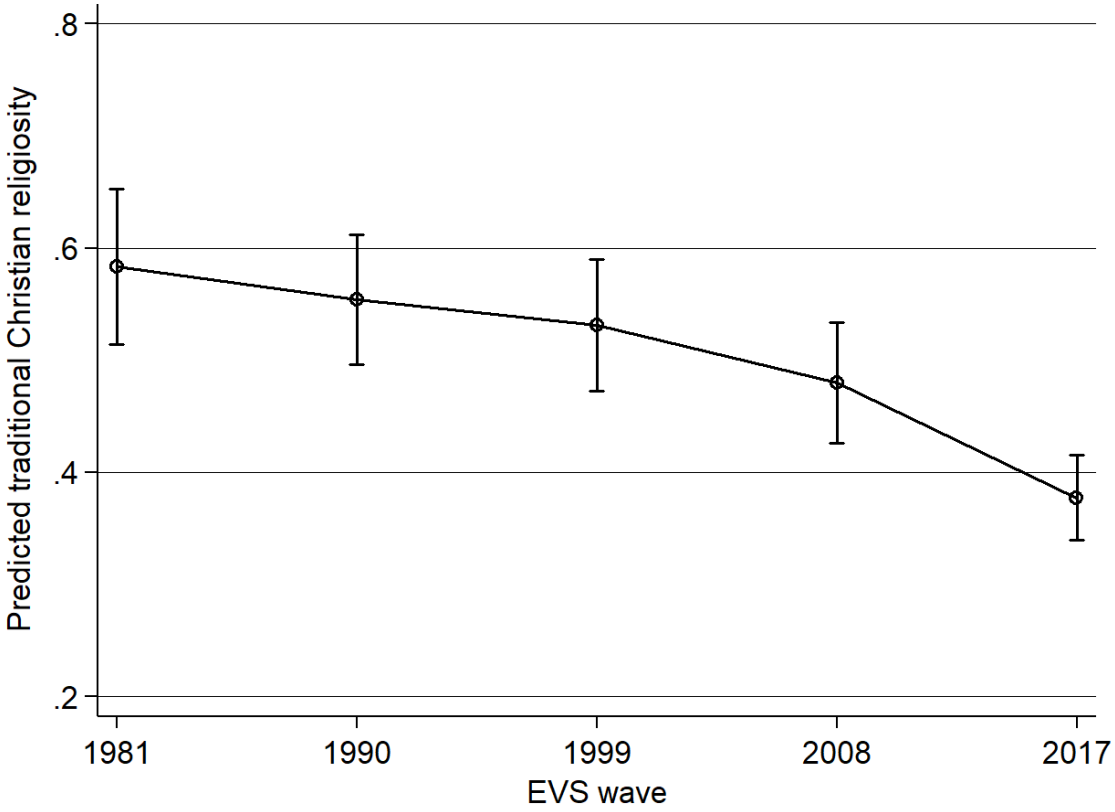
		Model 1	Model 2
		B	*B*
Fixed	Time		-0.0473***
Effects			(0.0091)
Coefficients	Woman		0.0539***
			(0.0025)
	Age		0.0028***
			(0.0001)
	Education		-0.0059***
			(0.0005)
	Intercept	0.5052***	0.4828***
		(0.0151)	(0.0278)
Random	Country-	0.0184	0.0140
Effects	Wave		
Variances	Residual	0.0421	0.0381
–2 Log Likelihood		- 32,910	- 41,303
Sample Size (N)		100,999	97,608;
		81	81

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Ns are for respondents and country-waves, resp. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

For illustrative purposes, we created a graph with the five waves of the EVS on the horizontal axis, and the level of traditional Christian religiosity on the vertical axis,

statistically controlling for the effects of age, gender, and education (see Figure 1). As a reminder, traditional Christian religiosity is measured with a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 1 and is constructed by taking the mean of four standardized items/subscales (i.e. belief in God, traditional Christian beliefs, moral traditionalism, and church attendance). What stands out in this graph is that the pace of decline of traditional Christian religiosity has accelerated between 2008 and 2017.

Figure 1. Predicted Marginal Means of Traditional Christian Religiosity by EVS wave, Controlling for Age, Gender, and Education. Data source: European Values Study 1981-2017

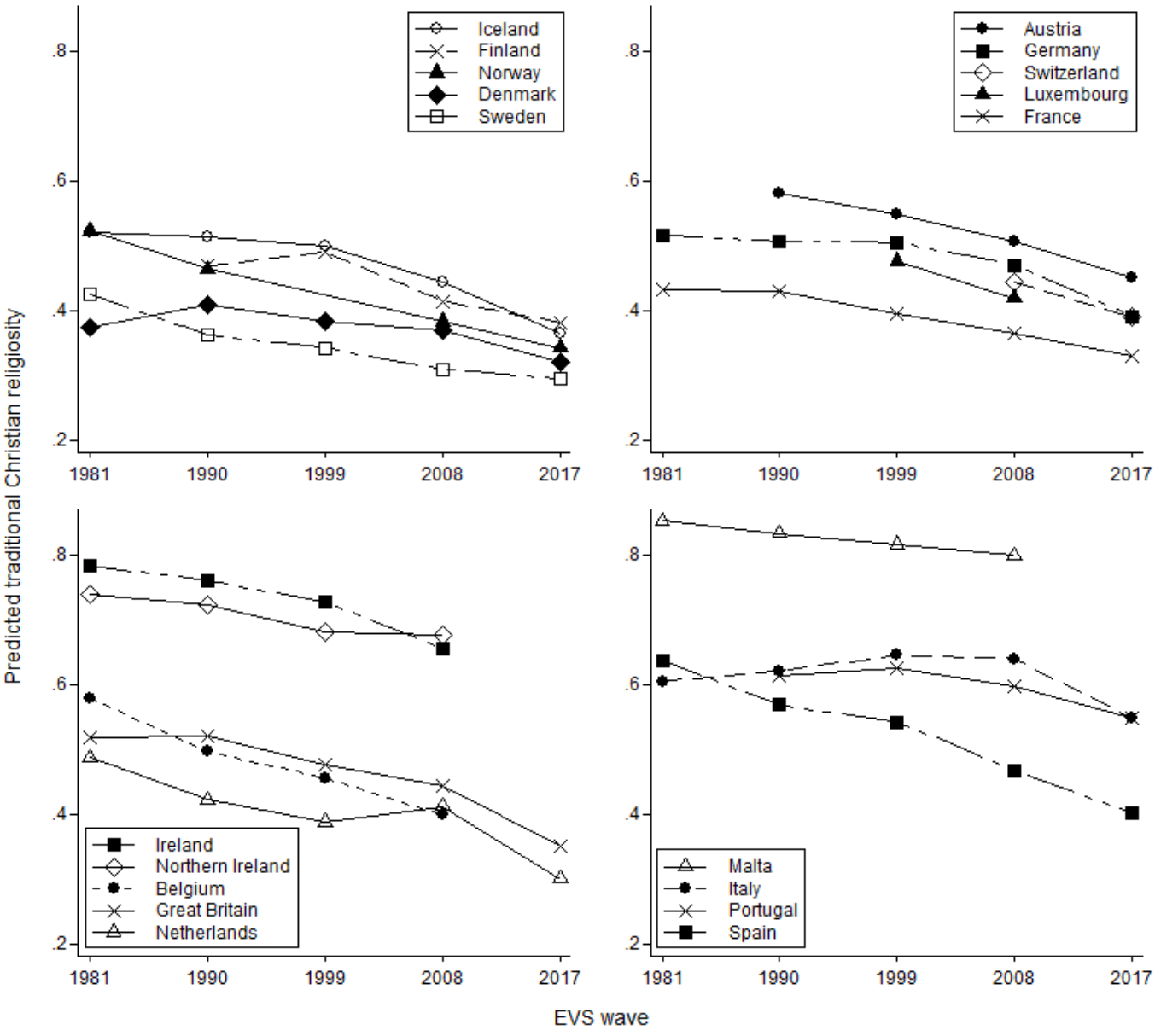


Note: Traditional Christian religiosity is measured with a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 1 and is constructed by taking the mean of four standardized items/subscales (i.e. belief in God, traditional Christian beliefs, moral traditionalism, and church attendance).

Since "bundling countries together […] may mask the different trajectories of individual countries" (Burkimsher 2014, 440), we graphed Figure 1 for four groups of countries in which the trends of all the separate countries are visible and can be compared with each

other (see Figure 2). We combined the Scandinavian countries, the Catholic countries of the south, the English and Dutch speaking countries, and the German and French speaking countries. Although the trend lines turn out to be steeper for some countries than for others (compare for instance Spain and Northern-Ireland), it is clear that traditional Christian religiosity has declined in all the Western-European countries in our sample between 1981 and 2017.

Figure 2. Predicted Marginal Means of Traditional Christian Religiosity for Four Groups of Countries by EVS wave, Controlling for Age, Gender, Education. Data: EVS 1981-2017.



Note: Traditional Christian religiosity is measured with a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 1 and is constructed by taking the mean of four standardized items/subscales (i.e. belief in God, traditional Christian beliefs, moral traditionalism, and church attendance).

Trends in Religion Broadly Conceived

The first model in Table 4 is again a null model in which the variance in *religiosity more broadly conceived* is partitioned into its within- and between-context components, and with which the ICC can be calculated. Calculating the ICC is somewhat different in a multilevel logistic regression analysis because only the contextual-level variance is estimated (Merlo et al., 2016). SPSS scales the individual-level variance to 1 and does not test it for statistical significance, but according to Heck et al. (2014) the variance of a logistic distribution with a scale factor of 1 is approximately 3.29 (π^2 / 3). Our results demonstrate that a multilevel analysis is again preferred over a single-level analysis as the ICC is approximately 0.16 (i.e. 0.6244 / (0.6244 + 3.29).

In the second model and concerning our second research question, we find that, on average, religiosity broadly conceived has also declined in Western Europe. The effect of time on our general religiosity measure is negative and highly significant (*b* = -0.2002, *p* = 0.001). In other words, the probability that a person is religious diminishes with each wave. As the former coefficient is in log-odds units, it is easier to interpret the odds ratio (see 'Exp(B)' in Table 4, model 2). Its value is 0.8185, meaning that with each wave the odds that one is religious in a general and non-specific sense diminishes with 18.5% (1 – 0.8185 = 0.1815 * 100).

Table 4. Multi-level Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Respondents' Religiosity (Broadly Conceived) for Nineteen European Countries (EVS 1981-2017).

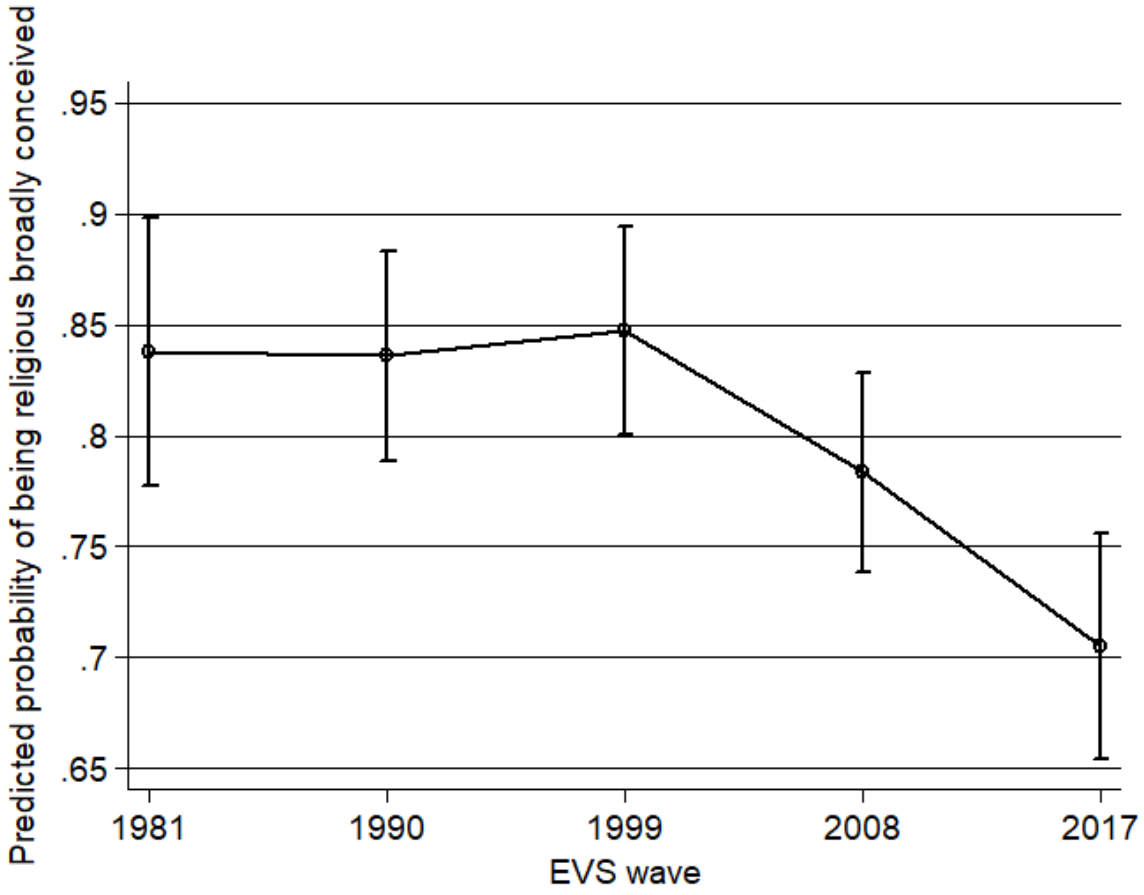
		Model 1		Model 2	
		log-odds	Exp(B)	log-odds	Exp(B)
Fixed Effects Coefficients	Time			-0.2002**	0.8185
				(0.0622)	
	Woman			0.7630***	2.1447
				(0.0226)	
	Age			0.0185***	1.0187
				(0.0011)	
	Education			-0.0156*	0.9845
				(0.0063)	
	Intercept	1.508***		0.8333***	
		(0.0879)		(0.2047)	
Random Effects Variances	Country-Wave	0.6244		0.6034	
	Residual	1		1	
–2 Log Likelihood		499,854		489,878	
Sample Size (N)		104,903; 81		101,242; 81	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Ns are for respondents and country-waves, respectively.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

For illustrative purposes, we created a graph with the five waves of the EVS on the horizontal axis, and the level of religiosity (broadly conceived) on the vertical axis, statistically controlling for the effects of age, gender, and education (see Figure 3). As a reminder, religiosity broadly conceived is a dichotomous variable, hence the units displayed on the vertical axis of the graph are predicted probabilities. What stands out in this graph is that it shows that the level of religiosity (broadly conceived) stayed about the same between 1981 and 1999 to then strongly decline in the subsequent two decades, i.e. between 1999 and 2017.

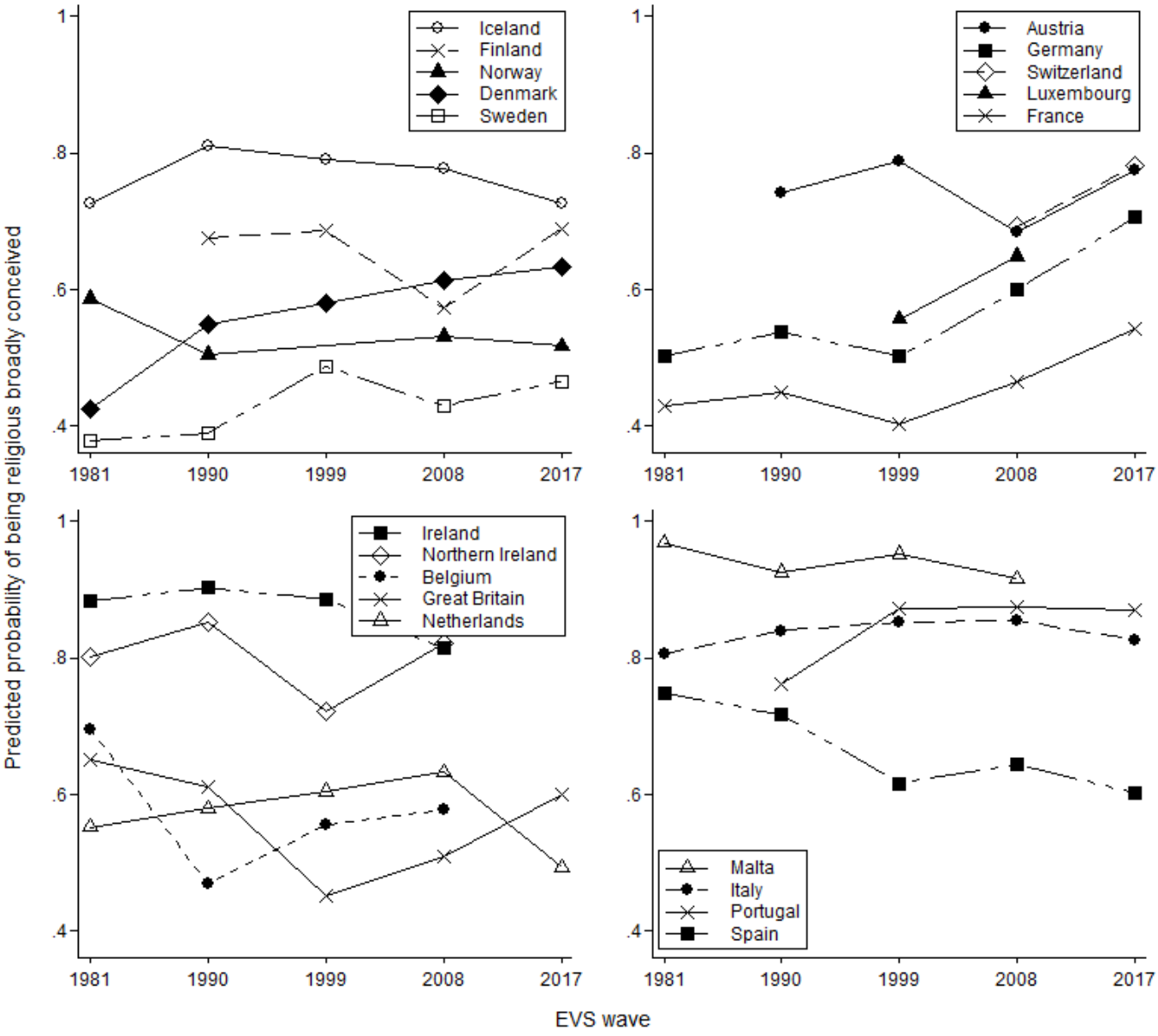
Figure 3. Predicted Probabilities of Being Religious (Broadly Conceived) by EVS wave, Controlling for Age, Gender, and Education. Data source: European Values Study 1981-2017



Note: Religiosity broadly conceived is a dichotomous variable, hence the units displayed on the vertical axis of the graph are predicted probabilities.

Again, to see whether all the Western-European countries are following the same trends or not, we graphed Figure 3 for four groups of countries in which the trends of all the separate countries are visible and can be compared with each other (see Figure 4, note that the groups of countries in Figure 4 are the same as in Figure 2). What stands out in these graphs is that, even though the average trend in religiosity broadly conceived in Western Europe is one of decline, a reasonable number of countries (i.e. Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Portugal) actually experienced (slight) *increases* over time in religiosity more broadly conceived. Furthermore, Great Britain's level of religiosity broadly conceived actually fluctuated pretty intensely over time (i.e. a steep decline followed by a steep upsurge), but the all-time low in 1999 should be interpreted with some caution as the question on belief in re-incarnation was not asked in Great Britain in 1999, giving respondents in that particular country-wave combination less of an opportunity to be 'religious in a general and non-specific sense'.

Figure 4. Predicted Probabilities of Being Religious (Broadly Conceived) for Four Groups of Countries by EVS wave, Controlling for Age, Gender, Education. Data: EVS 1981-2017.



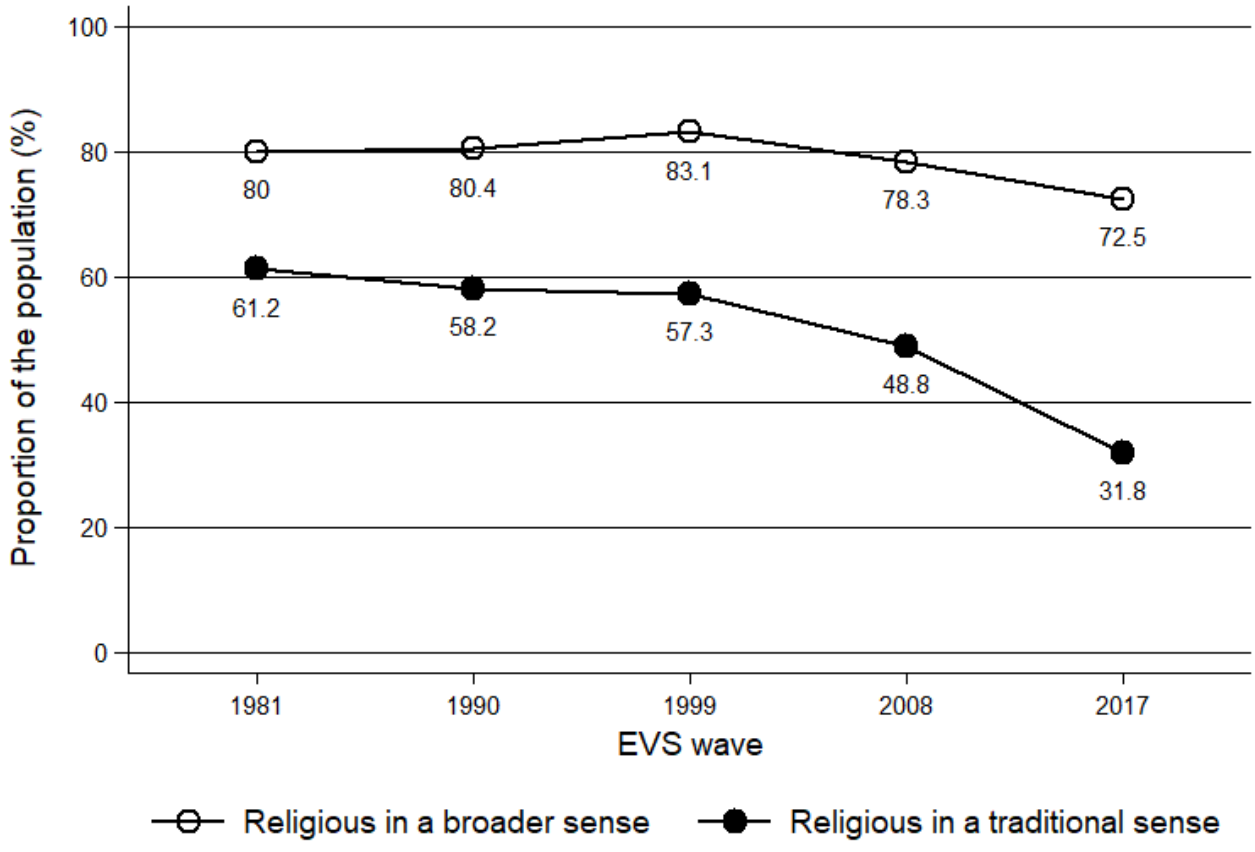
Note: Religiosity broadly conceived is a dichotomous variable, hence the units displayed on the vertical axes of the graphs are predicted probabilities. Furthermore, a different vertical scale is used in this figure to Figure 2.

Trends in Traditional Christian Religiosity and Religion Broadly Conceived Compared

Thus far, our analyses showed that both traditional Christian religiosity and religiosity more broadly conceived have declined in Western Europe. Additionally, it would be interesting and worthwhile to compare the two trajectories and examine whether they both have

declined at the same pace. To find that out whether or not the two declines have occurred at the same pace, we dichotomize traditional Christian religiosity by coding scores below 0.50 into 0 'not religious in a traditionally Christian sense' and scores equal to, or higher than, 0.50 into 1 'religious in a traditionally Christian sense'. This enables us to calculate for each of the five waves the proportions of the population that are religious in a traditionally Christian sense and religious more generally conceived (see Figure 5). This graph shows that, even though both conceptualizations of religiosity show declines in Western Europe, traditional Christian religiosity has declined at a much faster pace than religiosity more broadly conceived.

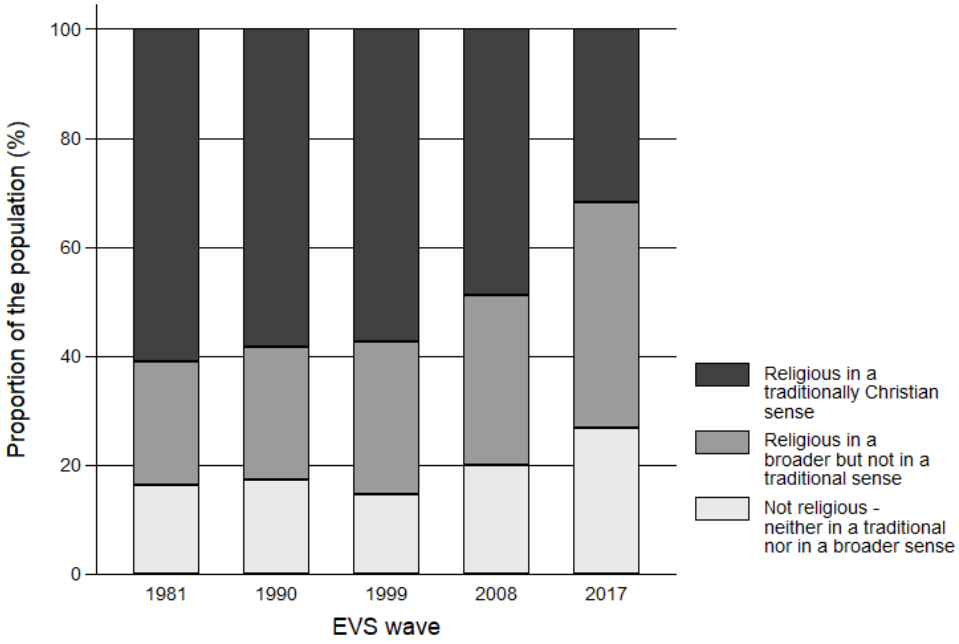
Figure 5. Proportions of the Population Being Religious in a Broader Sense and Being Religious in a Traditional Sense by EVS wave. Data: European Values Study 1981-2017.



Note: Religiosity in a broader sense (i.e. religiosity more broadly conceived) and religiosity in a traditional sense (i.e. traditional Christian religiosity) are both dichotomous variables.

To visualize the bigger picture even clearer, we examine how the sizes of the three groups based on the two religiosity measures changed over time, i.e. 1) those who are religious in a traditionally Christian sense, 2) those who are religious in a broader but not in a traditionally Christian sense, and 3) those who are not religious – neither in a traditionally Christian nor in a broader sense (see Figure 6). We omitted the fourth category from the analysis as it is theoretically impossible that those who are religious in a traditional sense are not religious in a broader sense. What the graph clearly shows is that the share of traditional Christians in Western Europe has diminished from 61.2% in 1981 to 31.8% in 2017. The wholly secular group, on the other hand, has grown – from 16.4% in 1981 to 26.7% in 2017 – confirming the fact that religion has declined, and that it does not matter whether one understands it narrowly as only traditional Christian religiosity, or more broadly so that it also includes alternative ways of being religious or spiritual. While the religious pie has thus clearly shrunk in size, today a much bigger portion of it consists of types of religion or spirituality that deviate from traditional Christian religiosity – from 22.5% in 1981 to 41.4% in 2017. So if one does encounter religiosity in Western Europe nowadays, it is much more likely to be of a non-traditional type than was true in the past. The theoretical implications of our findings are discussed in the next and final section of this note.

Figure 6. Proportions of the Population Being Religious in a Broader Sense and/or Being Religious in a Traditional Sense by EVS wave. Data: European Values Study 1981-2017.



Note: Religiosity in a broader sense (i.e. religiosity more broadly conceived) and religiosity in a traditional sense (i.e. traditional Christian religiosity) are both dichotomous measures and were combined to create the threefold typology displayed above.

Discussion and Limitations

Our findings raise the important but difficult question whether the changes that have taken place within the shrinking religious population of Western Europe are either part of the process of religious decline itself or in fact evidence of a more persistent change in the nature of being religious? In other words, should we interpret the presence of these non-traditional types of religiosity and spirituality as a lasting replacement of traditional Christian religiosity, or merely as 'fuzzy fidelity' (Storm 2009; Voas 2009) that basically entails a first step in a one-way street from conventional religiosity towards outright secularity? As our findings do not lend themselves to answering this question, we are unable to put an end to this ongoing debate among sociologists of religion. Marshall and Olson (2018) have recently raised the same question, namely whether self-identifying as "'spiritual but not religious' is becoming a replacement for religion or is it more likely just one step on the path between religion and non-religion?"[15] (516) Their analysis of cross-sectional survey data from the United States and Scandinavia led them to conclude that "both possibilities […] seem somewhat plausible" (Idem). However, they were unable to say which of the two scenarios is more likely than the other. We concur with Marshall and Olson that "[p]anel data on individuals or parent–child differences in religion and spirituality would be needed to explore whether there is actual, systematic, movement over time" (Idem, 517).

This brings us to a discussion of the potential limitations of our study. The most important one pertains to the data that we used more or less out of necessity. Although the EVS contains useful questions to track changes in adherence to traditional Christian religiosity and its various dimensions, the same cannot be said for other forms of religion and spirituality. So while these data can be used to track the declines of traditional Christian religiosity and religiosity more broadly (and by implication vaguely) conceived, as we hope to have demonstrated, they are not suitable for tracking the development of specific types of religiosity and/or spirituality that deviate from the traditional Christian model. Because of

[15] Note that self-identifying as 'spiritual but not religious' is just one of the many alternative ways of being religious and/or spiritual nowadays in the West.

this, contemporary theories about an increased prioritization of experiencing an immanently present divine spirit cannot be tested properly. So while our analysis demonstrates that if one does encounter religiosity in Western Europe nowadays, it is much more likely to be of a non-traditional type than was true in the past, what exactly this non-traditional religiosity looks like ultimately remains a matter of theoretical speculation. This is why we would like to make an urgent call for better survey data, especially by including more suitable questions in the large internationally comparative survey programs to measure types of religiosity and/or spirituality that deviate from the traditional Christian model.

One suggestion would be to include a recently developed seven-item scale to reliably measure the worldview of a post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality (see Supplementary Table 5) (Houtman & Tromp 2021), as outlined in specialized literature (e.g. Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996). Including such a scale in the large internationally comparative survey programs would enable scholars not only to systematically map the presence and development of this type of spirituality across place and time, it would also allow them to study the (possibly changing) relationship between such post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality and traditional Christian religiosity. Good religion questions that reach beyond traditional Christian religiosity are scarce, also in the EVS data used in this paper. We have considered a range of other EVS questions for the construction of our religiosity measures, but for various reasons found them wanting – they were either not available in all of the five waves or were of dubious face validity[16].

[16] Examples of questions that were not available in all of the five EVS waves are *how important is religion in your life?; how often do you pray to God outside of religious services?;* and *do you take some moments of prayer, meditation or contemplation?* The question of *how much confidence do you have in the church* was available in all of the five waves, but was deemed less valid than frequency of church attendance to measure endorsement of traditional Christian religion's organizational form. An alternative for asking whether one believes in God would have been the question *how important God is in your life?* The latter is available in all five waves, too, and could possibly serve as a suitable substitute for the former question. Other questions address *involvement in a humanitarian or charitable organization* and *feeling concerned about the living conditions of human kind, elderly people, unemployed people, immigrants, sick and disabled people*, but it is of course a matter of debate whether *care and concern for others* are exclusively Christian, indeed whether they are typical for Christians at all. Identical problems, arguably even more so, exist for questions about the *justifiability of unlawfully claiming state benefits, cheating on tax, accepting a bribe,* and *avoiding paying a transport fare*, and *intolerance to having people of a different race as neighbors*.

Conclusions and Implications

Critics of the thesis of religious decline have pointed out that the decline of Christianity's traditional institutional, doctrinal and ritual dimensions should not be mistaken for a decline of religion *tout court.* In this research note, we have addressed this ongoing debate among sociologists of religion by studying *whether traditional Christian religiosity has declined in Western Europe over the past four decades,* and *whether the same applies to religiosity more broadly conceived?* Our results indicate that both questions can be answered in the affirmative. So yes, religion has been declining and it does not matter whether one understands it narrowly as only traditional Christian religiosity, or more broadly so that it also includes alternative ways of being religious and/or spiritual. Yet, traditional Christian religiosity has declined at a much higher pace than religiosity more broadly conceived, so that non-traditional religiosity has come to make up an increasing portion of the overall declining religious pie. Thus, if one does encounter religiosity in Western Europe nowadays, it is much more likely to be of a non-traditional type than was true in the past. So not only are there fewer religious people today than there were in the past, those who continue to be religious and/or spiritual increasingly relativize (or even reject) traditional Christian religiosity with its characteristic conception of the sacred, epistemology of belief, moral traditionalism, and social organization. That said, it is quite clear that these new forms of religiosity and spirituality cannot compensate for the loss in traditional Christian religiosity. The religious part of the pie is shrinking and the secular part of it is growing. So contrary to Davie's (1994, 43) predictions, the sacred *does* disappear and in many ways it is becoming *less* rather than more prevalent in contemporary Western Europe.

Supplementary Table 5. Seven-item scale that reliably measures the worldview of a post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality, adopted from Houtman and Tromp (2021).

Personal spirituality is more important than allegiance to a religious tradition
Every person has a higher spiritual 'self' that can be awakened and enlightened
There is some sort of spirit or life force which permeates all life
The divine does not originate outside, but within every person
The one and only true religion does not exist, but there are truths that one can find in all religions of the world
The cosmos is a living entity
The entire universe springs from one universal spiritual energy

Note: The response options comprise: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither disagree nor agree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree; 6 = don't know. It is recommended to treat the *don't know* answers as missing values

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3

‘Believing Without Belonging’ in Twenty European Countries (1981-2008) De-institutionalization of Christianity or Spiritualization of Religion?

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Abstract

Extending and building on previous work on the merits of Grace Davie’s theory about ‘believing without belonging’, this paper offers a comparative analysis of changes in the relationships between ‘believing’ and ‘belonging’ across countries. In doing so, two renditions of the theory that co-exist in Grace Davie’s work are distinguished, i.e., the typically foregrounded version about a *de-institutionalization of Christianity* and its often unnoticed counterpart about a *spiritualization of religion*. Societal growth curve modelling is applied to the data of the European Values Study for twenty European countries (1981-2008) to test hypotheses derived from both theories. The findings suggest that the typically foregrounded version of a *de-institutionalization of Christianity* needs to be rejected, while the typically unnoticed version of a *spiritualization of religion* is supported by the data.

Keywords

Believing without belonging, religious change, religious decline, traditional Christian religiosity, spirituality, mysticism

Introduction

In her seminal work *Religion in Britain since 1945,* better known under the motto in its subtitle: *Believing without Belonging*, Grace Davie (1994) has influentially critiqued the notion of an unambiguous decline of religion. Distinguishing between ‘believing’ and ‘belonging’, she defends the argument that in Britain since World War II, and more generally in Western Europe, “[b]elieving (…) persists while belonging continues to decline – or, to be more accurate, believing is declining (has declined) at a slower rate than belonging.” (Davie 1990a, 455).

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Davie's 'believing without belonging' thesis sparked a lot of scholarly attention, and previous studies have already addressed vital elements of the theory in a range of different contexts. The current paper builds on and extends these earlier contributions by using them as vital and indispensable building blocks for a comparative analysis of the relationships between 'believing' and 'belonging' across place and time. So, in this paper, we study *whether the relationship between 'believing' and 'belonging' has weakened in those European countries in which 'belonging' is lowest.* We will answer this question by making use of the four available waves of the European Values Study (EVS), covering a time period of nearly three decades (1981-2008), and a geographical area of twenty European countries.

This article proceeds as follows. In section 2, we will set out Davie's 'believing without belonging' thesis, but as will become immediately clear, 'believing without belonging' is not one unambiguous thesis but in fact comprises two different theories on religious change, viz. *de-institutionalization of Christianity,* and *spiritualization of religion.* In section 3, we describe the data, the operationalization of the variables, and explain the method that we use. In section 4, we present our findings, and in the last section we draw conclusions, answer our research question, and discuss our results.

Theory and hypotheses

Indeed, systematically testing Davie's 'believing without belonging' thesis is not an easy task due to its nuanced nature. Davie (1994, 93) warns her readers that "'believing' and 'belonging' are not to be considered too rigidly" because the whole idea of 'believing without belonging' is "to capture a mood, to suggest an area of enquiry, a way of looking at the problem, not to describe a detailed set of characteristics." Therefore, operationalizing 'believing' and/or 'belonging' "too severely is bound to distort the picture." (Davie 1994, 94) Correspondingly, Davie defines 'believing' and 'belonging' rather loosely, and this results not in one unambiguous thesis, but in fact in two different theories on religious change that run crisscross through each other in her book, and are not mutually exclusive. The first theory is about *de-institutionalization of Christianity.* This is the 'standard' interpretation of 'believing without belonging' and will be explicated in subsection 2.2. The second theory is about *spiritualization of religion,* a different theory indeed as will become clear in subsection 2.3. Before we discuss these two different theories in detail, we discuss the literature about religious change in Western Europe since the 1960s that is most relevant for Davie's work.

The decline of traditional Christian religion and the rise of post-Christian spirituality

Since the 1960s, the religious landscape of Western Europe has changed dramatically. Traditional Christian religion declined significantly and lost much of its former dominance, appeal and legitimacy, especially in the northern and western parts of Europe (e.g. Norris and Inglehart (2011)). Historically rooted in the counterculture of the 1960s (Roszak 1969), a decidedly post-Christian / New Age spirituality emerged and spread in roughly the same time period and geographical area (Campbell 2007, Hanegraaff 1996, Heelas 1996). Various scholars, students of religious change in the West like Davie, have interpreted these recent developments as a shift from religion to spirituality. Heelas et al. (2005) for instance suggest that a 'spiritual revolution' may be unfolding, one in which the 'life-as religion' of the 'congregational domain' is increasingly giving way to the 'subjective-life spirituality' of the 'holistic milieu'. Building on Troeltsch's (1956[1931]), Campbell (1978) similarly understands these recent changes in terms of a shift towards 'spiritual and mystic religion', which he has more recently portrayed as a "fundamental revolution in Western civilization" that entails a gradual 'Easternization of the West', i.e. a process in which a basically monistic Eastern worldview gradually replaces its dualistic counterpart that has historically characterized the West (Campbell 2007, 41).

What the above-mentioned scholars have in common is that they all understand these processes of religious change as epitomized by the emergence and spread of a decidedly post-Christian / New Age spirituality that differs profoundly from traditional Christian religion as the West has known it for centuries (Houtman and Tromp 2020, Houtman, Aupers, and Heelas 2009). Adherents of such a post-Christian spirituality tend to self-identify as 'spiritual but not religious' and in doing so drive a wedge between 'religion' and 'spirituality', understanding the two as incompatible, firmly rejecting the former and embracing the latter. More specifically, they embrace a more individualized and subjective spirituality that prioritizes spiritual feeling and direct experience of the divine over Christianity's institutional, doctrinal and ritual aspects (Hammer 2001, Heelas 1996, Houtman and Tromp 2020, Roof 1993, Zinnbauer et al. 1997). Indeed, they distance themselves both from the institutional church as well as from traditional Christian dogmas and doctrines (Nicolet and Tresch 2009, Roof 1993), because the problem with organized religions is in their understanding that the latter are "preventing rather than facilitating a personal experience of the transcendent." (Turner et al. 1995, 437) For these 'highly active

seekers' (Roof 1993), spiritual feelings and experiences are hence divorced from, and no longer associated with, organized religion (Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott 1999), i.e. "neither [with] the Church nor God as represented by theistic Christianity." (Palmisano 2010, 238)

Indeed, many students of religion have meanwhile pointed out the emergence and growth of a spirituality that has completely broken away from religion, with the erosion of a church-based and belief-oriented religion giving rise to an individualized and experience-oriented spirituality (Ammerman 2013, Campbell 1978, De Groot and Pieper 2015, Flanagan and Jupp 2007, Marler and Hadaway 2002, Mears and Ellison 2000, Pollack 2008, Roof 1993, 1998, Versteeg 2006, Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005, Zinnbauer et al. 1997, Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott 1999).

Davie's theory about believing without belonging has however typically been interpreted as addressing something completely different from this, i.e. as referring merely to a *de-institutionalization of Christianity* – a decline in church attendance with many of those concerned nonetheless sticking to traditional Christian beliefs. Yet, observers like Voas and Crockett (2005) have correctly pointed out that a close reading of Davie's book reveals that it does in fact feature two markedly different theories about increases in believing without belonging. The second rendition of her theory, which has more often than not remained unnoticed, does indeed address precisely the type of *spiritualization of religion* that we have just discussed.

It is equally striking to note that Davie's theory has typically not even been interpreted as a veritable theory, but rather as a merely descriptive claim about religious trends occurring in Western Europe. Yet, Davie brings forward a theory that accounts for these changes, pointing out that it is precisely the circumstance that "believing is declining (has declined) at a slower rate than belonging" (Davie 1990a, 455) that triggers increases in believing without belonging. For this theory to be empirically tenable, then, we should be able to observe increases in believing without belonging in those European countries where belonging is lowest. As explained below, this is however a hypothesis that has to the best of our knowledge not yet been systematically tested. In what follows, we discuss the two different renditions of Davie's theory, one about *de-institutionalization of Christianity* and one about *spiritualization of religion*, to conclude with the respective hypotheses that need to be tested to assess their empirical tenability.

De-institutionalization of Christianity

Davie asserts that what we have been witnessing in Britain since 1945, and more generally in Western Europe, is not so much a decline of religion *tout court,* but rather a decline in church attendance. What she argues is "that the majority of British people - in common with many other Europeans - persist in believing but see no need to participate with even minimal regularity in their religious institutions." (Davie 1990b, 395) This results in widespread "unattached religion," (Davie 1994, 199) "unattached belief," (Idem, 69) or "disconnected belief" (Idem, 123) and hence an "increasingly evident mismatch between (…) religious practice and (…) levels of religious belief." (Idem, 4) This mismatch takes the specific form of "relatively high levels of belief and low levels of practice (rather than any other combination)." (Idem, 4-5) This means that standard accounts of secularization as a decline of religion are "getting harder and harder to sustain," (Idem, 7) because it is in fact "more accurate to describe late-twentieth century Britain – together with most of Western Europe – as unchurched rather than simply secular." (Idem, 12-13) The first theory that Davie brings forward here is hence a theory about *de-institutionalization of Christianity:* people do not cease to hold traditional Christian beliefs, but increasingly do so without (regularly) attending their churches' services. Many scholars have taken 'believing without belonging' to mean precisely this, which is another way of saying that this first theory has pretty much become the 'standard interpretation' of 'believing without belonging' (Winter and Short 1993, Glendinning 2006, Nicolet and Tresch 2009, De Groot and Pieper 2015, Reitsma et al. 2012, Inglis 2007, Aarts et al. 2008). Whereas some scholars conclude, for Britain at least, that this version of 'believing without belonging' is empirically untenable (Voas and Crockett 2005), others find that this particular way of being religious is prevalent in the United States (Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott 1999) and Switzerland (Nicolet and Tresch 2009) and relatively popular in the Netherlands (De Groot and Pieper 2015).

While previous studies have already addressed important aspects of this first rendition of the theory in a range of different contexts, we argue that a full-blown test necessitates a combination of three crucial elements that has thus far been neglected. Firstly, believing and belonging should be studied simultaneously, because what is crucial for the theory is precisely the relationship between the two (Davie 1990a, 455). Secondly, in addressing this relationship the focus should be on multiple points in time, so on how it changes over time, with the theory predicting a decline (Idem). Thirdly and finally, it should

be studied whether this relationship has indeed weakened over time in the countries where 'belonging' is lowest. For it is precisely the notion that a decline in 'belonging' incites the weakening of the relationship between the two that raises Davie's argument above the status of a mere descriptive claim to that of a veritable theory that uncovers a causal chain. We elaborate on each of these three vital elements below.

Firstly, instead of examining *relationships* between 'believing' and 'belonging', many of the existing studies (including Davie's own) address their aggregated volumes, either for one moment in time or across time (Inglis 2007, Davie 1990a, b, 1994, 1997, Lambert 2004, Pollack and Pickel 2007, Voas and Crockett 2005, Winter and Short 1993). Davie herself for instance presents data for the proportions of the British and Western-European populations that attend church monthly (1990b, 405) on the one hand ('belonging') and belief in (a personal) God, sin, soul, heaven, life after death, the devil, and hell on the other ('believing') (Davie 1990a, 460, 1990b, 405). Based on these statistics alone, however, no solidly grounded inferences can be made about the *de-institutionalization of Christianity,* because this does not necessarily imply that a more drastic decline in belonging as compared to believing has weakened the link between the two. The same problem holds for Winter and Short (1993, 640) who assert that 'believing *and* belonging' is in fact a more accurate description of the religious situation in rural England, based on their observations that in 1990, 88% of their sample belongs to a church, denomination or religion; that 42% believes in life after death; and that 25% "claimed some form of religious or spiritual experience." Indeed, Voas and Crockett (2005) claim precisely the opposite, namely that religion in Britain can be characterized as 'neither believing nor belonging'. They base this claim on their findings that belief and church attendance demonstrate equal rates of decline in their panel data, while belief has even declined more rapidly than attendance in their cross-sectional data. Pollack and Pickel (2007) make the same claim on the basis of their finding that both church attendance and belief in God have declined. The point to underscore is that all these claims about the tenability of this first rendition of Davie's theory are based on isolated trends in church attendance and traditional Christian beliefs. These trends do as such not tell us much about either changes in the relationship between the two, nor about whether such changes have indeed been sparked by stronger declines in church attendance as compared to traditional Christian beliefs.

Other studies do investigate relationships between believing and belonging, yet without assessing how these change over time (Storm 2009, Pollack and Pickel 2007). Where Pollack and Pickel (2007, 618) present correlations (i.e. relationships) between church attendance and belief in God for western and eastern Germany in 1999/2000, Storm (2009) presents findings of a cluster analysis on nine religiosity items, identifying four clusters (or groups of individuals) of 'fuzzy fidelity' (Voas 2009), including one that she characterizes as 'believing without belonging'. She also presents data about the sizes of the various clusters, which makes clear that for the ten European countries in her sample, the 'believing without belonging' cluster has an average size of 10% in 1998-1999. Based on these cross-sectional studies alone, we can however not determine whether (the) 'believing without belonging' (cluster) has become more prevalent over time in the most unchurched countries.

Thirdly and by contrast, Aarts et al. (2008) and Reitsma et al. (2012) do use repeated cross-sectional data to study differences in the relationships between 'believing' and 'belonging' over time and across countries, albeit not across countries with varying degrees of church attendance. Instead, Aarts et al. (2008) derive contrasting hypotheses from secularization theory and supply-side theory. With their first set of hypotheses, they investigate the relationships between 'believing' and 'belonging' over time, but do not distinguish between countries. With their second set of hypotheses, they do study the relationships between 'believing' and 'belonging' across countries (i.e. countries with high respectively low levels of religious pluralism), but not over time. The same holds for Reitsma et al. (2012), who derive hypotheses from modernisation theory to study the relationships between 'believing' and 'belonging' across countries, but not over time. They also derive hypotheses from religious market theory to study the relationships between the two over time and across countries, to be sure, but in doing so they compare western countries with former communist ones[18] rather than countries with higher respectively lower levels of church attendance.

In sum, it is evident that previous studies have already addressed vital elements of the first rendition of Davie's theory about increases in believing without belonging, i.e., the

[18] Davie only made predictions about Britain and Western Europe more generally, hence including former communist countries (Reitsma et al. 2012) or North-American countries (Aarts et al. 2008) seems unnecessary.

theory about a *de-institutionalization of Christianity,* in a range of different contexts. To the best of our knowledge, however, the key hypothesis to be derived from this theory has thus far not been tested yet, i.e. *that the relationship between traditional Christian beliefs and church attendance has declined in those European countries in which church attendance is lowest* (Hypothesis 1).

Spiritualization of religion

Whereas this has gone unnoticed by many a scholar writing about 'believing without belonging', Voas and Crockett (2005, 12) have correctly pointed out that "the slogan lends itself to an unfortunate equivocation", because a 'strong version' and a 'weak interpretation' of 'believing without belonging' can be distinguished. In this paper, we refer to the former with *de-institutionalization of Christianity* (as discussed above) and to the latter with *spiritualization of religion* (explicated below). Other authors (Aarts et al. 2008, Glendinning 2006, Reitsma et al. 2012) have acknowledged a similar distinction, yet have like Voas and Crockett (2005) themselves only tested the 'strong version' of 'believing without belonging', leaving the 'weak interpretation' to remain untested at all.

Indeed, at various points in her book, Davie puts forward different sets of meanings of 'believing' and 'belonging'. The second rendition of her theory comes to the fore most clearly where she points out how in Britain and Western Europe more generally "feelings, experience and the more numinous aspects of religious belief demonstrate considerable persistence," whereas "*religious orthodoxy*, ritual participation and institutional attachment display an undeniable degree of secularization (…) both before and during the post-war period." (Davie 1994, 4-5, italics added) This second version of Davie's theory is hence not about people leaving the church, while sticking to their traditional Christian beliefs (i.e. *de-institutionalization of Christianity* as discussed above), but about people prioritizing spiritual feelings and experiences of the divine over Christianity's institutional, ritual *and* doctrinal aspects. This is the type of religion that the German theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1956[1931]) understands as 'mystical' religion. Despite the fact that the latter has traditionally been neglected in the sociology of religion (Daiber 2002, 329), it has meanwhile been picked up by contemporary sociologists of religion to interpret recent changes in the religious landscapes of the West as increases in 'religious individualism' (Bellah et al. 2008[1985], Campbell 1978, Daiber 2002, Streib and Hood 2011).

"Mysticism," as Troeltsch himself describes it, "shows a strong impulse towards the directness, presence, and inwardness of the religious experience, towards a direct contact with the divine, a contact which transcends or supplements traditions, cults, and institutions." (1911, 172) In Troeltsch's understanding, if mysticism 'transcends' rather than 'supplements' religion, it has broken away from religious traditions and institutions and disdains the latter, understanding itself as "the true inner principle of all religious faith," as Streib and Hood put it (2011, 448), "a religious principle in its own right divorced from a containing frame-work of dogma, ritual or ecclesiasticism" (Campbell 1978, 149), indeed "a distinct religion in its own right with a distinct system of beliefs." (Idem, 147) It is precisely such "unchurched mysticism" (Parsons 1999, 141) or "post-Christian spirituality" (Houtman and Tromp 2020) that Davie refers to in her work. Because those concerned want to maintain a critical distance from religious institutions and doctrines alike, they typically self-identify as "'spiritual' rather than 'religious,' as in 'I'm not religious but I'm very spiritual.'" (Bellah et al. 2008[1985], 246) In doing so they in effect drive a wedge between 'religion' and 'spirituality', understanding the two as incompatible, firmly rejecting the former and embracing the latter (see also Streib and Hood (2011)).

In sum, Davie's theory on *spiritualization of religion* comprises the rejection of Christianity's institutional, doctrinal and ritual aspects, and the increased prioritizing of spiritual feelings and experiences of the divine. Hence, following the same logic as for Davie's first theory, her second theory predicts *that the relationship between spiritual religion and traditional Christian religiosity has declined in those European countries in which traditional Christian religiosity is lowest* (Hypothesis 2).

Data, operationalization, and method

Data

We make use of the four available waves (1981, 1990, 1999, and 2008) from the European Values Study (EVS), a repeated cross-sectional dataset that covers a time period of nearly three decades and a geographical area of forty-seven countries in 2008, most of them European (EVS 2011). Our sample comprises the following twenty countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, Great Britain, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and West-Germany. All twenty countries had data available for all four waves except for Austria,

Croatia, Finland, Greece, Luxembourg, and Portugal who were not yet included in 1981. In addition, Croatia, Greece, and Luxembourg were not yet included in 1990 either, and Norway had one missing wave in 1999. This resulted in a dataset with 87,153 individuals distributed over seventy country-year combinations. The average number of respondents per country-year combination is 1,245 (SD = 467) with a minimum of 304 in Northern Ireland (1990), and a maximum of 2,792 in Belgium (1990).

Operationalization de-institutionalization of Christianity

Traditional Christian beliefs are measured with responses to five questions about whether or not one believes in (1) a personal God, (2) life after death, (3) hell, (4) heaven, and (5) sin[19]. The first item is measured with the question: *Which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs?* The response options comprise: 1 'There is a personal God', 2 'There is some sort of spirit or life force', 3 'I don't really know what to think', 4 'I don't really think there is any sort of spirit, God or life force'. We dichotomize this variable by recoding the latter three responses as '0', and a conception of the sacred as a transcendent personal God as '1'. The items 2-5 were preceded with the statement: *Which, if any, of the following do you believe in?* The response options comprise: 0 'No', and 1 'Yes'. Factor analysis demonstrated that these five items indeed could be subsumed under one component (see Table 1). All five items had high and positive loadings on the first factor and could reliably be combined to form one scale (Cronbach's alpha = .843)[20]. Scale scores are assigned as mean item scores for those with at least three valid answers, resulting in a valid N of 80,334 respondents (92.2%)[21].

[19] The items about belief that 'people have a soul' and belief in 'the devil' were only available in the first two waves of the EVS and could therefore not be used for constructing the scale.

[20] Iceland and Norway have respectively the lowest and highest Eigenvalues (2.124 and 3.256) and proportions explained variance (42.5% and 65.1%). The factor loadings varied from .57 to .82 (Iceland), and from .79 to .86 (Norway). Iceland and Norway have respectively the lowest and highest Cronbach's alpha's (.656 and .865). Only in Croatia and Malta will the alpha increase slightly if the item about a Personal God is deleted from the scale (from .830 to .875 in Croatia, and from .725 to .814 in Malta).

[21] If we set the minimum to four or five valid answers, we will lose respectively 13% and 27% of the sample. This is due to relatively high proportions of missing values for the items belief in life after death (16.1%), heaven (11.9%), hell (11.5%), and sin (9.4%). Nearly all respondents who have a missing value on one or more of these questions answered them with "I don't know".

Table 1. Factor Loadings of Five Items Measuring Traditional Christian Beliefs (N = 63,527)

Items	Component 1
Personal God	.689
Life after death	.752
Hell	.821
Heaven	.872
Sin	.783
Eigenvalue	3.089
% of Variance	61.8%

Church attendance is measured with the question: *Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?* Response options comprise 1 'more than once a week', 2 'once a week', 3 'once a month', 4 'only on special holy days/Christmas/Easter days', 5 'other specific holy days', 6 'once a year', 7 'less often', and 8 'never, practically never'. We mirrored all response options and merged both holy day categories, so that recoded church attendance ranges from 1 'never, practically never' to 7 'more than once a week' with higher values indicating that individuals attend church more frequently.

Country-level church attendance is computed for each country separately by taking the average level of church attendance in that country in the year 2008 (i.e. EVS wave 4).

Time is measured with a variable that indicates the year range in which the survey was administered. It is recoded into (0) 1981-1984; (1) 1990-1993; (2) 1999-2001; (3) 2008-2010 and treated as linear.

Operationalization spiritualization of religion

Traditional Christian religiosity consists of a combination of *church attendance* and *traditional Christian beliefs* as already discussed in the previous subsection. Scores have been assigned in four steps: 1) all respondents with invalid scores on either or both

variables were excluded, resulting in a valid N of 79,961[22]; 2) both variables were standardized (with means = 0 and standard deviations = 1) because they have different scales; 3) scores were assigned as means of the two resulting standardized variables; and 4) the resulting index for traditional Christian religiosity is normalized to a range of 0-1.

Country-level traditional Christian religiosity is computed for each country separately by taking the average level of traditional Christian religiosity in that country in the year 2008 (i.e. EVS wave 4).

Finally, we need a measure for *spiritual religion* but this is easier said than done as questions about spirituality in general, and spiritual feelings and experiences of the divine in particular, are virtually absent in today's large internationally comparative survey programs, and the European Values Study is no exception (Houtman, Heelas, and Achterberg 2012). Though it is clear that there is no way to tackle this methodological shortcoming in a fully convincing manner, we selected a question about taking moments for prayer, meditation or contemplation – spiritual practices typically used for "turning inward," (Campbell 2007, 65) "direct experience of 'the real'," (Idem, 67) or "direct contact with the divine." (Troeltsch 1911, 172) "[S]uch practices often lead to an experience of connectedness with a larger reality, yielding a more comprehensive self; with other individuals or the human community; with nature or the cosmos; or with the divine realm." (Huss 2014, 49-50) The exact wording of the question we use is: *Do you take some moments of prayer, meditation or contemplation or something like that?* Respondents could answer this question with 1 'yes', or 0 'no'. The advantage of using this single item to measure *spiritual religion* is that prayer, meditation and contemplation are being practiced both within and without a traditional Christian context (Ammerman 2013, Berghuijs, Pieper, and Bakker 2013, Huss 2014, Lucas 1992, Pargament et al. 1995, Schlehofer, Omoto, and Adelman 2008, Versteeg 2006, Woodhead 2011, Zinnbauer 1997). For meditation is not only a popular practice among New Agers (Donahue 1993, Huss 2014, Lucas 1992) but also among visitors of a Jesuit spiritual center in the Netherlands (Versteeg 2006). Alongside prayer it is moreover not only embraced by charismatic-evangelical Christians, but also by Catholic and Protestant churches considered mainstream and historic (Woodhead 2011). If the relationship between spiritual religion and traditional Christian religiosity does indeed weaken across time, as

[22] This is 91.7% of the original sample.

Davie's theory about spiritualization of religion predicts, experience-oriented spirituality has become increasingly disconnected from traditional Christian institutions and doctrines.

See Table 2 for the descriptive statistics of all the variables that will be included in our models. We also include the general trends of all the scales, and of all the variables that are used to construct these scales, so as to provide the reader with a more complete picture of how the various religiosity indicators behave over time (see Table 3).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics	N	MIN	MAX	M	SD [a]
Spiritual religion					
- Prayer / meditation / contemplation [b]	84,561	0	1	.620	
Traditional Christian religiosity					
Traditional Christian religiosity	79,961	0	1	.435	.326
- Church attendance [c]	86,620	1	7	3.433	2.082
- Traditional Christian beliefs	80,334	0	1	.463	.382
Personal God [d]	83,935	0	1	.406	
Life after death [e]	73,087	0	1	.559	
Hell [f]	77,146	0	1	.296	
Heaven [g]	76,769	0	1	.487	
Sin [h]	78,919	0	1	.582	
Correlation Christian beliefs; church attendance [i]	70	.261	.667	.505	.085
Correlation spiritual religion; Christian religiosity [i]	70	.314	.666	.501	.080
Country-level church attendance 2008	20	2.104	5.668	3.274	.923
Country-level traditional Christian religiosity 2008	20	.196	.823	.423	.165

[a] Standard deviations are not shown for dichotomous items.

[b] With 3.0%, the proportion of missing values for this item is fairly low (minimum = 0.8% in Malta, and maximum = 9.2% in West-Germany).

[c] With 0.6%, the proportion of missing values for this item is extremely low (minimum = 0.2% in The Netherlands, and maximum = 2.1% in Sweden).

[d] Sweden and Malta have respectively the lowest and highest country-means for this variable (.166 and .744). With 3.7%, the average proportion of missing values is fairly low for this item (minimum = 1.4% in Iceland, and maximum = 6.1% in Belgium).

[e] Denmark and Malta have respectively the lowest and highest country-means for this variable (.35 and .89). With 16.1%, the average proportion of missing values is quite high for this item (minimum = 7.9% in Malta, and maximum = 24.9% in Finland).

[f] Denmark and Malta have respectively the lowest and highest country-means for this variable (.09 and .85). With 11.5%, the average proportion of missing values is relatively high for this item (min = 6.4% in Iceland, and max = 20.9% in Finland).

[g] Denmark and Malta have respectively the lowest and highest country-means for this variable (.19 and .91). With 11.9%, the average proportion of missing values is relatively high for this item (min = 5.9% in Malta, and max = 21.4% in Finland).

[h] Denmark and Malta have respectively the lowest and highest country-means for this variable (.24 and .94). With 9.4%, the average proportion of missing values is relatively high for this item (minimum = 4.1% in Malta, and maximum = 17.9% in Finland).

[i] Data are unavailable for ten country-year combinations, hence the valid N = 70.

Table 3. Trends of all the variables (EVS 1981-2008, Twenty European Countries)

	1981	1990	1999	2008	absolute change	relative change
Spiritual religion						
- Prayer / meditation / contemplation (%)	60.1	60.6	64.8	61.6	+1.5	+2.5
Traditional Christian religiosity						
Traditional Christian religiosity (mean)	.44	.43	.46	.42	-0.02	-5.7
- Church attendance (mean)	3.49	3.46	3.55	3.27	-0.22	-6.1
- Traditional Christian beliefs (mean)	.47	.44	.49	.46	-0.01	-2.2
- Personal God (%)	38.8	39.7	44.8	38.9	+0.1	+0.3
- Life after death (%)	56.9	53.2	58.5	55.3	-1.6	-2.8
- Hell (%)	27.8	24.6	32.9	32.2	+4.4	+15.8
- Heaven (%)	49.3	47.9	49.9	48.0	-1.3	-2.6
- Sin (%)	61.8	59.0	59.2	54.8	-7.0	-11.3

Method

We test our hypotheses using Fairbrother's (2014) *societal growth curve modelling.* This technique is very similar to individual-level growth-curve modelling, but then applied "to the higher-level units in comparative longitudinal survey data." (Idem, 125) Researchers often use growth-curve models to analyse individual-level panel data, i.e. the same individuals are measured on multiple occasions, a structure that implies a multilevel model in which the measurement occasions are nested within the individuals. Growth-curve models can be used to study whether an independent variable *x* causes change in a dependent variable *y* over time, and this predictor variable *x* can either be time-variant (such as age) or time-invariant (such as gender). In the dataset that we use, the European Values Study (1981-2008), all the individuals are only measured once, however, the same countries are

measured up to four times. Taking societies as the units of analysis, societal growth curve modelling can be used to examine "whether the absolute level of some time-invariant (…) [independent] variable x_j leads to faster or slower change in [dependent variable] *y*. (…) An x_j variable (…) could be the country mean $\overline{x_j}$ (…), though it could also denote some other time-invariant macro-level characteristic." (Fairbrother 2014, 125). Subsequently, an interaction term between the independent variable x_j and *time* needs to be added to the model. We will treat the twenty countries in our sample as 'individuals', each of them measured on two, three, or four occasions (i.e. the number of available EVS waves). This implies that country-waves are nested within countries. The models require the inclusion of a time-invariant predictor variable (x_j), and an interaction term between the latter and *time*. Needless to say, the model therefore also requires the inclusion of a main effect of *time*.

To test our first hypothesis, the required dependent variable *y* should express the relationship between two variables. Hence, we will calculate for each country-wave combination a unique Pearson's correlation coefficient between traditional Christian beliefs and church attendance. The required x_j variable is country-level church attendance. In sum, we will test whether the correlation between traditional Christian beliefs and church attendance has weakened in those European countries in which church attendance (country-level) is lowest. The data that we will analyse for this purpose can be found in Table 4, and the countries are sorted by their mean level of church attendance (ascending).

To test our second hypothesis, the required dependent variable *y* should express the relationship between prayer/meditation/contemplation (a nominal variable) and traditional Christian religiosity (a scale variable). Hence, we will calculate for each country-wave combination a unique point-biserial correlation between 'prayer, meditation, contemplation' and 'traditional Christian religiosity'. The required independent x_j variable is country-level traditional Christian religiosity. In sum, we will test whether the point-biserial correlation between prayer/meditation/contemplation and traditional Christian religiosity has weakened in those European countries in which traditional Christian religiosity (country-level) is lowest. The data that we will analyse for this purpose can be found in Table 5, and the countries are sorted by their mean level of traditional Christian religiosity (ascending).

Table 4. Correlations Between Church Attendance and Traditional Christian Beliefs and Country-level Church Attendance 2008 of Twenty European Countries (EVS 1981-2008)

	1981	1990	1999	2008	Country-level church attendance 2008
Sweden	0.54	0.54	0.47	0.52	2.10
France	0.59	0.57	0.50	0.49	2.24
Finland		0.56	0.48	0.58	2.46
Great Britain	0.45	0.48	0.43	0.52	2.48
Belgium	0.59	0.55	0.53	0.48	2.49
Norway	0.50	0.58		0.54	2.60
Iceland	0.32	0.32	0.26	0.41	2.70
Denmark	0.46	0.38	0.37	0.35	2.78
Spain	0.64	0.62	0.62	0.56	2.82
Luxembourg			0.49	0.43	2.84
Netherlands	0.62	0.59	0.59	0.58	2.92
West-Germany	0.63	0.62	0.54	0.55	3.10
Austria		0.57	0.50	0.56	3.23
Croatia			0.54	0.50	3.92
Portugal		0.59	0.47	0.42	3.97
Northern-Ireland	0.53	0.44	0.52	0.49	4.11
Italy	0.56	0.67	0.56	0.61	4.29
Greece			0.45	0.44	4.38
Ireland	0.55	0.43	0.45	0.50	4.41
Malta	0.37	0.36	0.45	0.44	5.67

Table 5. Correlations Between Prayer/Meditation/Contemplation and Traditional Christian Religiosity (TCR) and Country-level TCR 2008 of Twenty European Countries

	1981	1990	1999	2008	Country-level TCR 2008
Sweden	0.53	0.51	0.39	0.51	0.20
France	0.55	0.58	0.57	0.49	0.25
Denmark	0.55	0.51	0.50	0.46	0.26
Belgium	0.57	0.62	0.52	0.48	0.28
Norway	0.40	0.34		0.35	0.29
Luxembourg			0.57	0.51	0.31
Netherlands	0.56	0.49	0.38	0.45	0.33
Finland		0.48	0.49	0.50	0.33
Great Britain	0.50	0.51	0.57	0.58	0.35
West-Germany	0.47	0.48	0.67	0.59	0.36
Spain	0.51	0.58	0.56	0.55	0.37
Iceland	0.43	0.39	0.38	0.36	0.37
Austria		0.49	0.49	0.54	0.40
Croatia			0.57	0.52	0.52
Portugal		0.63	0.61	0.56	0.54
Italy	0.50	0.57	0.53	0.56	0.58
Greece			0.50	0.53	0.61
Ireland	0.52	0.40	0.38	0.53	0.63
Northern-Ireland	0.62	0.43	0.58	0.59	0.67
Malta	0.34	0.37	0.31	0.45	0.82

Results

Before moving immediately to hypothesis testing, let us start with briefly examining some trends and between-country differences of the central variables in our analyses. In Table 6, one can find the country means of traditional Christian beliefs, church attendance, prayer/meditation/contemplation, and traditional Christian religiosity. Dependent on data availability, country means are presented for two, three or four waves. Clearly, many things can be said about this table, but we limit ourselves to three observations. First, the data seem to support Davie's suggestion that not only in Britain but also in Western Europe more generally "believing is declining (has declined) at a slower rate than belonging." (1990a, 455) Concerning the *de-institutionalization of Christianity,* more countries experienced declines in the mean levels of church attendance than in traditional Christian beliefs. Regarding the *spiritualization of religion,* more countries experienced declines in the mean levels of traditional Christian religiosity than in taking moments of prayer/meditation/contemplation. Secondly, when we examine the country trends of all four indicators simultaneously, Belgium and Spain seem to have experienced the greatest declines (e.g. their mean levels of traditional Christian religiosity decreased with approximately one-third in the period under study). Thirdly, both conceptualizations of 'belonging' (i.e. church attendance and traditional Christian religiosity) are least prevalent in the northern and western parts of Europe (especially in Sweden and France) and most prevalent in the southern part of Europe (especially in Malta). The only exceptions to this general rule are Ireland, Northern-Ireland and Spain.

Table 6. Country-Means of Traditional Christian Beliefs

(TCB), Church Attendance (CHAT),

Prayer/Meditation/Contemplation (PMC) and

Traditional Christian Religiosity (TCR)

of Twenty European Countries (EVS 1981-2008)

	1981	1990	1999	2008
Austria TCB		0.43	0.42	0.42
Austria CHAT		3.87	3.83	3.23
Austria PMC		0.72	0.70	0.62
Austria TCR		0.46	0.45	0.40
Belgium TCB	0.42	0.34	0.34	0.32
Belgium CHAT	3.31	3.27	2.98	2.49
Belgium PMC	0.62	0.56	0.63	0.51
Belgium TCR	0.41	0.36	0.34	0.28
Croatia TCB			0.59	0.55
Croatia CHAT			4.34	3.92
Croatia PMC			0.74	0.65
Croatia TCR			0.58	0.52
Denmark TCB	0.22	0.21	0.22	0.22
Denmark CHAT	2.40	2.41	2.55	2.78
Denmark PMC	0.46	0.43	0.51	0.48
Denmark TCR	0.23	0.22	0.24	0.26
Finland TCB		0.46	0.52	0.42
Finland CHAT		2.85	2.83	2.46
Finland PMC		0.22	0.73	0.71
Finland TCR		0.38	0.41	0.33
France TCB	0.30	0.32	0.31	0.30
France CHAT	2.33	2.51	2.21	2.24

France PMC	0.42	0.46	0.40	0.41
France TCR	0.26	0.28	0.25	0.25
Great Britain TCB	0.50	0.50	0.51	0.47
Great Britain CHAT	2.64	2.76	2.48	2.47
Great Britain PMC	0.49	0.54	0.50	0.47
Great Britain TCR	0.38	0.40	0.39	0.35
Greece TCB			0.58	0.65
Greece CHAT			4.28	4.38
Greece PMC			0.61	0.74
Greece TCR			0.56	0.61
Iceland TCB	0.46	0.53	0.54	0.47
Iceland CHAT	2.61	2.75	2.80	2.70
Iceland PMC	0.43	0.46	0.54	0.51
Iceland TCR	0.36	0.41	0.41	0.37
Ireland TCB	0.80	0.76	0.76	0.69
Ireland CHAT	5.76	5.76	5.23	4.40
Ireland PMC	0.81	0.84	0.85	0.78
Ireland TCR	0.80	0.78	0.73	0.63
Italy TCB	0.45	0.59	0.65	0.60
Italy CHAT	4.07	4.38	4.52	4.29
Italy PMC	0.71	0.75	0.79	0.74
Italy TCR	0.48	0.58	0.62	0.58
Luxembourg TCB			0.37	0.32

Luxembourg CHAT			3.33	2.84
Luxembourg PMC			0.57	0.52
Luxembourg TCR			0.38	0.31
Malta TCB	0.89	0.86	0.85	0.86
Malta CHAT	6.19	6.00	5.86	5.67
Malta PMC	0.91	0.88	0.92	0.90
Malta TCR	0.88	0.85	0.83	0.82
Netherlands TCB	0.40	0.33	0.33	0.34
Netherlands CHAT	3.29	3.12	2.80	2.92
Netherlands PMC	0.61	0.68	0.70	0.66
Netherlands TCR	0.39	0.34	0.31	0.33
Northern-Ireland TCB	0.83	0.80	0.76	0.80
Northern-Ireland CHAT	4.80	4.73	4.31	4.11
Northern-Ireland PMC	0.74	0.76	0.71	0.74
Northern-Ireland TCR	0.73	0.71	0.67	0.67
Norway TCB	0.45	0.36		0.30
Norway CHAT	2.86	2.61		2.60
Norway PMC	0.62	0.64		0.63
Norway TCR	0.37	0.31		0.29
Portugal TCB		0.55	0.61	0.58
Portugal CHAT		3.94	4.12	3.97
Portugal PMC		0.66	0.75	0.70
Portugal TCR		0.52	0.57	0.54

Spain TCB	0.56	0.49	0.47	0.45
Spain CHAT	4.07	3.65	3.47	2.82
Spain PMC	0.71	0.61	0.64	0.62
Spain TCR	0.54	0.47	0.44	0.37
Sweden TCB	0.27	0.25	0.25	0.22
Sweden CHAT	2.57	2.24	2.29	2.10
Sweden PMC	0.34	0.34	0.45	0.44
Sweden TCR	0.27	0.23	0.23	0.20
West-Germany TCB	0.37	0.37	0.37	0.36
West-Germany CHAT	3.39	3.42	3.47	3.10
West-Germany PMC	0.63	0.69	0.60	0.54
West-Germany TCR	0.38	0.39	0.40	0.36

Now in order to formally test our hypotheses, we performed societal growth curve analyses with IBM SPSS Statistics 25, using the Linear Mixed Models procedure, and Maximum Likelihood estimation. Our findings can be found in Table 7. Concerning Davie's first theory on *de-institutionalization of Christianity,* we find that the relationship between traditional Christian beliefs and church attendance has indeed declined across time. The total decrease of -0.034 in the correlation is not particularly overwhelming[23], but is nonetheless negative and significant (b = -0.011; p = 0.032). While traditional Christian beliefs and church attendance have as such drifted apart in the period 1981-2008, the non-significant interaction effect between time and country-level church attendance points out that this has not happened in those European countries where church attendance is lowest (cf. Model 1a and 1b in Table 7).

[23] The correlation decreased from 0.523 in 1981 to 0.489 in 2008.

Table 7. Societal Growth Curve Models of Twenty European Countries (EVS 1981-2008)

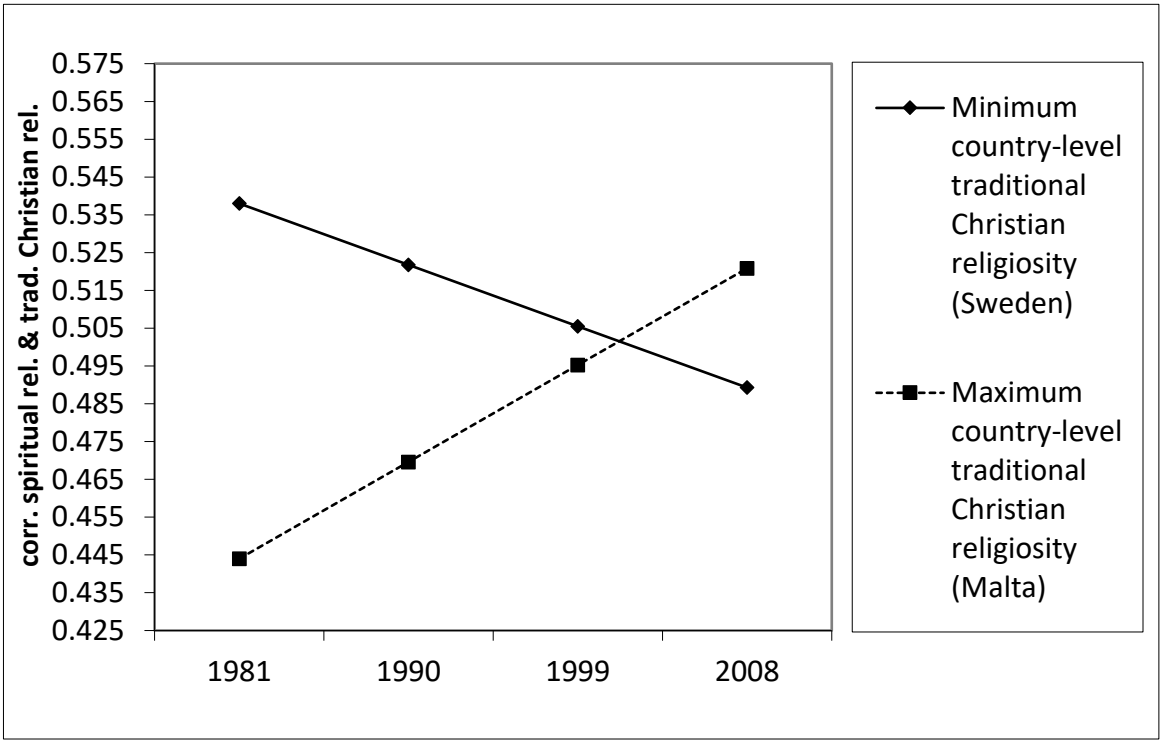
Model		1a	1b	2a	2b
Random Effects Variances	Country-Wave	0.002	0.002	0.003	0.003
	Country	0.005	0.004	0.003	0.003
Fixed Effects Coefficients	Time	-0.011*	-0.033+	-0.002	-0.029+
		(0.005)	(0.017)	(0.006)	(0.015)
	Country-level church attendance		-0.026		
			(0.019)		
	Time * Country-level church attendance		0.007		
			(0.005)		
	Country-level traditional Christian religiosity				-0.150
					(0.102)
	Time * Country-level traditional				0.067+
					(0.034)

	Christian religiosity				
	Intercept	0.523***	0.607***	0.505***	0.567***
		(0.018)	(0.065)	(0.018)	(0.046)
-2LL		-192.5	-195.0	-177.0	-181.0
N		79,961; 70; 20	79,961; 70; 20	78,184; 70; 20	78,184; 70; 20

Note: SEs in parentheses. Ns are for respondents, country-waves and countries, resp.
Hypothesis 1 derived from a *de-institutionalization of Christianity* is tested in Model 1b, viz. the relationship between traditional Christian beliefs and church attendance has declined in those European countries in which church attendance is lowest.
Hypothesis 2 derived from a *spiritualization of religion* is tested in Model 2b, viz. the relationship between spiritual religion and traditional Christian religiosity has declined in those European countries in which traditional Christian religiosity is lowest.
*** p < .001 ** p < .01 * p < .05 + p <.10

Regarding Davie's second theory on *spiritualization of religion,* we find that there is no overall decline in the strength of the relationship between spiritual religion and traditional Christian religiosity (see Model 2a in Table 7). There is however a marginally significant interaction between time and country-level traditional Christian religiosity (b = 0.067; p = 0.055, see Model 2b in Table 7). This means that depending on a country's level of traditional Christian religiosity, the relationship between spiritual religion and traditional Christian religiosity either strengthened or weakened over time.

Figure 1. Changes in the Correlations between Spiritual Religion and Traditional Christian Religiosity by Country-Level Traditional Christian Religiosity (Supporting Hypothesis 2)



As predicted, in those European countries in which traditional Christian religiosity is lowest[24], the relationship between spiritual religion and traditional Christian religiosity weakened over time. In other words, in the period 1981-2008, spiritual religion and traditional Christian religiosity became less associated with each other in those European countries in which the latter lost most of its adherents. Hence, our second hypothesis and Davie's second theory on *spiritualization of religion* are supported by the data. Again, a total decrease of -0.049 in the correlation is not particularly overwhelming[25], but the negative slope for those countries in which traditional Christian religiosity is lowest is in the hypothesized direction. See Figure 1 for a visualization of the interaction effect with the upper solid- and the lower dashed line representing the countries that are respectively least and most traditionally Christian[26].

In addition, what the theory did not predict and therefore is an unexpected finding of this analysis, is that the relationship between spiritual religion and traditional Christian religiosity *strengthened* over time in those countries in which the latter is still strongly adhered to (see the

[24] We make use of the continuous variable country-level traditional Christian religiosity 2008 (see Table 5)
[25] The correlation decreased from 0.538 in 1981 to 0.489 in 2008.
[26] i.e. Sweden (0.196) and Malta (0.823).

lower dashed line in Figure 1). For those countries, the correlation between the two increased in the period 1981-2008 (+0.077 in absolute terms, from 0.444 in 1981 to 0.521 in 2008, see Figure 1). Hence, we must conclude that spiritual religion and traditional Christian religion have become increasingly related in countries that have remained most traditionally Christian. This trend therefore runs in the opposite direction compared to the one in those European countries in which traditional Christian religiosity is lowest. This does not contradict Davie's theory, to be sure, because the latter predicts decreasing relationships between the two due to a decline in traditional Christian religion, which is what we also find. We return to this in the discussion section as this puzzling finding asks for further research and theoretical explanation.

Conclusion and discussion

Grace Davie's influential 'believing without belonging' thesis has sparked a lot of scholarly attention since its introduction a quarter of a century ago. Extending and building on previous studies that have already addressed vital elements of the theory in a range of different contexts, we offered an integrated comparative analysis of the relationships between 'believing' and 'belonging' across place and time. More precisely, we studied the relationships between 'believing' and 'belonging' for twenty European countries in the period 1981-2008, using data from the European Values Study. Specifically, we studied *whether the relationship between 'believing' and 'belonging' has weakened in those European countries in which 'belonging' is lowest.*

Strikingly, our findings suggest that *spiritualization of religion* is empirically supported, even though 'believing without belonging' is rarely understood in this way and has not been tested until now. Specifically, we find that the relationship between spiritual religion and traditional Christian religiosity indeed weakened in the period 1981-2008 in those European countries in which the latter is lowest. This means that in those countries the two are now less associated with each other than they were in the past. This is consistent with much previous research according to which 'spirituality' has broken away and differentiated from 'religion' (and 'religiousness') (Hill et al. 2000, Huss 2014, Mears and Ellison 2000, Wuthnow 1998, Zinnbauer et al. 1997). More specifically, personal spiritual feelings and experiences have become increasingly disconnected from organized and institutionalized religion (Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott 1999). Roof's (1993) 'highly active seekers', adherents of New Age or post-Christian spirituality,

and those self-identifying as 'spiritual but not religious', all to be found in the 'cultic' or 'holistic milieu' (Campbell 1972, Heelas et al. 2005), are the people most likely to be responsible for these changes.

Remarkably, our results also show that precisely what has become the 'standard' interpretation of 'believing without belonging' as *de-institutionalization of Christianity* appears to be untenable. For while the relationship between traditional Christian beliefs and church attendance did decline across time in all European countries in our sample, it did not do so in the most unchurched countries, as the theory predicts. Pollack and Pickel (2007, 627) are absolutely right in saying that traditional Christian beliefs and church attendance "statistically correlate quite strongly," but it must be noted that the strength of their relationship did attenuate over time. In short, the answer to our research question - *whether the relationship between 'believing' and 'belonging' has weakened in those European countries in which 'belonging' is lowest* - is 'yes' if 'believing without belonging' is understood as *spiritualization of religion*, but 'no' if it is interpreted as *de-institutionalization of Christianity.*

There are two possible explanations for the unexpected and puzzling finding that spiritual religion and traditional Christian religiosity have become increasingly related in those countries that have remained most traditionally Christian. A first explanation takes this as evidence for a trend of religious polarization, i.e., people increasingly taking sides by means of clear-cut self-identifications as either 'religious *and* spiritual' or 'neither religious nor spiritual', with the latter consisting of convinced atheists who strongly oppose both. Previous research namely indicated that anti-religious attitudes are especially found in those Western-European countries that are highly religious (Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2013) and/or have a Catholic religious heritage (Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2018). A second possible explanation stems from Palmisano's (2010, 238) work who found that the majority of Italians in fact connect their "religious experience […] with the sacred which is and remains 'external to' and 'higher than' the individual (typically the Christian God)." They have (mystical) experiences of a "profound and immediate unity with all that is absolute." (Idem) These "mystical experiences" are subsequently understood as "ineffable events which confirm the truth of religious orthodoxy." (Idem, 233) In Troeltsch's (1956[1931]) understanding, this is precisely the type of mysticism that 'supplements' rather than 'transcends' church-based religion. We invite further research to test and elaborate on these potential explanations.

Of course, the potential limitations of our study deserve attention as well. First of all, the actual declines in the relationships are not particularly overwhelming, hence we need to be a bit cautious with making too strong claims based on these findings alone. At the same time, this may be due to an underestimation of religious change. Regarding *de-institutionalization of Christianity,* the European Values Study surely contains many good questions to track changes in traditional Christian religiosity, but the brief period of time that it covers implies an overly strict test. For the EVS's first wave took place as recent as 1981, while a large (if indeed not the largest) part of the religious decline and change took place prior to that year, not least the "marked drop in both [religious] membership and attendance figures in the 1960s." (Davie 1994, 122) Hence, we are only able to study the latter (and arguably less intense) part of these processes of religious change. There is no easy fix for this limitation as alternative repeated cross-sectional and internationally comparable datasets starting before 1981 do not exist either.

Concerning *spiritualization of religion,* it is the other way around. Post-Christian spirituality of the 'New Age' variety only emerged in the West in the latter part of the 1970s, and was fully developed by the 1980s (Hanegraaff 1996, Campbell 2007), so we should have been able to study this process from the start. Unfortunately, a reliable and valid multi-item scale to measure *spiritual religion* is lacking in the European Values Study (as well as in all other internationally comparative survey programs). So while these data can be used to study the changing relationship between traditional Christian religiosity and spiritual religion, as we hope to have demonstrated, they preclude a nuanced measurement of the latter. Because of this, contemporary theories (such as Davie's *spiritualization of religion*) about an increased prioritizing of spiritual feelings and experiences of the divine over religiosity's institutional, doctrinal and ritual aspects are difficult to test properly.

While our analysis demonstrates that spiritual religion and traditional Christian religiosity became less associated with each other in those European countries in which the latter lost most of its adherents, what exactly this spiritual religion looks like thus remains ultimately a matter of theoretical speculation. This is why we would like to make an urgent call for better survey data, especially by including more useful scales in the large internationally comparative survey programs such as Hood's (1975) Mysticism Scale or Houtman and Tromp's (2020) Post-Christian Spirituality Scale. Adding such scales to the large international survey programs would make the lives of students of religious change in the West a whole lot easier.

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4

Do 'Spiritual' Self-Identifications Signify Affinity With New Age Religion? Survey Evidence from the Netherlands

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Abstract

This paper examines nationally representative survey data from the Netherlands collected in 2015 (N=2,197) to study whether the 'spiritual but not religious' embrace New Age spirituality and reject traditional Christian religion, whereas the 'both religious and spiritual' adhere to traditional Christian religion and understand spirituality in a non-New Age fashion (i.e. spirituality in a Christian sense). Yet, we find just as much affinity with New Age spirituality among the 'both religious and spiritual' as among the 'spiritual but not religious'. This is because the more liberal and progressive Christians in the former category embrace New Age spirituality, too, while their more conservative and traditional Christian counterparts in this 'both religious and spiritual' category rather dismiss it. Both within Christian religion and beyond it, then, self-identifications of 'being spiritual' have become quite reliable shortcuts to identify sympathy with what used to be called 'New Age' in the past.

Keywords

spiritual but not religious; SBNR; religious and spiritual; traditional Christian religion; New Age spirituality; religious change

Introduction

Since the counterculture of the 1960s, massive cultural changes took place in the religious landscape of the West. First and foremost the 'New Age movement' emerged in the bosom of the counterculture of the 1960s to reach its "full development" in the 1980s (Hanegraaff 1996, 12). This expansion has ironically gone hand in hand with a declining appeal of the 'New Age' label as a self-identifier, which has led Hammer (2004, 75, emphasis in original) to

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observe that while "[t]he New Age *movement* may be on the wane, […] New Age *religiosity* […] shows no sign of disappearing" (see also Fuller 2001). Coinciding with these vicissitudes of New Age the catchphrase 'spirituality' emerged as the new buzzword in the religious field, giving rise to self-identifications of 'being spiritual but not religious' and 'being both religious and spiritual'.

Given these coinciding developments it is remarkable and disappointing that those who have studied the popular use and meaning of the 'spirituality' label have hardly engaged with specialized scholarship about New Age. At the same time, experts in New Age spirituality have shown hardly any interest in studies about 'spiritual' self-identifications either. Given the resulting virtual absence of critical intellectual dialogue, this paper aims to connect these two areas of expertise. It does so by studying *whether the 'spiritual but not religious' embrace New Age spirituality, and whether they much like New Agers dismiss traditional Christian religion, whereas the 'both religious and spiritual' adhere to traditional Christian religion and understand spirituality in a non-New Age fashion (i.e. spirituality in a Christian sense).* We address these questions by means of an examination of nationally representative survey data from the Netherlands collected in 2015.

Theory

New Age spirituality and traditional Christian religion

New Age spirituality has become increasingly widespread in the West since the 1960s (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Campbell 2007; Houtman & Aupers 2007), while traditional Christian religion, the type of religion that dominated the religious landscape of the West in the past, has meanwhile declined significantly and lost much of its former dominance, appeal and legitimacy (e.g. Norris and Inglehart 2011; Tromp, Pless and Houtman 2020, 2021; Pless, Tromp and Houtman 2021). These developments have been widely identified as pivotal processes of religious change. Heelas and Woodhead (2005, 6-7) for instance put forward the idea of a 'spiritual revolution' that may be under way, one in which the 'subjective-life spirituality' of the 'holistic milieu' gradually supersedes the 'life-as religion' of the 'congregational domain'. Building on the work of Troeltsch ([1931] 1956), Campbell (1978, 147) similarly regards "the contemporary transformation of religion […] as a transition from 'church religion' to 'spiritual and mystic religion'", a gradual process which he has more recently described as an 'Easternization of the West', i.e. a development in

which the dualistic worldview the West has known for centuries is gradually superseded by its Eastern monistic counterpart (Campbell 2007).

New Age spirituality differs profoundly from the two most important manifestations of traditional Christian religion, viz. 'Church' and 'Biblical Christianity' (Woodhead 2004, 46), a distinction that corresponds largely with Catholicism and Protestantism, respectively. Seen from the perspective of New Age spirituality, 'Church' and 'Biblical' Christianity are both deeply problematic, the former for emphasizing hierarchism, sacramentalism and sacerdotalism, the latter for underscoring strict obedience to theological and moral conservatism. Rather than conceiving of the sacred as a transcendent personal God who has created the world and who makes demands on believers, New Age spirituality understands the sacred as an immanent, diffuse, and impersonal spirit, life force or energy that is – and always has been – present in the world and the cosmos. It as such replaces the Christian dualism between God and creation by holism, i.e. the notion that at a deeper level invisible unity exists, because everything within the cosmos is in fact connected through this divine spirit, energy or life force (Campbell 2007). This implies that the world is neither inanimate nor soulless, but rather that the cosmos is alive, changing and evolving constantly. Due to the omnipresence of the sacred, it can also be found within each and every individual in the form of a spiritual self that most of the time remains concealed underneath a self that is viewed as ordinary, mundane, socialized and false (Houtman and Tromp 2021, 46). With this, the Christian notion of sacerdotalism is dismissed because the 'laity' are now no less sacred than the 'clergy'. In Heelas' (1996, 19) words, "the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the 'Self' itself is to experience 'God', 'the Goddess', the 'Source', 'Christ Consciousness', the 'inner child', the 'way of the heart', or, most simply and [. . .] most frequently, 'inner spirituality'".

Rather than salvation in the traditional Christian sense – i.e. being released from suffering by an eternal life in the Kingdom of God – its New Age rendition takes shape as an escape from the pressures and demands made by society and its institutions. This can be achieved by 'listening to one's heart' or one's 'inner voice', i.e. one's personal feelings, intuitions, and emotions, understood as emanations of the spiritual self that lies within. In seeking salvation from suffering adherents of New Age spirituality thus rely on an epistemology of personal experience, also known as *gnosis,* rather than on an epistemology

of belief, which holds “the ultimate truth” to be “revealed to man from some transcendental sphere” (Hanegraaff 1996, 519).

New Age consequently heavily relativizes the authoritative status of external sources and treats religious traditions, dogmas, creeds, clergy, charismatic leaders, and self-proclaimed experts who claim to have a hold on the absolute and exclusive truth with suspicion. Instead any human being is seen as capable of having direct experiential access to the sacred. Adherents of New Age spirituality are therefore radically de-traditionalized and anti-authoritarian, rejecting “voices of authority associated with established orders […] even rejecting ‘beliefs’”, (Heelas 1996, 22) to the effect that “prescriptions of others, of tradition, of experts, of religious texts, and all such external sources are not considered legitimate” (Adams and Haaken 1987, 502-503). Indeed, they are ‘epistemological individualists’ with “voices of authority emanating from experts, charismatic leaders and established traditions being mediated by way of inner experience” (Heelas 1996, 21). In the end, then, “there is […] no other authority than personal, inner experience” (Hanegraaff 1996, 519).

While external sources are therefore denied authority, they are not dismissed altogether. This is because deep down all religious traditions are held to be identical, interchangeable, and equally valid since they ultimately all worship and refer to the same divine and universal spiritual source. Hence, elements from various traditions are freely combined in ways that make sense to the individuals in question (Houtman and Tromp 2021, 43). These notions are known as perennialism and bricolage, respectively. Needless to say, the least dualistic and most mystically-oriented religious traditions are New Age’s favorites (Hanegraaff 1996), precisely because they prioritize personal spiritual feelings and experiences of the divine over religion’s institutional, doctrinal, dogmatic and ritual aspects (Houtman & Tromp 2021, 44).

Spiritual and/or religious self-identifications

Most students of religious change are keenly aware that ‘spirituality’ and its derivatives have become major new buzzwords in the religious field, with widespread self-identifications of ‘being spiritual’ as a result. Indeed, the question of what people actually mean with this self-designation has become a major issue in empirical research that often relies on an inductive approach (i.e. asking for people’s definitions of spirituality by means of open-ended questions). Do ‘spiritual’ self-identifications nowadays signify affinity with

New Age spirituality, or can they refer to other things as well? And does the term have the same or a different meaning for the 'spiritual but not religious' and the 'both religious and spiritual'? Studies conducted thus far yield a complex and ambiguous picture that does not provide clear-cut answers to these pivotal questions. While 'spirituality' appears to be often used to refer to New Age spirituality, it is also frequently defined differently, with some studies suggesting that the two categories entertain similar notions of 'spirituality' and others pointing in a different direction.

Ammerman (2013) finds a range of different meanings of 'spirituality', some of them with overly Christian overtones, others apparently hardly related to Christian religion at all. Her analysis revealed that 71% of her American interviewees spoke about "spirituality in […] god-defined and god-oriented terms, terms they have learned from [their] religious traditions" (Idem, 267). Besides this *theistic* spiritual discourse, 57% of her participants made use of an *extra-theistic* spiritual discourse that reminds the reader of the previously discussed New Age spirituality. For them, spirituality can be found in the "core of the self" (Idem, 268) and is associated with the "inner self, with finding one's own 'spark of the divine'" (Idem, 270). This extra-theistic spirituality is therefore "immanent", it is about the "interconnectedness of all of life", and it requires "no authority beyond the person's own experience" (Idem, 269).

A more recent study by Steensland, Wang, and Schmidt (2018, 460) suggests that the 'spiritual but not religious' entertain notions of spirituality that are *post-Christian* in nature rather than traditionally Christian. This category described spirituality more often in terms of a 'holistic connection' that focuses primarily on "connections with and feelings toward self, nature, and other people" and (much) less often in terms of 'organized religion', a 'belief in God', or having a 'relationship with God' (Idem, 460).

Comparing the 'spiritual but not affiliated' with the 'both spiritual and affiliated', Berghuijs, Pieper, and Bakker (2013, 383) found that, in their descriptions of spirituality both categories refer most frequently to a very general *transcendent reality* (in a cognitive sense), followed by referring to the *human mind* (also in a cognitive sense) and to a *centripetal connectedness* that is experiential in nature. The 'spiritual but not affiliated' almost never refer to specific Christian notions in their descriptions of spirituality. The 'both spiritual and affiliated' do that somewhat more often, but the differences between the two categories remain small nevertheless. God (in a cognitive sense) is the Christian notion that is most

often referred to by the 'both spiritual and affiliated' when asked to describe their understanding of spirituality, but still only in 7% of the cases. Apparently then, hardly anyone in the two categories associates spirituality with Christianity and this is not due to a shortage of Christians in their sample. These findings therefore suggest that the 'spiritual but not religious' and the 'both religious and spiritual' entertain similar notions of 'spirituality', but these notions can hardly be called Christian in the sense the West has known it for centuries.

By contrast, evidence from Zinnbauer et al. (1997) suggests that a majority in both categories – i.e. the 'spiritual but not religious' and the 'both religious and spiritual' – actually do associate spirituality with Christianity. In their seminal study, both categories referred most frequently to a traditional concept of the sacred in their definitions of spirituality, i.e. to "God, Christ, Higher Power, Holy, Divine, [or] the Church)" (Idem, 556). Seventy-four percent of the 'both religious and spiritual' and 61% of the 'spiritual but not religious' did that. Again, the two categories entertained similar notions of 'spirituality' but now with markedly Christian overtones. Indeed, this is almost the opposite of what Berghuijs et al. (2013) have found, but that may of course be due to cross-national differences between the USA and the Netherlands, one of the most and one of the least Christian nations in the West, respectively.

At the same time, Zinnbauer et al.'s (1997, 556) study shows that the 'spiritual but not religious' referred more often to a non-traditional concept of the sacred than the 'both religious and spiritual' in their definitions of spirituality. Compared to the latter, the former were also

> less likely to evaluate religiousness positively, less likely to engage in traditional forms of worship such as church attendance and prayer, less likely to hold orthodox or traditional Christian beliefs, more likely to be independent from others, more likely to engage in group experiences related to spiritual growth, more likely to be agnostic, more likely to characterize religiousness and spirituality as different and nonoverlapping concepts, more likely to hold nontraditional "new age" beliefs, and more likely to have had mystical experiences (Idem, 561).

As indicated above, these are principal features of New Age spirituality. In the study by Berghuijs, Pieper, and Bakker (2013, 393), too, the 'spiritual but not religious' defined spirituality more often than the 'both religious and spiritual' in terms of a *centripetal connectedness* that is experiential in nature. Because this resembles the *self-spirituality* found in New Age circles, these findings may despite the overall lack of clarity suggest that the 'spiritual but not religious' embrace New Age spirituality.

New Age and spiritual self-identifications

Students of New Age have indeed pointed out the irony that while New Age spirituality became increasingly widespread in the West, the label 'New Age' itself fell into disuse as a self-designation (Fuller 2001; Hammer 2004). Even though Hammer (2004, 74) argues that "no new emic term for their collective identity seems to have formed", there are clues that the label 'New Age' has meanwhile been replaced by self-identifications of 'being spiritual', or more specifically, as being 'spiritual but not religious'. Zinnbauer et al. (1997, 561) for instance point out that this category resembles Roof's (1993) 'highly active seekers' in their rejection of "traditional organized religion in favor of an individualized spirituality that includes mysticism along with New Age beliefs and practices". Sutcliffe (2003, 216) observes that the "emergent 'spiritual' discourse demonstrates significant biographical continuities across the decades" and that "this discourse of 'spirituality' increasingly displaces 'New Age'" (Idem, 223). In addition, Fuller (2001) states that

> It is difficult to know just how many Americans are sympathetic to New Age spirituality. Very few people ever use the term when describing their own religious beliefs. Even the 14 percent of Baby Boomers who describe themselves as metaphysical seekers rarely identify themselves as New Agers. There is, after all, no such thing as an organized New Age movement. Those interested in one alternative spiritual topic may have absolutely no interest at all in other topics that usually get lumped together as New Age. Yet it is probably fair to say that those who describe themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" are in general agreement with the broad principles of these alternative philosophies. This would mean that a full 20 percent of the population can be said to be sympathetic with the New Age movement (Fuller 2001, 99).

All this does indeed suggest that "those who describe themselves as 'spiritual, but not religious' […] can be said to be sympathetic with the New Age movement" (Fuller 2001, 99). If this is indeed the case, then 'spiritual but not religious' refers to the well-known combination of affinity with New Age and the latter's repudiation of 'organized religion', not least traditional Christian religion (Sutcliffe 2003; Houtman & Tromp 2021, 40).

Yet, this still leaves us with those who self-identify as 'both religious *and* spiritual'. Those concerned do not drive a wedge between religion and spirituality, hence they consider the two concepts compatible, which is why scholarship on New Age suggests that their notion of spirituality is different from the one embraced by the 'spiritual but not religious'. This assumption is consistent with Ernst Troeltsch's ([1931] 1956) classical distinction between two different renditions of spirituality or mysticism. The first of these closely resembles New Age spirituality (Campbell 1978), because it exists outside religious traditions and institutions. It 'transcends' religion as it "moves in the opposite direction to undercut the form and structure of organized religion" (Garrett 1975, 215). This "radical religious individualism" (Troeltsch [1931] 1956, 377) is "independent of all institutional religion, and possesses an entire inward certainty, which makes it indifferent towards every kind of religious fellowship" (Idem, 734). It is contrasted with, completely broken away from, and seeking to displace concrete or established religion, becoming, in effect, "an independent religious principle" that understands "itself as the real universal heart of all religion" (Idem) or "the true inner principle of all religious faith" (Streib and Hood 2011, 448). It is a "distinct religion in its own right with a distinct system of beliefs" (Campbell 1978, 147), "divorced from a containing frame-work of dogma, ritual or ecclesiasticism" (Idem, 149).

A second type of spirituality or mysticism identified by Troeltsch may however be found within religious traditions and institutions as some sort of 'experiential add-on' to otherwise non-spiritual or non-mystical religion. It does as such not 'transcend' religion but rather 'supplement' it. It "can be combined with every kind of objective religion, and with the customary forms of worship, myth, and doctrine" (Troeltsch [1931] 1956, 734) and it "intensifies and accentuates certain affective religious elements without denying concrete religion" (Garrett 1975, 215). In fact, it "functions in such a way as to provide legitimation and support for established ecclesiastical structures" (Idem). Adherents of this second form

of spirituality do find personal piety and fostering experiences of the divine more important than religion's 'external' and institutional aspects and mere belief in the sacred.

With Troeltsch's distinction in mind, it would be hardly surprising if the 'spiritual but not religious' and the 'both religious and spiritual' do indeed refer to very *different* types of spirituality, the former one that 'transcends', 'undercuts', and 'displaces' traditional Christian religion and the latter a Christian rendition that 'supplements' traditional Christian beliefs and practices. This leads us to expect that the 'spiritual but not religious' have much affinity with New Age spirituality but not with traditional Christian religion, whereas the 'both religious and spiritual' have exactly the opposite, i.e. much affinity with traditional Christian religion but not with New Age spirituality.

Methods

Data

We analyse data from the Netherlands because this is one of the countries in which traditional Christianity and New Age spirituality have respectively declined and increased most since the 1980s (Houtman & Aupers 2007, 305; Tromp et al. 2021, 136). Specifically, we make use of a large online survey conducted in the Netherlands in 2015 by CentERdata (2015), a Dutch institute for data collection and research based at Tilburg University. CentERdata is specialized in online survey research and maintains a validated panel of respondents that is representative for the Dutch population aged sixteen years or older. The questionnaire was distributed to 2,956 individuals, 2,243 of them responded, and 2,197 filled it out completely (74%). The survey was administered in Dutch so the first author (whose mother tongue is Dutch) translated all the questions and answers below into English[28].

Measurements

To answer our research questions, we need to measure religious and/or spiritual self-identifications, New Age spirituality, and traditional Christian religiosity.

[28] The Dutch version of the survey is available at: https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-x9s-wc6h, accessed on 1 February 2024.

Instead of measuring how active people are in the 'holistic milieu' (Heelas & Woodhead 2005, 156-157), we measure the 'New Age spirituality' it institutionalizes. This way we move beyond the idiosyncrasies of particular spiritual groups and practices and measure affinity with the underlying spiritual worldview that is shared by participants of the various groups and practices. Specifically, we measure New Age spirituality with a continuous scale that consists of responses to the following seven statements:

1. There is something that connects man, world and nature down to the core.
2. Truth must be experienced inwardly.
3. You should rely on your inner voice.
4. One can find a real, authentic and 'sacred' core in every human being that is unspoiled by culture, history and society.
5. Religion can spring from many sources.
6. You must put together your own religion using the wisdom of a variety of traditions and ideas.
7. You can combine different teachings and practices to what suits you best.

Respondents were asked to indicate how much they (dis)agree with each item using a scale ranging from 1 = agree to 3 = disagree (with 2 = partially agree, partially disagree in the middle). We reverse the original response categories so that higher scores indicate stronger agreement with the statements. The proportions of missing values are extremely low (0.2-0.3%). Factor and reliability analyses[29] indicate that the seven questions can be combined safely to construct a scale that reliably measures New Age spirituality (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.80). Scale scores are assigned as means to all those with valid scores on all seven items. Higher scores on this scale indicate more affinity with New Age spirituality.

Religious and/or spiritual self-identifications are measured with the following two questions: (1) *Do you consider yourself to be a religious person?* and (2) *Irrespective of whether you consider yourself to be religious or not, how spiritual would you say you are?* The response options for the first item comprise: 1 = definitely yes; 2 = actually yes /

[29] PCA without rotation. All items load high and positive on the first component with factor loadings ranging from 0.54 to 0.75. This component has an Eigenvalue of 3.199, explaining 46% of the variance.

somewhat; 3 = actually not; 4 = no, definitely not. The response options for the second question are: 1 = definitely spiritual; 2 = somewhat spiritual; 3 = hardly spiritual; 4 = definitely not spiritual. For both variables, response options 1 and 2 are recoded into '1' indicating that one self-identifies as religious or spiritual, respectively. Response options 3 and 4 are recoded into '0' indicating that one does not self-identify as religious or spiritual, respectively. 44% of the respondents consider themselves religious, 54% did not, and 2% did not know. The 'don't know' answers are treated as missing values. One-third of the sample self-identifies as spiritual, two-thirds does not. The answers to these two questions are combined to construct a fourfold typology. 44% of the respondents consider themselves 'neither religious nor spiritual', 23% self-identify as 'religious but not spiritual', 22% consider themselves 'religious and spiritual', 12% are 'spiritual but not religious'. Dummy variables are created for all four categories.

We measure traditional Christian religiosity with a scale that consists of four variables/subscales, viz. (1) affiliation with a Christian denomination, (2) frequency of church attendance, and (3) theological and (4) moral conservatism.

First, affiliation with a Christian denomination is measured with the following two questions: (1) *Are you affiliated with a church denomination or religious group?* The response options comprise: 'yes' (29.0%), 'no' (69.4%), and 'don't know' (1.6%). Only those who answered 'yes' received the follow-up question (2) *With which church denomination or religious group are you affiliated?* We create a new dichotomous variable with 1 = Affiliated with a Christian denomination (26.4%) and 0 = Not affiliated with a Christian denomination (73.6%). Specifically, the first category contains those affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church (13.0%), Protestant Church Netherlands (9.6%), Free Reformed Churches Netherlands (0.8%), Christian Reformed Churches Netherlands (0.7%), Reformed Municipalities (0.7%), United Pentecostal- and Evangelical Municipalities (0.7%), Dutch Reformed Churches (0.5%), and Restored Reformed Church (0.4%). The second category contains everyone who answered 'no' or 'don't know' to the first question, or Islam (0.5%), Hinduism (0.1%), Buddhism (0.1%), Judaism (0.0%) or 'don't know' (0.1%) to the second question. The 'Other' category (1.7%) with open answers was examined and 34 of those responses could be added to the first category, and three of those answers could be added to the second category.

Second, frequency of church attendance is measured with the question: *Do you regularly go to church or another religious gathering, do you go sometimes, once in a while at most, or do you never go?* The response options are: 1 = regularly (12.9%); 2 = sometimes (7.1%); 3 = once in a while at most (23.7%); 4 = never (55.8%). We reverse the original response categories so that higher scores indicate more frequent attendance. The proportion of missing values is only 0.5%.

Third, theological conservatism is measured with a continuous scale that consists of responses to the following six statements: (1) *Which of these statements comes closest to your own beliefs?* The response options are: 1 = There is a God who is concerned with every human being personally (15.6%); 2 = There must be something as a higher power that controls life (28.6%); 3 = I don't know whether a God or higher power exists (33.3%); 4 = A God or higher power does not exist (22.5%). We dichotomize this variable by recoding a conception of the sacred as a personal God as '1' and the other three responses as '0'; (2) *Which of these statements comes closest to your own beliefs?* 1 = Christ is God's son (22.8%); 2 = Christ was sent by God, but he is not God's son (6.0%); 3 = Christ was a special human being with extraordinary gifts (25.1%); 4 = Christ was an ordinary human being just like everyone else (25.3%); 5 = Christ never existed and is only a legend (20.7%). We dichotomize this variable by recoding a conception of Christ as God's son as '1' and the other four responses as '0'; (3) *Do you see the Bible as the word of God?* 1 = Yes (13.3%); 2 = Is partially / in a sense the word of God (22.9%); 3 = No (42.8%); 99 = Don't know (21.1%). We dichotomize this variable by recoding a conception of the Bible as the word of God as '1' and the other three responses as '0'; (4) *Do you believe in a life after death?* 1 = Yes (23.5%); 2 = I am not sure (36.6%); 3 = No (39.9%). We dichotomize this variable by recoding a belief in life after death as '1' and the other two responses as '0'; (5) *believing in heaven* and (6) *hell* are already dichotomous items with 1 = Yes; 0 = No. Factor and reliability analyses[30] indicate that the six questions can be combined safely to construct a scale that reliably measures theological conservatism (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.84). Scale scores are assigned as means to all those with valid scores on all six items. Higher scores on this scale indicate that one is theologically more conservative.

[30] PCA without rotation, extracting only one component with an Eigenvalue greater than 1 (λ = 3.407), explaining 57% of the variance. Factor loadings range from 0.59 to 0.86.

Fourth, moral conservatism is measured with a continuous scale that consists of responses to the following six statements/questions:

1. Morality is threatened when no one believes in God anymore.
2. Egoism has free reign if the churches disappear.
3. Belief in God ensures that society does not deteriorate.
4. How important do you find religion for child rearing?
5. How important do you find religion for showing us how to live well together?
6. How important do you find religion for the preservation of values and norms?

Concerning items 1-3, respondents were asked to indicate how much they (dis)agree with each statement using a Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Regarding questions 4-6, respondents were asked to indicate how important they find religion for these matters using a scale ranging from 1 = Very important to 3 = Not important (with 2 = Somewhat important in the middle). The response options are mirrored for items 4-6, so that higher scores indicate that one is morally more conservative. For all six items applies that the 'don't know/no opinion' answers are treated as missing values[31]. Factor and reliability analyses[32] indicate that the six questions can be combined to construct a scale that reliably measures moral conservatism (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.92). Scale scores are assigned as means to all those with valid scores on at least three of the six items. Higher scores on this scale indicate that one is morally more conservative.

Finally, factor and reliability analyses[33] indicate that these four features can be combined safely to construct a scale that reliably measures traditional Christian religiosity (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.85). The final scale is constructed by taking the mean of the four standardized variables/subscales. Higher scores on this scale indicate stronger adherence to traditional Christian religion. See Table 1 for the descriptive statistics of all the variables/scales included in our models.

[31] The six items have relatively low proportions of missing values, ranging from 5.3% to 8.3%.
[32] PCA without rotation, extracting only one component with an Eigenvalue greater than 1 (λ = 4.258), explaining 71% of the variance. Factor loadings range from 0.81 to 0.86.
[33] PCA without rotation, extracting only one component with an Eigenvalue greater than 1 (λ = 2.775), explaining 69% of the variance. Factor loadings range from 0.80 to 0.89.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	N	MIN	MAX	M	SD [a]
Self-identifications					
Neither religious nor spiritual	2,152	0	1	0.44	
Religious but not spiritual	2,152	0	1	0.23	
Spiritual but not religious	2,152	0	1	0.12	
Both religious and spiritual	2,152	0	1	0.22	
New Age spirituality (scale)	2,191	1	3	2.09	0.52
Something connecting man, world and nature	2,192	1	3	2.09	0.79
Truth must be experienced inwardly	2,192	1	3	2.14	0.77
Rely on your inner voice	2,192	1	3	2.41	0.70
Real, authentic and 'sacred' core in everyone	2,192	1	3	1.85	0.79
Religion can spring from many sources	2,191	1	3	2.00	0.79
Put together your own religion	2,191	1	3	1.89	0.79
Combine different teachings and practices	2,191	1	3	2.22	0.78
Traditional Christian religiosity (scale)	2,134	0	1	0.29	0.26
Affiliation with Christian denomination	2,197	0	1	0.28	
Church attendance	2,186	1	4	1.77	1.05
Theological conservatism (scale)	2,186	0	1	0.15	0.26
Moral conservatism (scale)	2,145	0	1	0.43	0.26
Valid N (listwise)	2,092				

[a] Standard deviations are not shown for dichotomous items.

Methods and Results

The first step in our analysis is finding out whether the 'spiritual but not religious' and the 'both religious and spiritual' embrace traditional Christian religion to the same degree. We examine this by calculating the average scores on traditional Christian religion for the four categories of self-identifiers. We find that the two categories rejecting a religious self-identity barely adhere to traditional Christian religion. By contrast, the two categories embracing a religious self-identity have considerable affinity with traditional Christian religion (see Table 2). The 'both religious and spiritual' have therefore much more affinity with traditional Christian religion than the 'spiritual but not religious'.

Table 2. Category Means — Traditional Christian Religiosity

Neither Religious Nor Spiritual	0.12
Religious But Not Spiritual	0.47
Spiritual But Not Religious	0.14
Both Religious & Spiritual	0.51

The second step in our analysis is finding out whether the two categories embrace New Age spirituality to the same degree. We examine this by means of a linear regression analysis with New Age spirituality as the dependent variable, and the four self-identifications as the independent variables. The latter are dummy variables and we use the 'both religious and spiritual' as our reference category to see whether the difference with the 'spiritual but not religious' is statistically significant. We find that the two categories rejecting a spiritual self-identity have much *less* affinity with New Age spirituality than the two categories who do consider themselves to be spiritual (see Table 3, Model 1). Strikingly, we find that the 'both religious and spiritual' have just as much affinity with New Age spirituality as the 'spiritual but not religious'. To explain this, we take the alleged mutual dislike between New Age spirituality and traditional Christian religion into account and enter the latter as an additional predictor.

Adherence to traditional Christian religion does indeed detract from affinity with New Age spirituality, just like vice versa, which confirms the existence of a tension between the two (see Table 3, Model 2). Unsurprisingly, if we statistically control for the traditional Christian inclinations of the 'both religious and spiritual' category, its affinity with New Age spirituality increases even further and becomes even stronger than that of the 'spiritual but not religious'. This means that the 'both religious and spiritual' who are *least* involved with traditional Christian religion have *most* sympathy for New Age spirituality, and vice versa. As a final step in our analysis, we examine whether the 'both religious and spiritual' is the only category that features a tension between traditional Christian religion and New Age spirituality or whether the same holds for the other three categories. Statistically this means that we add interaction terms between the four self-identifications and traditional Christian religion to the model (see Table 3, Model 3). Concerning the 'spiritual but not religious', we find that the degree to which they have affinity with New Age spirituality is *not* affected by their level of traditional Christian religiosity, most likely because hardly anyone in this category has considerable affinity with the latter[34] (see Figure 1 for a visualization of the interactions).

By contrast, we find that the other religious category - i.e. the 'religious but not spiritual' - features a similar tension between traditional Christianity and New Age as the 'both religious and spiritual'. Thus, for those who self-identify as religious – both spiritual and not spiritual – having more affinity with traditional Christianity detracts from their affinity with New Age[35]. Those who self-identify as 'religious' do therefore not necessarily dislike New Age spirituality, but do not necessarily like it either. The decisive factor is how strongly they adhere to traditional Christian religion: the more they do, the less sympathy for New Age spirituality they have. Liberal Christians, especially those who self-identify as 'both religious and spiritual, thus tend to be open to New Age spirituality whereas their conservative counterparts are not.

[34] Even though the slope of the 'spiritual but not religious' appears to be positive in Figure 1, it does however not differ significantly from zero ($b = 0.18$, $p = 0.54$).

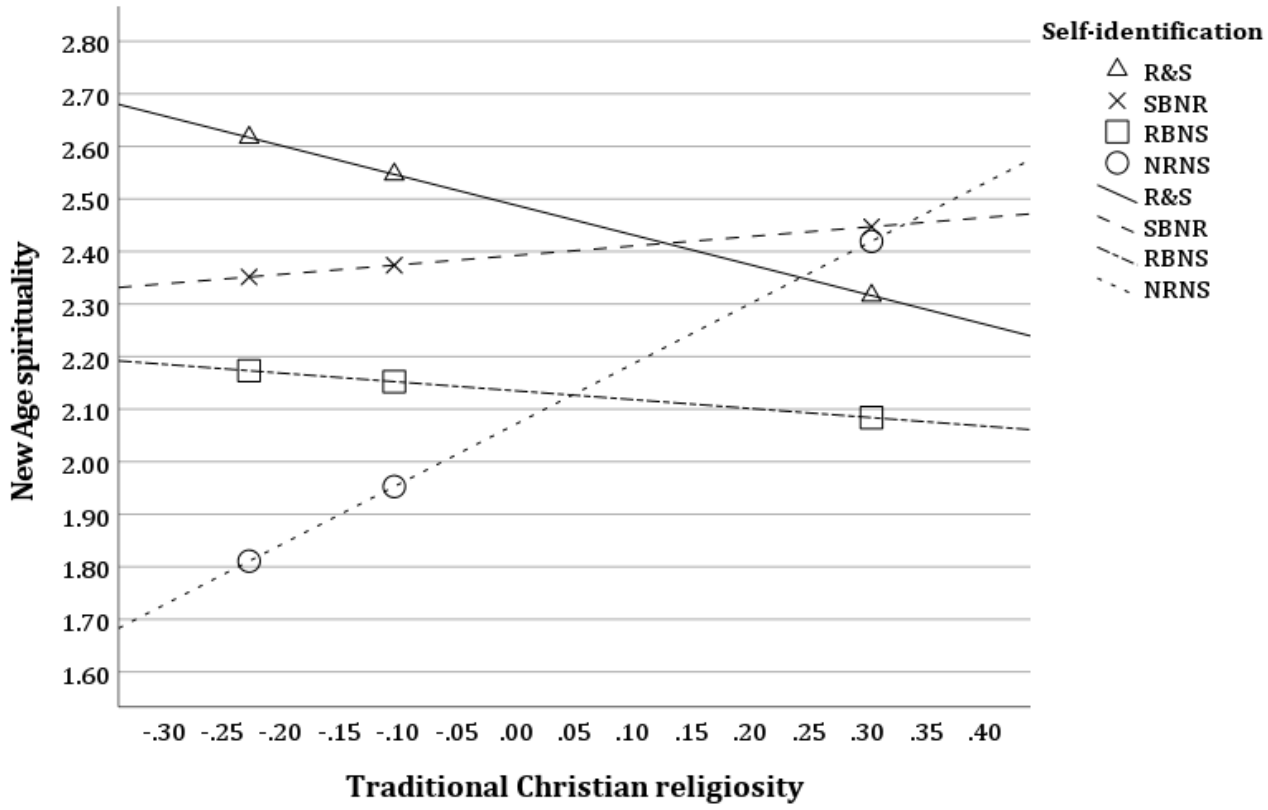
[35] Unlike the positive slope of the 'spiritual but not religious', the negative slope of the 'religious but not spiritual' does in fact differ significantly from zero ($b = -0.17$, $p < 0.05$). The same holds for the 'both religious and spiritual' ($b = -0.57$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 3. Summary of Linear Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting New Age Spirituality (N = 2,092)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Independent variables	B	SE B	*β*	B	SE B	*β*	B	SE B	*β*
Neither Religious Nor Spiritual	-0.49***	0.03	-0.46	-0.56***	0.03	-0.53	-0.91***	0.05	-0.87
Religious But Not Spiritual	-0.26***	0.03	-0.21	-0.27***	0.03	-0.22	-0.47***	0.06	-0.38
Spiritual But Not Religious	0.01	0.04	0.01	-0.06	0.04	-0.04	-0.31***	0.07	-0.19
Religious & Spiritual (ref. cat.)	0			0			0		
Traditional Christian Religiosity (TCR)				-0.18***	0.05	-0.09	-0.57***	0.08	-0.29
Interaction effects									
Neither Religious Nor Spiritual * TCR							1.71***	0.18	0.28
Religious But Not Spiritual * TCR							0.40***	0.11	0.18
Spiritual But Not Religious * TCR							0.75*	0.30	0.08
Religious & Spiritual * TCR (ref. cat.)							0		
Constant	2.36***	0.02		2.46***	0.04		2.65***	0.05	
R^2	16.8%			17.2%			20.7%		

Note: The same number of respondents are involved in all three models (i.e. 2,092) because we want to make sure that any observed changes in the relationships between self-identifications and New Age spirituality are solely due to statistically controlling for traditional Christian religion and not to possible changes in sample size. TCR = Traditional Christian Religiosity. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Figure 1. Interaction Effect Between Religious and/or Spiritual Self-identifications and Traditional Christian Religiosity (Mean Centred and Values at Percentiles 16, 50 and 84)



Conclusions

Steensland et al.'s (2018) findings suggested that the 'spiritual but not religious' have considerable affinity with a holistic 'New Age' spirituality but not with traditional Christian religion, and that is also exactly what our study demonstrates. Consistent with Zinnbauer et al. (1997, 561), they are "less likely to engage in traditional forms of worship such as church attendance and […] less likely to hold orthodox or traditional Christian beliefs," compared to the 'both religious and spiritual'. Hence, they also resemble Roof's (1993) 'highly active seekers' in their rejection of "traditional organized religion in favor of an individualized spirituality that includes […] New Age beliefs and practices." (Zinnbauer et al. 1997, 561) The 'both religious and spiritual', on the other hand, do have considerable affinity with traditional Christian religion, but much more surprising, they have no less sympathy for New Age spirituality than the 'spiritual but not religious'. This study therefore challenges the suggestion that arose from the findings by Zinnbauer et al. (1997) and Berghuijs et al. (2013), namely that the 'spiritual but not religious' have more affinity with New Age spirituality than the 'both religious and spiritual'. So even though Fuller (2001) was correct when he argued that the 'spiritual but not religious' have sympathy for New Age, our study

shows that a significant share of the 'both religious and spiritual' like New Age too, indicating that New Age spirituality is in fact more widely supported by the population at large.

We also found that the 'both religious and spiritual' and the 'religious but not spiritual' categories feature marked tensions between traditional Christian religion and sympathy for New Age spirituality. This means that those who self-identify as 'religious' – and especially those who also consider themselves 'spiritual' – do not necessarily dislike New Age, but do not necessarily like it either. More specifically, the more dogmatic/dualistic/orthodox/conservative the Christianity they adhere to, the weaker their affinity with New Age spirituality, and vice versa. Hence, it is not even the 'spiritual but not religious' who have most affinity with New Age, but those liberal/progressive Christians among the 'both religious and spiritual' who are *least* involved with traditional Christian religion. Ammerman (2013) similarly concludes that an *extra-theistic* spiritual discourse does not remain confined to the religiously inactive, but people who are religious in a non-conservative way make use of it too. She furthermore observes that the type of "'spirituality' being endorsed as an alternative [to religion] is at least as widely practiced by those same religious people as it is by the people drawing a moral boundary against them" (Idem, 275). We find that this is generally true for the 'both religious and spiritual', but not for the 'religious but not spiritual' who have significantly less affinity with New Age spirituality than the 'spiritual but not religious'.

Then, in both Zinnbauer et al. (1997) and Berghuijs et al. (2013), the 'spiritual but not religious' and the 'both religious and spiritual' had similar notions of spirituality, but in the former study a majority in both categories associated spirituality with Christianity, whereas in the latter study hardly anyone in the two categories did that. Given that the 'spiritual but not religious' in our study generally embrace New Age, but reject traditional Christianity, it is hard to imagine that they associate the spirituality they embrace with the Christianity they reject. Instead, it is much more likely that they associate religion with Christianity and spirituality with New Age. Our findings suggest that the 'both religious and spiritual' generally make the same connections. However, the more conservative/orthodox the Christianity they adhere to, the more likely it becomes that they associate both religion *and* spirituality with Christianity.

Discussion

Ironically, as New Age spirituality became increasingly widespread in the West, the label lost much of its former traction as a self-designation, confusing many researchers in the process. So do 'spiritual' self-identifications nowadays signify affinity with New Age? Based on our analysis, we would say 'yes, they do': self-identifications of 'being spiritual' have become quite reliable shortcuts for sympathy towards New Age spirituality (as defined here). No less than a third of the Dutch population considers itself at least somewhat spiritual and a majority of them agrees with the central tenets of New Age spirituality. When the 'spiritual' subsequently add that they are 'not religious', they mean that they reject traditional Christian religion. The category of 'both spiritual *and* religious' is however much more of a mixed bag in terms of adherence to traditional Christian religion. It contains liberal Christians who are very much open to New Age spirituality as well as orthodox ones who are much more hostile to it. The latter have however become a minority in the Netherlands, with even among religious people – both spiritual and not spiritual – only a small group remaining strongly committed to traditional Christian religion. This means that a sizeable number of Christians are nowadays into New Age spirituality *because* a considerable share of them is no longer orthodox. New Age spirituality is thus no longer a marginal phenomenon at the cultural fringe of society but is currently faring well both within and beyond Christian religion[36]. Hammer (2004, 75, emphasis in original) therefore correctly observed that while "[t]he New Age *movement* may be on the wane, […] New Age *religiosity* […] shows no sign of disappearing". Or to put it in Possamai's (2004, 426) words, the term "'New Age' is dead but not what it signifies". And even though Hammer's (2004, 74) other assertion, that "no new emic term for their collective identity seems to have formed", is hard to affirm or disprove based on the etic perspective adopted in this study, our findings, as well as those by others, nevertheless suggest that the label 'New Age' has meanwhile been displaced by self-identifications of 'being spiritual'. The popular discourse on 'spirituality' is, for a substantial part, "the legacy of 'New Age': a product of its genealogy" (Sutcliffe 2003, 223). So the term 'New Age' may be dead, but the type of spirituality that it signifies lives on in self-identifying 'spiritual' people. They are, to put it in Sutcliffe's (2003, 196) words, "the metaphorical 'children of the new age'".

[36] Our findings do not in themselves challenge the process of religious decline that is ongoing in the Netherlands since the 1960s (see e.g. Kregting, Scheepers, Vermeer & Hermans 2018, 58).

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5

The Subjectivization Thesis and the New Age Gender Puzzle

Paul Tromp, Galen Watts and Dick Houtman[37]

Abstract

The expansion of New Age spirituality in the West is largely due to women's decision to become involved, not men's. Apparently, this type of spirituality appeals more to women than to men, but why should this be the case? Attempting to solve this 'New Age gender puzzle', Heelas and Woodhead (2005) introduced contrasting and allegedly gendered notions of autonomous selfhood, viz., *individuated-* and *relational subjectivism.* Both types aim to improve the quality of subjective-life, but the former is externally oriented and seeks indirect solutions to 'problems' by reaching outside into the world, whereas the latter is internally oriented and focused on exploring the complexities of the inner life through meaningful relationships with others. They argue that men more typically endorse *individuated subjectivism* that fails to spur spiritual longings whereas women more naturally embrace *relational subjectivism* that does do so. Because their theory has not been tested systematically yet, we do so in this paper by examining nationally representative survey data from the Netherlands collected in 2008 (n=1,836). The findings of a mediation analysis show that women have indeed more affinity with New Age spirituality than men *because* they generally embrace relational subjectivism to a greater extent, thereby supporting their theory.

Introduction

The religious landscape of the West has been changing dramatically since the 1960's with traditional Christian religiosity declining significantly and losing much of its former dominance, appeal and legitimacy (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2011; Tromp, Pless and Houtman 2020, 2021; Pless, Tromp and Houtman 2021) and with a post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality becoming increasingly widespread since its birth in the bosom of the 1960's counterculture (e.g., Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Van Otterloo 1999; Campbell 2007; Houtman & Aupers 2007). These coinciding developments have been widely identified as

[37] This chapter was submitted for publication as a research article and is currently under review. Should the paper be accepted for publication, the accepted version will replace this preprint.

pivotal processes of religious change. According to Heelas and Woodhead, a 'spiritual revolution' may be ongoing, one in which the 'life-as religion' of the 'congregational domain' gradually makes way for the 'subjective-life spirituality' of the 'holistic milieu' (2005, 7). Despite the observation that new types of spirituality and religiosity[38] have not been able to compensate for traditional Christian religion's decline (Tromp, Pless & Houtman, 2021), it remains important to figure out *why* the churches become empty while New Age grows (Houtman & Mascini 2002). As it turns out, both developments, as well as the growth of non-religiosity, have been caused by increased levels of moral individualism, i.e., "the granting of a moral primacy to individual liberty" (Idem, 459)[39]. Interestingly, the latter combines just as easily with New Age as with non-religiosity, plus it is equally embraced by men and women. For that reason, it cannot explain the recurring empirical observation that far more women take an interest in New Age spirituality than men. Meanwhile, many other students of religious change have also wracked their brains over the by now infamous – but not yet satisfactorily solved – 'New Age gender puzzle' (e.g., Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Woodhead 2007; Houtman & Aupers 2008; Trzebiatowska & Bruce 2012).

Just like Houtman and Mascini (2002), Heelas and Woodhead (2005) also stumbled upon an exceptionally high level of female affinity with New Age spirituality. In the 'holistic milieu' of Kendal, a relatively small town in the North of England, they observed a sex ratio of 80:20 in favor of women. The conclusion they draw makes perfect sense: the expansion of New Age spirituality in the West is largely due to women's decision to become involved, not men's. Apparently, then, New Age beliefs and practices are much more attractive to women than to men, but why should this be the case? With their *subjectivization thesis,* Heelas and Woodhead (2005) propose an intriguing answer to this question by introducing contrasting and allegedly gendered notions of autonomous selfhood. Both types aim to improve the quality of subjective-life, but the first type, *individuated subjectivism,* is externally oriented and seeks indirect solutions to 'problems' by reaching outside into the world, whereas the second type, *relational subjectivism,* is internally oriented and focused on exploring the complexities of the inner life through meaningful relationships with others. They argue that men more typically endorse the former that fails to spur spiritual longings

[38] of which post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality is merely one example.
[39] Needless to say, there are of course additional theoretical explanations for these developments, but these fell outside the study's scope.

whereas women more naturally embrace the latter that does do so. Because their theory has to the best of our knowledge not been tested systematically yet, we do so in this paper by examining nationally representative survey data from the Netherlands collected in 2008.

New Age spirituality

Before we dive straight into Heelas and Woodhead's thesis, we believe it is useful to start our theoretical discussion with a description of what this New Age spirituality is all about. First and foremost, it conceives of the sacred as an immanent, diffuse, and impersonal spirit, energy or life force that is – and always has been – present in the world and the cosmos. At a deeper level, invisible unity is held to exist because everything within the cosmos is allegedly connected through this divine spirit, energy or life force. This idea of holism implies that the cosmos is alive and in a continuous process of change and evolution. Due to the divine's omnipresence, it can also be found within each and every individual in the form of a spiritual self that most of the time remains concealed underneath a self that is viewed as ordinary, mundane, socialized and false. One's personal feelings, intuitions, and emotions are understood as emanations of this spiritual self that lies within, and by 'listening to one's heart' or one's 'inner voice' one can escape from the pressures and demands made by society and its institutions. Adherents of New Age thus rely on an epistemology of personal experience in their attempt to overcome alienation and suffering in the here and now. External sources are denied authority and legitimacy, although in reality they are not dismissed altogether. This is because deep down all religious traditions are held to be identical, interchangeable, and equally valid because they ultimately all worship and refer to the same divine and universal spiritual source. Elements from various traditions are therefore freely combined in ways that make sense to the individuals in question. Because external sources of authority are mediated by way of inner experience (Heelas 1996), it may come as no surprise that the least dualistic and most mystically-oriented religious traditions are New Age's favorites (Hanegraaff 1996). Just like 'New Agers' themselves, these traditions also prioritize personal spiritual feelings and experiences of the sacred over religion's institutional, doctrinal, dogmatic and ritual aspects (Tromp et al. 2020). According to specialized literature that discusses it more extensively, this is New Age spirituality in a nutshell (e.g., Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Campbell 2007; Houtman & Tromp 2021).

The New Age gender puzzle

Empirical studies on New Age spirituality in the United Kingdom reveal that far more women take an interest in - and have affinity with - this type of spirituality than men. In the 'holistic milieu' of Kendal, a relatively small town in the North of England, Heelas and Woodhead (2005, 94) observed a sex ratio of 80:20 in favor of women, both among producers and consumers of spiritual practices. Others have reported similar findings. Rose (1998), for instance, surveyed 908 subscribers of *Kindred Spirit,* back then the widest-selling New Age magazine of the UK. Seventy percent of his respondents were female, hence he also concluded that "the large majority of those active in the New Age appear to be women" (Idem, 8). Hamilton (2000) surveyed 402 visitors and participants of the annual ten-day Mind–Body–Spirit Festival in London. 252 of them were female, and even though "the sample was not random, it was probably as representative as it could have been" (Idem, 199). This suggests that nearly two-thirds of the 50,000+ attendees of the 'New Age' festival were women. Glendinning and Bruce (2006) surveyed a representative sample of the Scottish population and found exactly the same pattern: women were significantly more likely than men to make use of New Age practices such as horoscopes, astrology, tarot, fortune-telling, complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), yoga and meditation and to view these activities as important in their lives. Finally, Thomas, Nicholl and Coleman (2001) examined the use and expenditure of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in England in 1998, making use of a representative sampling frame and a relatively large sample (n = 2,669). They found that women's use of homoeopathic and herbal remedies was noticeably larger than men's. Also, women's therapeutic use of acupuncture, chiropractice, homoeopathy, hypnotherapy, medical herbalism, osteopathy, reflexology and aromatherapy was significantly higher than men's.

Empirical findings from outside the UK point in the same direction. Houtman and Aupers (2008) analyzed data from the World Values Survey (1981–2000) for fourteen western countries and found that spirituality is more typically embraced by post-traditional women than by post-traditional men. Andersen, Gundelach and Luchau (2013) examined data from the Danish part of the European Values Study (1981–2008) and observed a statistically significant correlation between gender and spirituality with women being more spiritual than men. Houtman and Mascini (2002) analyzed nationally representative panel data from the Netherlands and also found that women have a stronger affinity with New

Age than men. Finally, Verheij, De Bakker, and Groenewegen (1999) derived their data from the Dutch National Survey of General Practice, carried out by the Netherlands Institute for Health Services Research in 1987-1988. They detected that "women have a higher utilization probability of homeopathy and paranormal healing" (Idem, 92), a finding that is consistent with many other studies conducted in the 1980's and 1990's on the use of complementary and alternative medicine: users are predominantly women.

Much more empirical evidence could be cited at this point, but we assume that the message is clear and unequivocal by now: far more women take an interest in - and have affinity with – New Age spirituality than men. Why this is the case is however not yet fully understood, resulting in the by now infamous 'New Age gender puzzle'.

Moral individualism and post-traditionalism

A remarkable bycatch of Houtman and Mascini's (2002) attempt to figure out why the Dutch churches become empty while New Age grows, was the empirical observation that women's affinity with New Age spirituality is markedly stronger than men's. Being unable to explain this "substantial gender difference" themselves, they appealed to future researchers to solve this "intriguing and theoretically important puzzle" (Idem, 468). Two possible explanations that could be ruled out straight away, however, were sex differences with respect to rationalism[40] and moral individualism[41]. As predicted, women were indeed slightly less rationalistic than men, but their weaker rationalism turned out to be unrelated to their stronger New Age affinity. Regarding their study's main question, increased levels of moral individualism were indeed responsible for the decline of Christianity, as well as for the growth of New Age and non-religiosity[42]. However, it could not explain the fact that far more women take an interest in New Age than men. This is because moral individualism combined just as easily with New Age as with non-religiosity, plus it was equally embraced by men and women. As far as they could observe, there were no other studies showing "gender differences with respect to [moral] individualism" either (Idem, 464).

[40] i.e., "the conviction that true and objective scientific knowledge exists, which can be applied in the form of technology to control the environment" (Houtman & Mascini 2002, 458).
[41] i.e., the granting of a moral primacy to individual liberty" (Houtman & Mascini 2002, 459).
[42] Needless to say, there are of course additional theoretical explanations for these developments, but these fell outside the study's scope.

Some years later, Houtman and Aupers (2008) developed and tested another explanation, viz. a gendered version of the theory of *detraditionalization* (see also Woodhead 2007, 2008). In a nutshell, they argue that a process of detraditionalization[43] evokes burdens, tensions, anxieties, contradictions and ambiguities in post-traditional women, but not in post-traditional men. Despite the former's rejection of traditional female gender roles (i.e., taking care of the household chores and other family members), many post-traditional women "still find themselves confronted with […] [traditional gender arrangements and] role expectations and [therefore] face a 'second shift' when returning home after a day's work" (Idem, 110; see also Hochschild 1997; 1989). Houtman and Aupers (2008) maintain that these depressing circumstances make post-traditional women much more likely than post-traditional men "to be[come] haunted by […] questions of meaning and identity […] that stimulate late-modern individuals to explore the depths of their souls" (Idem). As a result, post-traditional women have a higher probability than post-traditional men to "embark on a spiritual quest and [to] sacralize their selves," i.e., to engage with New Age spirituality, in short (Idem). Houtman and Aupers' (2008, 114) finding that post-traditional women are indeed more likely than post-traditional men to embrace New Age spirituality is "consistent with this argument, but does not necessarily prove it", as they indicate themselves. They appeal to future researchers to either study "whether this difference is really caused by post-traditional women being haunted more severely by problems of meaning and identity", or to propose another solution to the gender puzzle.

A process of subjectivization

In *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) went for the second option and proposed a theory that possibly explains the spiritual turn at large as well as why New Age spirituality is a predominantly female

[43] Noteworthy, Houtman & Aupers (2008) consider *detraditionalization* and *individualization* to be two different terms for the same process, rendering *posttraditionalism* and *moral individualism* synonymous with each other. The latter is confirmed when we examine the way in which they operationalized both concepts. Despite not being fully identical due to the use of different data sources, *posttraditionalism* and *moral individualism* both contain Inglehart's post-materialism index, a scale for sexual permissiveness c.q. the rejection of traditional ideas about sexuality, and some items that tap into an emphasis on self-direction rather than conformity as an important value (cf. Houtman & Mascini 2002, 463-464; Houtman & Aupers 2008, 110-112).

affair. In their much-cited book, they basically defend two principal claims, viz. 1) the contemporary popularity of New Age spirituality (and unpopularity of traditional Christian religiosity) in the West is largely the result of a process of *subjectivization*, and 2) because this *subjectivism* is of a *relational* type, it can also explain why post-traditional women are more likely than post-traditional men to engage with New Age spirituality.

Following the work of philosopher Charles Taylor (1991), who observes a "massive subjective turn" in modern western culture" (26), Heelas and Woodhead contend that the basic thrust of this "major cultural shift" has been "a turn away from life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences" (2005, 2). This turn to one's subjective life is all about paying close attention to one's feelings, experiences, sensations, moods, memories, dreams, passions and the like. It is all about taking such subjective states seriously, figuring out what message they appear to convey, and once understood, modifying one's life in such a way that it becomes more in accordance with them (Idem, 3). These subjective states thus become authoritative, significant and meaningful in one's life whereas 'external' authorities and established routines increasingly lose their ability to direct people's lives and bestow meaning upon them (Idem, 3-4). Similarly, other people's opinions, judgments and advice concerning what one should (or ought to) do come to be taken less seriously and are paid less attention to. What matters more than anything else, then, is becoming one's own authority, forging one's own inner-directed life, knowing oneself, and becoming who one 'truly' is (Idem, 3-4). Self-fulfillment and self-expression thus become principal goals: "doing 'what feels right', 'following your heart', 'being true to yourself', cultivating 'emotional intelligence' and respecting other people's feelings" (Idem, 80). In such a spiritual understanding living a virtuous life is to be(come) completely mindful of one's own states of being. It is about "enriching one's experiences; […] finding ways of handling negative emotions" and becoming "sensitive enough to find out where and how the quality of one's life – alone or in relation – may be improved" (Idem, 4).

An important side note to this characterization of the 'subjective turn' by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) is that what they suggest is nothing extraordinary or odd, but in fact consistent with most, if not all, of the relevant literature. Others have only labeled the condition differently, viz., as a 'therapeutic turn' or a turn to a 'therapeutic culture' (e.g., Madsen 2014; Wright 2008) and have tended to be more critical about it. Philip Rieff's *The*

Triumph of the Therapeutic (1966), Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), and Frank Furedi's more recent work *Therapy Culture* (2004) are just a small pick from a large body of influential and critical studies that all point to "the ascendancy of a modern therapeutic ethos" in Western culture (Wright 2008, 322) and the concomitant decline of traditional authority, communal ends and bonds, and civic responsibility (see also Bellah et al., 1985; Moskowitz, 2001). What these critical observers have in common is that they all perceive "the therapeutic self as essentially amoral – caught on a treadmill of meaningless self-improvement in an ultimately fruitless quest for subjective well-being" (Wright 2008, 333). Other of its defining features are a "heightened concern with 'private problems'" (Idem, 326), a "preoccupation with lifestyle and the self" (Idem, 323) as well as a fixation on "internal life" (Idem, 321) and "personal fulfilment" (Idem, 329). And if we are to believe Eva Moskowitz and Eva Illouz*,* authors of respectively *In Therapy We Trust* (2001) and *Saving the Modern Soul* (2008), the 'therapeutic turn', especially in America, is anything but a trivial process. Moskowitz has, for instance, argued that American culture has been dominated by "[a]n almost slavish devotion to psychological health and emotional problems (2001, 1) and that basically "all the institutions of American life—schools, hospitals, prisons, courts—have been shaped by the national investment in feelings" (2001, 279). According to Illouz, "the army, the corporation, the family, the state, the mass media, and civil society" can be added to a long list of modern western institutions that have meanwhile been penetrated by this 'therapeutic culture' (2008, 242). There is, in sum, no disagreement among scholars that Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) 'subjective turn' has in fact taken place: other observers have only tended to label it differently and to be more critical of it.

This process of *subjectivization* is indeed likely to be one of the driving forces behind the success of New Age spirituality. The cultural logic of the subjective turn is namely perfectly compatible with that of the latter: external sources of authority are generally ignored, individual liberty is highly valued, the inner self is sacralized, and personal feelings and experiences are considered of utmost importance. Indeed, according to Heelas and Woodhead, *the spiritual turn is simply the religious expression of the wider subjective turn taking place in the West.* In their understanding the latter has not only spurred the

emergence of a basically secular "subjective wellbeing culture"[44] (Idem, 84), but also "'prime[s]' people for the activities of the holistic milieu" (Idem, 88), the field where New Age spirituality is commonly found. According to Heelas and Woodhead, then, the holistic milieu and the New Age spirituality it institutionalizes, cater to those who have been involved in subjective well-being culture, yet wish to "'go deeper' into the spiritual dimension" (90)—a desire which that in their understanding stems from feeling stifled or alienated by unwittingly adopted social roles (see Heelas 2008; Sointu & Woodhead 2008).

While this logic may indeed explain the spiritual turn at large, the question still remains why New Age spirituality is a predominantly female affair. While Heelas and Woodhead (2005) do not believe that post-traditional women are generally more subjectivized than post-traditional men, they do argue that the latter more typically endorse an *individuated* type of *subjectivism* that fails to spur spiritual longings. Post-traditional women, on the other hand, are held to more naturally embrace a *relational* type of *subjectivism* that does do so.

Relational and individuated subjectivism

According to Heelas and Woodhead (2005), *relational subjectivists* cultivate their subjective-life in the context of personal encounters and relations with other people: 'talking things through' with close friends, and visiting therapists, counsellors, or HR specialists. Through 'meaningful' relationships with others, *relational subjectivists* aim to *go deeper* in discovering their subjective selfhood, exploring the complexities of their inner life: they learn about themselves by discussing their anger and anxieties with close friends or by dealing with jealousy with a lover. For them, it is "all about 'the we of me' - developing one's own subjective-life, be/coming oneself, relating to one's life, *through* one's relationships" Idem, 97; see also McCullers 1973). Here independence and interdependence go together.

As it turns out, New Age practitioners are generally also very much concerned with developing 'meaningful' relationships with others, i.e., with participants. The nature of these relationships is preferably close, reciprocal, trusting, egalitarian and holistic. What matters is sharing, expressing, caring, intimate disclosure, growing oneself through the

[44] i.e., "all those cultural provisions and activities which explicitly dwell on enhancing the quality of subjective-life" (Heelas & Woodhead 2005, 84).

experiences of associational activities. Hence, it may come as no surprise that many consultations between practitioners and participants of New Age therapies revolve around experiences of acceptance and care (Sointu 2011), making it indeed very plausible that *relational subjectivists* are attracted to this type of spirituality.

Individuated subjectivists, on the other hand, aim to improve the quality of their subjective-life by addressing 'problems' of not feeling successful enough, of not having enough pleasurable experiences, of not having achieved all one might achieve. Rather than going deeper into one's inner life, they are externally oriented: they seek external and indirect solutions to their 'problems' by reaching outside themselves into the world, obtaining commodities and material success to satisfy their desires. They experience their selves as unique, distinct, bounded, self-contained and in control, and develop their subjective-life through "atomized (self-reliant, self-sufficient) agency" (Heelas & Woodhead 2005, 96). For them, competition is more important than connections and personal relationships, which is why this mode of autonomous personhood is associated with possessive individualism and entrepreneurial capitalism (Idem). Unlike *relational subjectivists,* they are not accustomed to, and do not value, the intimate expressive, relational path to subjective well-being. Hence, they will feel threatened by what an interconnected 'we' might do to the 'me' as a protected, guarded, bounded, private entity, making it indeed very unlikely that New Age spirituality appeals to them.

The only question that remains at this point is why men more typically endorse the *individuated* type of *subjectivism* while women more naturally embrace the *relational* type? Heelas and Woodhead (2005) suggest that deeply ingrained cultural values and a gendered division of labor lie at the base of this difference. Many observers have indeed noted that, traditionally, "women are expected to be responsible for close relationships, and men to be independent and occupied with work" (Cancian 1987, 10-11). Consistent with this, "women [also] attach more importance to social goals such as relationships [and] helping others", while men generally "attach more importance to ego goals such as career and money" (Hofstede 2001, 279). In most cases, women *take* primary responsibility for "the conception, maintenance and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties, including visits, letters, telephone calls, presents, and cards to kin; the organization of holiday gatherings; the creation and maintenance of quasi-kin relations", also deciding to "neglect or […] intensify particular ties" (Di Leonardo 1987, 442-3). In addition, women are traditionally expected to

be “loving mothers” and "devoted wives” (Woodhead 2008, 189), taking primary responsibility for the subjective well-being of others, i.e., taking care of, and looking after, the minds, bodies, and spirits of those close to them such as their spouse, children and other close kin and dependents (Hochschild 2003). Consistent with these cultural expectations, women *are* generally more concerned than men with maintaining the subjective well-being of others in their daily lives. They generally *do* most of the ‘emotional labor’ such as comforting children, supporting and chatting with friends, and making men feel good about themselves (Hochschild 1983) and they spend more time than men on cooking in order to nourish the bodies of those close to them (Delphy & Leonard 1992). In the public domain of work, too, significantly more women than men hold person-centered occupations in which providing subjective well-being is key (e.g., nursing, caring, teaching, and human resource development). And even when care for the subjective well-being of others is not formally part of the ‘job description’, it turns out that many women still take responsibility for this (Pringle 1989; Adkins 1995; Hochschild 1983; Järvinen 1993).

So it seems that New Age spirituality appeals to many women because it validates, legitimates and sanctifies women’s traditional work of providing bodily, emotional and relational care to others that, for many women, constitutes an important part of their identity (Woodhead 2008; Sointu & Woodhead 2008). Many ‘New Age’ techniques also focus on emotions and the body (Woodhead 2008) and are therefore “easily aligned with” and “readily tap into and reproduce traditional representations of caring femininity” (Sointu 2011, 359). At the same time, however, and this is important, traditional caring and other-directed femininity in general, and self-sacrificial care in particular, are subverted by New Age practitioners. One’s first responsibility is to oneself and “[t]he consistent message is that you have to attend to, understand, and care for self first, and that this is the only proper basis for responsible care for others” (Sointu & Woodhead 2008, 270).

Now, to summarize Heelas and Woodhead’s (2005) argument: women are more likely than men to aim for improving the quality of their subjective-life through relationships with others, to be more familiar with subjective wellbeing values, and to be concerned with the subjective well-being of others in their daily lives, both in the public and private domain. Since New Age spirituality is so relational, it particularly attracts those, either directly or through subjective well-being culture, who aim to improve the quality of their subjective-life through relationships with others, i.e., *relational subjectivists* - and these are most often

women. Hence, the corresponding hypothesis is that *women have more affinity with New Age spirituality than men because they embrace relational subjectivism to a greater extent.*

Data, Operationalization, and Method

Data

To the best of our knowledge, Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) theory has not been tested systematically yet. Hence, we study its tenability by examining nationally representative online survey data from the Netherlands collected in the fall of 2008 by CentERdata, a Dutch institute for data collection and research based at Tilburg University. CentERdata is specialized in online survey research and maintains a validated panel of respondents that is representative for the Dutch population aged sixteen years or older. In addition to having items on New Age spirituality, individuated and relational subjectivism and gender, this cross-sectional dataset also contains questions concerning traditional Christian religion, worldviews, technology and the natural environment, and has been used previously by others (Achterberg et al. 2010; Van Bohemen et al. 2012; Houtman & Tromp, 2021). The advantages of using this particular dataset are twofold. Firstly, the Netherlands is an excellent context in which the relationship between the two types of subjectivism and New Age spirituality can be studied because it is one of the countries in which the latter has expanded most (Houtman & Aupers 2007), and it is also one of the most de-traditionalized countries in the world (Pop, Roosma & Achterberg 2023). Secondly, this survey contains an excellent measurement instrument for New Age spirituality, something that is in fact quite rare in the field (Houtman & Aupers 2007; Houtman & Tromp, 2021; Tromp et al. 2020, 2022) as well as a sufficient number of good items with which to construct the scales for individuated and relational subjectivism. And even though a better scale for individuated subjectivism is certainly imaginable, and the availability of more recent data would have been desirable, these two minor disadvantages do not form obstacles for the main purpose of this study (i.e., testing whether women have more affinity with New Age spirituality than men *because* they embrace relational subjectivism to a greater extent). The actual survey was presented to 2,423 panel members, 2,121 of them responded, and 2,081 respondents filled it out completely (86%). The survey was administered in Dutch so the first author (whose mother tongue is Dutch) translated all the statements, questions and answers below into English. The Dutch version of the survey can be obtained from the first author.

Operationalization

Consistent with previous studies (Achterberg et al. 2010; Van Bohemen et al. 2012; Houtman & Tromp 2021), we measure *New Age spirituality* with a continuous scale that consists of responses to seven items that capture the core tenets of New Age spirituality as discussed in the first paragraph of the theory section. Respondents were asked to indicate how much they (dis)agree with each statement using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. The 'don't know' answers are treated as missing values[45]. The seven items that make up the scale are listed below in Table 1.

Table 1. Factor loadings of the seven items measuring New Age spirituality (N = 1,285)

Items	FAC 1
There is some sort of spirit or life force which permeates all life *(immanence and diffuseness of the sacred)*	0.682
The entire universe springs from one universal spiritual energy *(holism)*	0.756
The cosmos is a living entity *(aliveness of the cosmos)*	0.508
The divine does not originate outside, but within every person *(self-spirituality)*	0.644
Every person has a higher spiritual 'self' that can be awakened and enlightened *(experiential epistemology)*	0.824
The one and only true religion does not exist, but there are truths that one can find in all religions of the world *(perennialism)*	0.550
Personal spirituality is more important than allegiance to a religious tradition *(bricolage)*	0.499
Initial Eigenvalue	3.475
Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings	2.941
Cronbach's Alpha	0.829

[45] The seven items have relatively high proportions of missing values, ranging from 11% to 21% with a mean of 15%. See Houtman and Tromp (2021) for an extensive discussion of this matter.

Notes: Principal Axis Factoring without rotation (KMO = 0.84; Bartlett's sphericity test is significant with $p < 0.001$). The scree plot (not shown) clearly indicates a 1-factor solution. Cronbach's Alpha does not increase any further if any one of the items is deleted from the scale, and all corrected item-total correlations are high (i.e., 0.46 or higher). The notions in parentheses were not shown in the actual survey, only the statements were.

Factor and reliability analyses indicate that the seven items can be safely combined to construct a scale that reliably and validly measures New Age spirituality (see Table 1, see also Houtman & Tromp (2021) and Van Bohemen et al. (2012) for a more extensive discussion of the scale's psychometric properties). Just as in Van Bohemen et al. (2012), scale scores are assigned as means to all those with valid scores on at least four of the seven items. 1,843 respondents receive such a scale score (87%). The final scale ranges from 1 to 5 with higher scores indicating more affinity with New Age spirituality.

Relational and *individuated subjectivism* are measured with two separate scales that consist of responses to six and four items, respectively. These ten items were selected from a larger battery of statements on personality traits. Respondents were asked to indicate for the following ten qualities to what extent they describe their personality: (1) acts as a leader; (2) shows affection; (3) compassionate; (4) understanding; (5) assertive; (6) dominant; (7) loves children; (8) loving; (9) soft hearted; (10) risk-taking. Response options comprise: 1 '(almost) never', 2 'rarely', 3 'occasionally', 4 'often', and 5 '(almost) always'. With thirty-three missing cases per item, a figure that is extremely low, nearly all respondents provided answers to these ten questions. The results of a factor analysis show that the four items from which we assume that they measure *individuated subjectivism* (i.e. acts as a leader; assertive; dominant; risk-taking) and the six items from which we assume that they measure *relational subjectivism* (i.e. shows affection; compassionate; understanding; loves children; loving; soft hearted) load on two separate and uncorrelated factors (see Table 2). These findings hence confirm that we are indeed dealing with two separate latent constructs that can be distinguished both theoretically *and* empirically. Subsequent reliability analyses yield a strong internal consistency for the relational

subjectivism scale[46] and an acceptable internal consistency for the individuated subjectivism scale[47] (see Table 2 for the Cronbach's Alpha's). Hence, items 1, 5, 6 and 10 can be safely combined to construct a scale that reliably and validly measures *individuated subjectivism* and the other six items can be safely combined to construct a scale that reliably and validly measures *relational subjectivism*. Scale scores are assigned as means to 2,088 respondents (98%). The final scales are continuous and range from 1 to 5 with higher scores indicating higher levels of individuated and relational subjectivism.

Table 2. Factor loadings of ten items measuring relational and individuated subjectivism (N = 2,088)

Items	FAC 1	FAC 2
1. Acts as a leader		0.672
2. Shows affection	0.485	
3. Compassionate	0.787	
4. Understanding	0.769	
5. Assertive		0.511
6. Dominant		0.771
7. Loves children	0.464	
8. Loving	0.727	
9. Soft-hearted	0.619	
10. Risk-taking		0.328
Initial Eigenvalue	3.150	2.078
Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings	2.644	1.523
Cronbach's Alpha	0.791	0.653

[46] Cronbach's Alpha for the relational subjectivism scale only increases with 0.005 when 'loves children' is deleted from the scale, but this is not done since the corrected item-total correlation is 0.416. NB: all corrected item-total correlations are sufficiently high (i.e., 0.411 or higher).
[47] Cronbach's Alpha for the individuated subjectivism scale only increases with 0.016 when 'risk-taking' is deleted from the scale, but this is not done since the corrected item-total correlation is 0.304. NB: all corrected item-total correlations are sufficiently high (i.e., 0.304 or higher).

Notes: Principal Axis Factoring without rotation (KMO = 0.77; Bartlett's sphericity test is significant with $p < 0.001$). Factor loadings < 0.30 are not shown. The scree plot (not shown) clearly indicates a 2-factors solution.

Gender is measured with a dichotomous item with '0' indicating 'man (or male)' and '1' indicating 'woman (or female)'.

The control variables we include are *age, educational level,* and *(net monthly household) income. Age* is measured in years with a continuous variable that ranges from 16 to 93. *Educational level* is measured with an ordinal variable with six categories, i.e., 1 'primary school', 2 'preparatory secondary vocational education', 3 'higher general secondary education or pre-university education', 4 'intermediate vocational education', 5 'higher vocational education' and 6 'university/scientific education'. Finally, *net monthly household income* is measured with an ordinal variable with four categories, i.e., 1 'EUR 1,150 or less', 2 'EUR 1,151 to EUR 1,800', 3 'EUR 1,801 to EUR 2,600' and 4 'More than EUR 2,600'. Descriptive statistics of all the variables can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics

	N	MIN	MAX	M	SD [a]
New Age spirituality	1,843	1	5	3.35	0.87
Relational subjectivism	2,088	1	5	3.92	0.50
Individuated subjectivism	2,088	1	5	2.87	0.61
Gender (woman / female = 1)	2,121	0	1	0.46	
Age (in years)	2,121	16	93	50.95	16.13
Educational level	2,114	1	6	3.63	1.53
Net monthly household income	2,121	1	4	3.13	0.93
Valid N (listwise deletion)	1,836				

[a] Standard deviations are not shown for dichotomous items.

Method

Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) *subjectivization thesis* predicts that women have more affinity with New Age spirituality than men *because* they embrace relational subjectivism to a greater extent, and it is precisely this relational type of subjectivism that should make one more likely to be attracted to New Age.

In order to test this hypothesis, we need to perform multiple linear regression analysis. Specifically, we need to carry out a mediation analysis with New Age spirituality as the dependent variable (Y), gender as the focal independent variable (X), and relational subjectivism as the mediator (M). We will follow the basic steps for mediation analysis as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986), i.e., three separate regression analyses: X → Y, X → M, and X + M → Y. Each regression model will also include individuated subjectivism and the control variables age, educational level, and net monthly household income. In the first regression analysis, we verify whether women indeed have more affinity with New Age spirituality than men (X → Y). In the second regression analysis, we test whether women are indeed more likely than men to be relational subjectivists (X → M). In the third regression analysis, we examine whether women have more affinity with New Age spirituality than men *because* they embrace relational subjectivism to a greater extent (X + M → Y). For their theory to hold any water, the positive association between women and New Age spirituality should at least weaken when relational subjectivism is added to the model (i.e., a partial mediation). Once we find empirical evidence for the existence of these relationships, the next step is to test the statistical significance of the hypothesized indirect effect from gender to New Age spirituality via relational subjectivism (i.e., testing whether it actually differs from zero or not), first with the more conservative and somewhat outdated Sobel test (Sobel 1982) and subsequently with the more flexible and more robust bootstrapping method[48] (Preacher & Hayes 2004). The latter approach will generate a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect. If zero is not in this interval, we can be confident that the indirect effect differs significantly from zero.

[48] For this, we use Andrew F. Hayes' PROCESS v4.1 macro for IBM SPSS Statistics 28.

Results

As expected, and consistent with previous studies (e.g., Houtman & Mascini 2002), we find that *women have significantly more affinity with New Age spirituality than men* while holding constant the effects of individuated subjectivism, age, educational level, and income (see Model 1 in Table 4, $b = 0.329$, $p < .001$).

Then, as predicted by Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) *subjectivization thesis, women also score significantly higher on relational subjectivism than men,* again holding constant the effects of individuated subjectivism, age, educational level, and income (see Model 2 in Table 4, $b = 0.245$, $p < .001$). Temporarily changing the model's outcome to individuated subjectivism also confirmed that women score significantly *lower* on individuated subjectivism than men ($b = -0.099$, $p < .001$; output not shown here).

Now, do women have more affinity with New Age spirituality than men *because* they embrace relational subjectivism to a greater extent? A comparison of regression models 1 and 3 (in Table 4) strongly suggests that this hypothesis is supported by the data. This can be concluded from the observation that woman's positive effect on New Age spirituality *weakened* as soon as we take people's degree of relational subjectivism into account[49]. Because woman's direct effect remains statistically significant from zero, we provisionally conclude that relational subjectivism *partially mediates* the association between gender and New Age spirituality. To find out whether the indirect effect *actually* differs significantly from zero, we now turn our attention to the findings of the Sobel test and the bootstrapping method.

Both the findings of the Sobel test and the bootstrapping method[50] point in the same direction and both complement and support the results from the regression analyses. They specifically demonstrate that the indirect effect from women (X) on New Age spirituality (Y) via relational subjectivism (M) indeed differs significantly from zero (Sobel test statistic = 5.355, standard error = 0.011, $p < .001$; indirect effect = 0.061[51], bootstrapped standard error = 0.0130, 95% CI [0.037, 0.088]). Thus, women generally have more affinity with New Age spirituality than men *because* they generally embrace relational subjectivism to a

[49] i.e., from $b = .329$ in Model 1 (total effect) to $b = .268$ in Model 3 (direct effect) which is a 18.5% decrease.

[50] Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap 95% confidence intervals: 10,000.

[51] A (regression coefficient between women (X) and relational subjectivism (M)) * B (regression coefficient between relational subjectivism (M) and New Age spirit. (Y)) = 0.2454 * 0.2502 = 0.061.

greater extent, and it is precisely this relational subjectivism that is positively associated with New Age spirituality. In other words, the more one embraces (or possesses) those characteristics associated with relational subjectivism, the stronger one subscribes to New Age spirituality (see Model 3 in Table 4, $b = 0.250$, $p < .001$). The same cannot be said for individuated subjectivism (see Models 1 and 3, $b = 0.058$, $p > .05$), a noteworthy finding that is actually a good sign, making the established positive association between relational subjectivism and New Age spirituality even more valid and convincing, because the observation that relational *and* individuated subjectivism are both positively associated with New Age spirituality would have been inconsistent with the theory.

In conclusion, the theoretical implication of this mediation analysis is that Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) *subjectivization thesis* is now supported by empirical evidence. Women have more affinity with New Age spirituality than men *because* they generally embrace (or possess) those characteristics associated with relational subjectivism to a greater extent than men. Since woman's positive effect on affinity with New Age spirituality remains significantly different from zero even after people's endorsement of relational subjectivism has been taken into account (see Model 3, Table 4), other theoretical explanations, in addition to Heelas and Woodhead's, continue to exist for why women generally have more affinity with New Age than men. We will return to this matter in the "Discussion" section.

Table 4. Summary of linear regression analyses for variables predicting New Age spirituality and relational subjectivism (N = 1,836)

	Model 1: DV = New Age Spirituality			Model 2: DV = Relational Subjectivism			Model 3: DV = New Age Spirituality		
Independent variables	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Men	-			-			-		
Women	0.329***	0.040	0.380	0.245***	0.023	0.491	0.268***	0.041	0.309
Relational subjectivism							0.250***	0.040	0.144
Individuated subjectivism	0.058	0.033	0.041	-0.002	0.019	-0.003	0.058	0.032	0.041
Control variables									
Age (in years)	0.009***	0.001	0.160	0.000	0.001	0.007	0.009***	0.001	0.159
Primary education	0.019	0.101	0.005	-0.021	0.058	-0.009	0.024	0.100	0.006
Preparatory secondary vocational education	0.043	0.069	0.022	0.074	0.040	0.064	0.025	0.068	0.012
Higher general secondary education/ pre-university education	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Intermediate vocational education	0.147*	0.073	0.065	0.074	0.042	0.057	0.129	0.072	0.057

Higher vocational education	0.133*	0.068	0.068	0.079*	0.039	0.069	0.113	0.067	0.058
University/scientific education	0.112	0.080	0.042	0.020	0.046	0.013	0.107	0.079	0.040
NMHI - EUR 1150 or less	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
NMHI - EUR 1151 to EUR 1800	-0.083	0.091	-0.037	-0.025	0.052	-0.019	-0.077	0.090	-0.034
NMHI - EUR 1801 to EUR 2600	-0.066	0.087	-0.035	0.020	0.050	0.018	-0.071	0.086	-0.038
NMHI - EUR 2601 or more	-0.174*	0.086	-0.100	-0.010	0.049	-0.010	-0.172*	0.085	-0.099
Constant	2.603***	0.155		3.760***	0.089		1.662***	0.215	
Proportion explained variance *(R^2)*	.060			.066			.080		

Note: The same number of respondents are involved in all three models (i.e. 1,836) because we want to make sure that any observed changes in the relationship between gender and New Age spirituality are solely due to statistically controlling for relational subjectivism and not to possible changes in sample size. Model 1 is also known as the total effect model. The change in R^2 from .060 (model 1) to .080 (model 3), i.e., after adding relational subjectivism as a mediator to the model, is statistically significant with $p < .001$. DV = dependent variable. NMHI = net monthly household income. Standardized coefficients (β) for dichotomous or multi-categorical predictors are in partially standardized form. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Conclusion

In this study, we have addressed the infamous 'New Age gender puzzle' that refers to the empirical observation that far more women are interested in New Age spirituality than men. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) offer a plausible theoretical explanation for this well-known gender gap in New Age spirituality by introducing contrasting and allegedly gendered notions of autonomous selfhood. They specifically distinguish between *individuated* and *relational subjectivism* and argue that men generally have more affinity with the former while women generally have more affinity with the latter. They conclude by asserting why New Age spirituality appeals to relational (but not to individuated) subjectivists. To the best of our knowledge, the present study has been the first serious attempt to systematically test Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) *subjectivization thesis.* Making use of nationally representative survey data from the Netherlands, we carried out a mediation analysis to see if women, on average, have more affinity with New Age spirituality than men *because* they generally embrace relational subjectivism to a greater extent. Our findings confirm that this is indeed the case, providing empirical support for the theory. As soon as we took people's endorsement of relational subjectivism into account, the positive association between women and New Age spirituality *weakened*. Interestingly, the relationship did not disappear altogether[52], hence there are still other explanations out there for the so often observed gender gap in New Age spirituality. We discuss one of these in the section below.

Discussion

In this paper, we have studied a 'New Age' worldview and replicated its gendered nature. Differences in the degree to which men and women endorse relational subjectivism turned out to be an important - but not the only - piece of the New Age gender puzzle. Hence, there must be more going on than this and we are quite certain that at least part of the answer lies in the question itself. So instead of solely focusing on the *explanans* (i.e., relational subjectivism in this study), we recommend future researchers to think critically about the *explanandum* as well. We argue that the enormous gender gap in New Age spirituality that some scholars have observed may in fact be an artefact of the way they have measured it. Heelas and Woodhead, for instance, examined fifty-three different

[52] In statistical terms, we have found evidence for a partial (but not for a full) mediation effect.

holistic milieu activities in and around Kendal (2005, 156-157) and observed that, on average, 80% of participants were female. Although they did mention the number of participants for each separate activity[53], they have not stated the gender ratios, important information that Rose (1998) did report in his paper about the New Age movement. He concluded that women are more attracted to practices that have to do with "healing and bodywork" whereas men find "spiritual concerns and community orientated activities" far more interesting (Idem, 7; 18). A very similar 'division of labor' was observed by Hamilton (2000, 196) who surveyed visitors and participants of London's annual Mind–Body–Spirit Festival. Women were making more use of alternative and complementary therapies while men were more often involved in sects, cults, and New Religious Movements. What is truly noteworthy about Rose's (1998) study, however, is that he found "no discernable gender differences among [his] participants" for seven New Age practices[54] (Idem, 7). For four other activities[55], he observed that men were even *more* involved than women. Of these in total eleven New Age practices, only two were included in Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) list of holistic milieu activities. Since Rose's pool of New Age activities was more comprehensive and diverse than Heelas and Woodhead's – because it contained more 'male-friendly' practices so to say – it may come as no surprise that Rose observed a *narrower* gender gap than Heelas and Woodhead, i.e., 70/30 instead of 80/20. And it does not end there: a nationally representative survey among U.S. adults showed that the gender gap among meditators[56] is even smaller with a 60/40 female-to-male ratio. A closer look revealed that women were significantly more likely than men to exclusively practice 'spiritual meditation'. However, when it came to the exclusive practice of 'mantra' and 'mindfulness' meditation, no significant gender differences were observed (Burke, Lam, Stussman & Yang 2017). The same goes for the likelihood of purchasing New Age materials (e.g., books, magazines, audio, videotapes etc.) among residents of Texas. Contrary to what was expected, "women [were] no more likely than men to purchase such materials" (Mears & Ellison 2000, 302).

[53] See Appendix 3 in Heelas and Woodhead (2005, 156-158).
[54] i.e., for "meditation practice" (Rose 1998, 12), "ethical investing, NLP (neuro-linguistic programming), recycling, sound therapy, transactional analysis and veganism" (Idem, 7).
[55] i.e., Buddhism, earth mysteries, green politics, and shaman/pagan rituals (Idem, 8).
[56] i.e., respondents who practiced mantra, mindfulness and/or spiritual meditation during the previous year.

Taken together, these findings therefore strongly suggest that the *magnitude* of the gender gap heavily depends on which New Age practices are being studied. Since new activities emerge all the time, existing ones mutate, and old ones disappear, it is indeed very hard if not impossible to include all relevant practices out there. Moreover, not all people view their activities as being spiritual[57]. One way to circumvent these limitations is to measure affinity with the underlying spiritual *worldview* instead (what we have done in our study) because it is much less 'gendered' than many of the practices out there. People's interest in specific activities is furthermore subject to (rapid) change whereas one's (spiritual) worldview is expected to be much more stable over time (e.g., someone either believes that 'there is some sort of spirit or life force which permeates all life' or one does not). Although our findings have confirmed that women generally hold on to a New Age worldview more firmly than men, an important caveat to mention is that the absolute difference between them is not particularly overwhelming[58]. In other words, the New Age gender gap appears to be much *narrower* when we shift our attention from the myriad of holistic milieu activities[59] to affinity with the more general and less 'gendered' underlying spiritual worldview that is shared by most participants of the various groups and practices. We recommend future researchers to keep this mind when they decide to further study the gender gap in New Age spirituality.

[57] e.g. recycling and veganism may be spiritual to some people but mundane to others.
[58] on average, women scored one-third of a point higher than men on a scale with a range of 1 to 5.
[59] especially the ones related to healing, bodywork, therapy and divination.

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Scientific summary (English)

There is no denying that compared to the heydays of the 1950s, traditional Christian religion has meanwhile declined significantly and lost much of its former dominance, appeal and legitimacy, particularly in Western-Europe. Secularization theorists offer convincing explanations for this downward trend, but however useful and valuable these explanations have been for the sociology of religion, this dissertation argues that the discipline's traditional obsession with secularization theory also has a massive downside. By placing this theory on a pedestal, it has been overshadowing (or obfuscating) other important developments that have meanwhile been taking place in the religious landscape of the West. Noteworthy are the increase in spiritual self-identifications as well as the expansion of a post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality. This dissertation argues that secularization theory's ascendancy in the sociology of religion has thwarted – intentionally or not – the social-scientific study of these two developments, thereby limiting the discipline's progress. Specifically, this unwanted situation has resulted in four neglected key issues which are explicated in the dissertation's introduction. The first problem is directly tackled in that first chapter. The other three issues are addressed as best as possible in the subsequent four empirical chapters.

The first key issue concerns the commonly held misconception that post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality is *culturally incoherent* (i.e., those concerned do not share a particular worldview) and *socially and publicly insignificant* (i.e., it has no influence whatsoever beyond the private domain). The dissertation's introduction explicates and critically evaluates both of these claims in the light of both recent and older scholarly works (both theoretical and empirical) originating from a more specialized literature on post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality. A thorough examination of the latter in fact reveals 1) a solid set of logically interrelated ideas that are central to the worldview of post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality (thereby defusing the first claim), and 2) that this type of spirituality is both socially transmissible and present in the public sphere (thereby defusing the second claim).

The second key problem pertains to the discipline's traditional focus on studying religious decline rather than religious change. Chapters 2 and 3 address this shortcoming by

examining both processes in tandem. This is important because studying them separately merely provides one-sided views of how the religious landscape of the West has evolved over time. Chapter 2 therefore tests the thesis of religious decline, central to secularization theory, *alongside* theories of religious change that assert something completely different, namely that religion in Western-Europe has not so much declined but rather changed profoundly (i.e., from a traditional Christian religiosity toward a post-Christian 'New Age' spirituality). Chapter 2 finds support for both of these processes. Religion has declined, whether one understands it narrowly as traditional Christian religiosity, or more broadly so that it also includes new forms of religiosity and spirituality (like New Age). It is noteworthy that the former has declined at a much higher pace than the latter. Although the rise of these new forms of religiosity and spirituality cannot compensate for the loss in traditional Christian religiosity, they do make up an increasing portion of the overall declining religious pie. Those who continue to be religious or spiritual deviate increasingly from the traditional Christian model, so when one does encounter religiosity, it is much more likely to be non-traditional religiosity (like New Age) than was true in the past, indicating a process of religious change.

Chapter 3 then studies to what extent the decline of traditional Christian religion is responsible for religious transformations, both within and beyond Christian religion. More specifically, it systematically explicates and critically tests two theories on religious change that are both derived from Grace Davie's well-known and much-debated 'believing without belonging' thesis. Strikingly, the findings do not reinforce the typically foregrounded version of 'believing without belonging' (i.e., a *de-institutionalization of Christianity*), however, they do support the typically unnoticed version of a *spiritualization of religion.*

The third key issue has to do with the emergence and expansion of a research tradition on spiritual (and religious) self-identifications. It consists of scholars studying from scratch what people actually mean when they say they are spiritual (but not religious), thereby overlooking a whole body of specialized literature that explains what this spirituality may be all about (i.e., the clearly distinct and pre-existing research tradition on New Age spirituality). Chapter 4 closes this gap by connecting these two traditions, thereby stimulating a much-needed critical intellectual dialogue between the two areas of expertise.

It does so by studying whether the 'spiritual but not religious' embrace New Age spirituality, and whether they much like New Agers dismiss traditional Christian religion, whereas the 'both religious and spiritual' adhere to traditional Christian religion and understand spirituality in a non-New Age fashion (i.e., spirituality in a Christian sense). Chapter 4 yet finds that the 'both religious and spiritual' generally have no less affinity with New Age spirituality than their non-religious counterparts. This is because the more liberal and progressive Christians in the former category embrace New Age spirituality, too, while their more conservative and traditional Christian counterparts in this former category rather dismiss it. Thus, spiritual self-identifications have become quite reliable shortcuts, both within and beyond Christian religion, to identify sympathy with New Age spirituality with.

The fourth and final key problem concerns the neglect of key issues within the social-scientific study of spirituality itself such as the infamous and obstinate 'New Age gender puzzle', i.e., the recurrent – but not yet satisfactorily explained – observation that far more women than men take an interest in New Age spirituality. Chapter 5 addresses this puzzle by systematically testing – for the first time – a theory that has been proposed nearly two decades ago by Heelas and Woodhead (2005). With their *subjectivization thesis*, they introduced contrasting and allegedly gendered notions of autonomous selfhood, viz., *individuated* and *relational subjectivism.* They argue that men more typically endorse the former that fails to spur spiritual longings whereas women more naturally embrace the latter that does do so. Chapter 5 shows that women have indeed more affinity with New Age spirituality than men *because* they generally embrace relational subjectivism to a greater extent, thereby supporting the theory and contributing to the puzzle's solution.

Scientific summary (Dutch)

Het valt niet te ontkennen dat traditionele christelijke religie, vergeleken met de hoogtijdagen van de jaren ’50, ondertussen aanzienlijk is afgekalfd en veel van zijn vroegere dominantie, aantrekkelijkheid en legitimiteit is verloren, met name in West-Europa. Seculariserings-theoretici tonen overtuigende verklaringen voor deze neerwaartse trend, maar hoe bruikbaar en waardevol deze verklaringen ook zijn geweest voor de godsdienstsociologie, dit proefschrift betoogt dat de traditionele obsessie van de discipline met seculariseringstheorie ook een enorme keerzijde heeft. Door deze theorie op een voetstuk te plaatsen, overschaduwt (of verduistert) het andere belangrijke ontwikkelingen die ondertussen plaatsvinden in het westerse religieuze landschap. Noemenswaardig zijn de toename in spirituele zelfidentificaties als ook de uitbreiding van een postchristelijke ‘New Age’ spiritualiteit. Dit proefschrift betoogt dat het overwicht van seculariseringstheorie in de godsdienstsociologie de sociaalwetenschappelijke studie van deze twee ontwikkelingen - opzettelijk of niet - heeft gedwarsboomd, en daarmee de vooruitgang van de discipline heeft beperkt. Specifiek heeft deze ongewenste situatie geresulteerd in vier verwaarloosde sleutelkwesties die in de introductie van het proefschrift worden uiteengezet. In datzelfde hoofdstuk wordt het eerste sleutelprobleem direct aangepakt. De overige drie kwesties worden zo goed mogelijk geadresseerd in de daaropvolgende vier empirische hoofdstukken.

De eerste sleutelkwestie betreft de algemeen verbreide misvatting dat post-christelijke ‘New Age’ spiritualiteit *cultureel incoherent* (i.e., de betrokkenen delen geen afzonderlijk wereldbeeld met elkaar) en *maatschappelijk en publiekelijk onbeduidend* (i.e., het heeft geen enkele invloed buiten het privédomein) is. De introductie zet beide beweringen uiteen en evalueert ze kritisch in het licht van zowel recente als oudere wetenschappelijke werken (zowel theoretisch als empirisch) afkomstig uit een meer specialistische literatuur over post-christelijke ‘New Age’ spiritualiteit. Een grondig onderzoek van het laatstgenoemde onthult in feite 1) een solide set van logisch met elkaar verbonden ideeën die centraal staan in het wereldbeeld van post-christelijke ‘New Age’ spiritualiteit (en ontmantelt daarmee de eerste bewering), en 2) dat dit type spiritualiteit zowel sociaal overdraagbaar als aanwezig in de publieke sfeer is (en ontmantelt daarmee de tweede bewering).

Het tweede sleutelprobleem heeft betrekking op de traditionele focus van de discipline op het liever bestuderen van religieuze neergang dan van religieuze verandering. Hoofdstukken 2 en 3 adresseren deze tekortkoming door beide processen tegelijkertijd te onderzoeken. Dit is belangrijk want ze afzonderlijk bestuderen verschaft slechts eenzijdige weergaven van hoe het westerse religieuze landschap door de tijd heen geëvolueerd is. Hoofdstuk 2 test daarom de binnen de secularisering stheorie centraal staande stelling van religieuze neergang *naast* theorieën over religieuze verandering die iets totaal anders beweren, namelijk dat religie in West-Europa niet zozeer is afgenomen maar eerder diepgaand is veranderd (i.e., van een traditionele christelijke religie naar een post-christelijke 'New Age' spiritualiteit). Hoofdstuk 2 vindt ondersteuning voor beide processen. Religie is afgenomen, of men dat nu smal opvat als traditionele christelijke religie, of breder zodat het ook nieuwe vormen van religiositeit en spiritualiteit (zoals New Age) omvat. Opmerkelijk is dat de eerst-genoemde in een veel hoger tempo is afgenomen dan de laatstgenoemde. Hoewel de op-komst van deze nieuwe vormen van religiositeit en spiritualiteit niet kunnen compenseren voor het verlies van traditionele christelijke religie, maken ze wel een steeds groter deel uit van de algeheel kleiner wordende religieuze taart. Zij die nog steeds religieus of spiritueel zijn, wijken in toenemende mate af van het traditionele christelijke model. Dus als men nu religiositeit aantreft, betreft het veel waarschijnlijker niet-traditionele religiositeit (zoals New Age) dan vroeger het geval was, wijzende op een proces van religieuze verandering. Hoofdstuk 3 bestudeert vervolgens in hoeverre de achteruitgang van traditionele christelijke religie verantwoordelijk is voor religieuze transformaties, zowel binnen als buiten christelijke religie. Meer specifiek zet het systematisch uiteen en test het kritisch twee theorieën over religieuze verandering die beide afgeleid zijn van Grace Davie's welbekende en veelbesproken stelling over 'geloven buiten verband'. Opvallend aan de bevindingen is dat deze de typisch op de voorgrond geplaatste versie van 'geloven buiten verband' niet bevestigen (i.e., een *de-institutionalisering van het christendom),* maar daarentegen de typisch onopgemerkte versie van een *spiritualisering van religie* wel ondersteunen.

De derde sleutelkwestie heeft te maken met de opkomst en uitbreiding van een onderzoekstraditie naar spirituele (en religieuze) zelfidentificaties. Deze bestaat uit wetenschappers die (helemaal opnieuw gaan) bestuderen wat mensen daadwerkelijk bedoelen als ze zeggen dat ze spiritueel (maar niet religieus) zijn. Daarbij zien zij een hele

bulk aan specialistische literatuur over het hoofd die uitlegt waar deze spiritualiteit mogelijk over gaat (i.e., de duidelijk te onderscheiden en reeds bestaande onderzoekstraditie naar New Age spiritualiteit). Hoofdstuk 4 dicht deze kloof door deze twee tradities met elkaar te verbinden en stimuleert daarmee een broodnodige kritische intellectuele dialoog tussen de twee expertisegebieden. Het doet dit door te bestuderen of de 'spiritueel maar niet religieus' New Age spiritualiteit omarmen, en of zij net zoals New Agers traditionele christelijke religie afwijzen, terwijl de 'zowel religieus als spiritueel' trouw blijven aan traditionele christelijke religie en spiritualiteit niet in New Age maar in christelijke zin opvatten. Toch vindt hoofdstuk 4 dat de 'zowel religieus als spiritueel' gemiddeld genomen niet minder affiniteit met New Age spiritualiteit hebben dan hun niet-religieuze tegenhangers. Dit komt doordat de meer liberale en progressieve christenen in de eerstgenoemde categorie New Age spiritualiteit ook omarmen terwijl hun meer conservatieve en traditioneel christelijke tegenhangers in deze eerstgenoemde categorie het eerder afwijzen. Dus zowel binnen als buiten christelijke religie zijn spirituele zelfidentificaties behoorlijk betrouwbare snelkoppelingen geworden om sympathie met New Age spiritualiteit te kunnen identificeren.

Het vierde en tevens laatste sleutelprobleem betreft de verwaarlozing van sleutelkwesties binnen de sociaalwetenschappelijke studie van spiritualiteit zelf zoals de beruchte en hardnekkige 'New Age gender puzzel', i.e., de terugkerende – maar nog niet naar tevredenheid uitgelegde – observatie dat veel meer vrouwen dan mannen interesse hebben in New Age spiritualiteit. Hoofdstuk 5 adresseert deze puzzel door het voor de eerste keer systematisch testen van een theorie die bijna twee decennia geleden is voorgesteld door Heelas en Woodhead (2005). Met hun *subjectiveringsthese* introduceerde zij contrasterende en vermeend geslachtsgebonden ideeën over autonome zelfheid, te weten *geïndividualiseerd*- en *relationeel subjectivisme.* Zij betogen dat het typischer is voor mannen om de eerstgenoemde variant te onderschrijven die er niet in slaagt om spirituele verlangens aan te sporen terwijl het natuurlijker is voor vrouwen om de laatstgenoemde variant te omarmen die dat wel doet. Hoofdstuk 5 laat zien dat vrouwen inderdaad meer affiniteit met New Age spiritualiteit hebben dan mannen *omdat* zij relationeel subjectivisme gemiddeld genomen in ruimere mate omarmen. Daarbij ondersteunt het de theorie en draagt het bij aan de oplossing van de puzzel.

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Introduction: Neglected Issues in the Social-Scientific Study of Spirituality

Paul Tromp

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A Smaller Pie with a Different Taste: The Evolution of the Western-European Religious Landscape (European Values Study, 1981-2017)

Paul Tromp, Anna Pless, and Dick Houtman

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'Believing Without Belonging' in Twenty European Countries (1981-2008) De-institutionalization of Christianity or Spiritualization of Religion?

Paul Tromp, Anna Pless, and Dick Houtman

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Do 'Spiritual' Self-Identifications Signify Affinity With New Age Religion? Survey Evidence from the Netherlands

Paul Tromp, Anna Pless, and Dick Houtman

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The Subjectivization Thesis and the New Age Gender Puzzle

Paul Tromp, Galen Watts and Dick Houtman

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