Is Religious Attendance Bottoming Out? An Examination of Current Trends Across Europe

NOTE: This online version includes data from ESS 2014 and ESS 2016

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The purpose of this research note is to summarize the available data on trends in religious attendance across 24 European countries to determine whether a base level has been reached in some countries. We focus on the changes observed in the period 1990–2014. After critically assessing the data quality of the recent European Social Survey (ESS) and European Values Study (EVS), we present four different methods of assessing current trends. First, we assess intercohort differentials, an indicator previously used extensively. We then look at trends in young people's rates of attendance, followed by trends of the postwar cohorts born in 1950–1981. We proceed to an appraisal of individual life-course variations by looking at attendance as a child and young adult. A compilation of these indicators shows that they often do not fully agree on whether there is growth, decline, or stability. To generalize, the high-attending Catholic countries are more likely to exhibit religious decline, whilst a few ex-communist countries are seeing sustained growth. The most secular countries seem to be generally stabilizing in the 5–20 percent range for attendance rates of the postwar generations.

Keywords: *religious trends, religious attendance, European countries, young people's religiosity, European Social Survey, European Values Study.*

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to study, for each European country where comparable data are available, the current trajectory of religious attendance of post-war generations, and in particular to determine whether there are signs of a bottoming out and, if so, what this base level might be.

What causes decline in population-level attendance rates? Two mechanisms, which may work separately or together, are possible. First, the attendance rate of each generation (cohort) may stay the same over time, but successive cohorts have lower attendance rates. This is proposed by Voas and Crockett (2005) as the primary driver of secularization – but it is quite slow. Secondly, there may be a decline over time affecting all (or many) cohorts: change can happen quickly if such period effects are strong.

Although similar studies have been done using the same data sources–specifically Voas and Doebler (2012) and Kaufmann, Goujon and Skirbekk (2011)–there are several unique features in this report. As new data waves become available, it is important that they are incorporated into our existing body of knowledge. The latest data in this study come from the European Social Survey of 2014, i.e. at least six years more recent than the studies cited above. Secondly, we examine the trends for each of 24 countries separately, unlike the two studies cited above, which both combine regional groupings of countries. This can lead to different conclusions, as we will discover: not all countries in a region (or with the same primary religious denomination) are following the same trajectories. Thirdly, we compare four different methods of assessing whether growth or decline is taking place, as follows: intercohort differentials (the most commonly used indicator to date); period trends in young people's attendance (a measure not used previously); period trends of the 1950-1981 cohort band (within-cohort trends have been examined in the two studies cited above); and adult versus child attendance (previously examined by Iannaccone, 2002). Before examining the trends we also considered it important to assess the reliability and comparability of the data sources. Finally we return to the central question of whether or not there seems to be a base level of religious observance, which countries might have reached it, and what happens subsequently.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Many papers have been written about temporal and cross-national variations in religiosity. Almost all try to explain the differences using a selection of explanatory variables. Several seminal works on the topic focus either on a very limited number of countries (e.g. Bruce, 2002) or they fail to look at trends over time, concentrating only on a snapshot of different countries at one point in time (e.g. Barro and McCleary, 2003; Ruiter and van Tubergen, 2009).

To give an overview of the studies which have compared countries and their trends over time, a summary table has been compiled (Table 1). This includes only papers that have been published since 2000; only those that include a significantly broad selection of countries across Europe; and only those that describe trends over time, rather than simply making cross-national comparisons at a single point in time.

What is, perhaps, surprising is the variety of different indicators used to measure the same phenomenon–growth or decline in religiosity. The studies cited cover attendance at religious services, self-assessed religiosity, religious affiliation and belief in God. More measures could be included if other questions included in various social surveys were analysed, e.g. prayer, specific religious or spiritual beliefs, etc. Some academics, faced with the range of possible attributes to investigate, choose to use a composite indicator of several measures, as they feel that although each individual measure may be imperfect, together they capture an individual's "religiosity" (e.g. Voas, 2009; Voas and Doebler, 2011).

Yet more surprising is that even a single measure, such as attendance at religious services, can be analysed in different ways. Monthly attendance is generally considered as the cut-off between regular and occasional attendance (e.g. Norris and Inglehart, 2004), but other studies consider weekly attendance (Kaufmann, Goujon and Skirbekk, 2011), while Aarts et al (2010) look at trends in annual attendance. Depending on exactly where the line is drawn between attender and non-attender, the direction of the trends is not necessarily the same.

From this brief overview of the literature, it would appear that considerably more effort has been put into trying to explain the trends than in critically assessing what the trends actually are and whether the data are reliable and consistent. The aim of this research note is to address that imbalance. We also attempt to separate out cohort and period effects. The likely influence of age is discussed in relation to each of these, without attempting a rigorous analysis of age effects, which may, in any case, evolve over time and differ between countries.

DATA SOURCES

Data from several multi-country cross-sectional social surveys are used in our study. The first data set is from the European Values Study (EVS), and we use the waves of 1990, 1999 and 2008-2009. Data from the World Values Survey (WVS) of the 1995-1999 wave plus Italy and Romania in 2006 are also included. The WVS developed out of the EVS and is similar in scope and focus. Data from the European Social Survey (ESS) is our second major source. The ESS started in 2002 and there have been subsequent waves at two-yearly intervals since then, with the most recent data available for this analysis being from 2014. A similar question on frequency of religious attendance was posed in each of these surveys (see

Table 1: Selected recent papers on inter-country comparisons of religious trends

	Survey data	No. of countries	Attendance	Self-reported religiosity	Religious affiliation	Belief in God	Time trends	Intercohort comparisons	Individual change
Iannaccone (2002)	ISSP 1991, 1998	32	x (as a child and parents')				x		
Greeley (2002)	ISSP 1991, 1998	8				x	x		x
Pollack (2003)	ISSP, PCE	11			x	x			x
Norris & Inglehart (2004)	WVS 1981-2001; Eurobarometer 1970-1999; Gallup	Various	x	x			x	x	
Froese (2004)	World Christian Encyclopedia 1970, 1995	15			x		x		
Voas (2009)	ESS 2002	22	x (combined religiosity indiator)	x	x	x		x	
Tomka (2010)	WVS 1990, 1996, 1999; ISSP 1998	14		x		x	x		x
Aarts et al (2010)	WVS 1981-2006	26	x				x		
Kaufmann, Goujon & Skirbekk (2011)	WVS 1981-2008; ESS	10	x	x			x	x	
Voas & Doebler (2011)	EVS 1990, 1999, 2008	(combined into 6 regions)	x (combined religiosity indiator)	x				x	

Note: PCE = Political Culture in Central and Eastern Europe

Appendix 1). For this report attendance at least monthly is considered as defining a regular "attender". It must be taken into account that participation in any religion (as defined by the respondent) is considered. In the majority of the countries covered in this study, the percentage of those who regularly attend religious services but who are not Christian is less than 5 percent. However, the non-Christian (especially Muslim) proportion can be significantly higher amongst young people, especially in countries which have high levels of immigration.

In the EVS of 2008 respondents were also asked about their attendance frequency when they were 12 years old. This was then compared with their current frequency of religious attendance.

Only those countries which had five or more data points were included in our analysis, with at least one data point before 2000. It was not essential for country data to be available for every possible survey wave as this was seen as an excessive constraint (unlike Kaufmann, Goujon and Skirbekk, 2011). An important concern is whether there has been declining representiveness of sample surveys, especially of young people. Response rates for sample surveys have been declining in many countries over the past decades. Accessing young people who have no landline telephone are who are often not at home is notoriously difficult. Those who are reached tend to lead more traditional, family-oriented lives. We have to trust the weighting procedure offered by each survey, and we applied the weights for individuals, as supplied.

This study looks only at the proportion of respondents who attend at least monthly. It would be interesting to see if the trends in the proportion who "never" attend mirrors these trends–or not. There could be divergence in religious behaviour, with an increase in both the religiously active and completely secular segments of society–or convergence towards occasional religious attendance. These are interesting questions that await further investigation. A significant barrier to tackling the question is that the EVS and ESS categories of "rare" attenders match less well than for regular attenders (see Appendix 1).

DATA VALIDATION

To assess the coherence of the data on young people's attendance rates, we compared the following sets of values for each country (see Table 2), trying to assess both accuracy and bias:

1. ESS 2008 with the average of ESS 2006 and ESS 2010 (20 countries)
2. EVS 2008 with the average of ESS 2006 and ESS 2010 (18 countries)
3. EVS 2008 with ESS 2008 (18 countries)
4. EVS 2009 with the average of ESS 2008 and ESS 2010 (4 countries – those with their recent EVS survey held in 2009).

In this way all 24 countries except Italy were assessed.

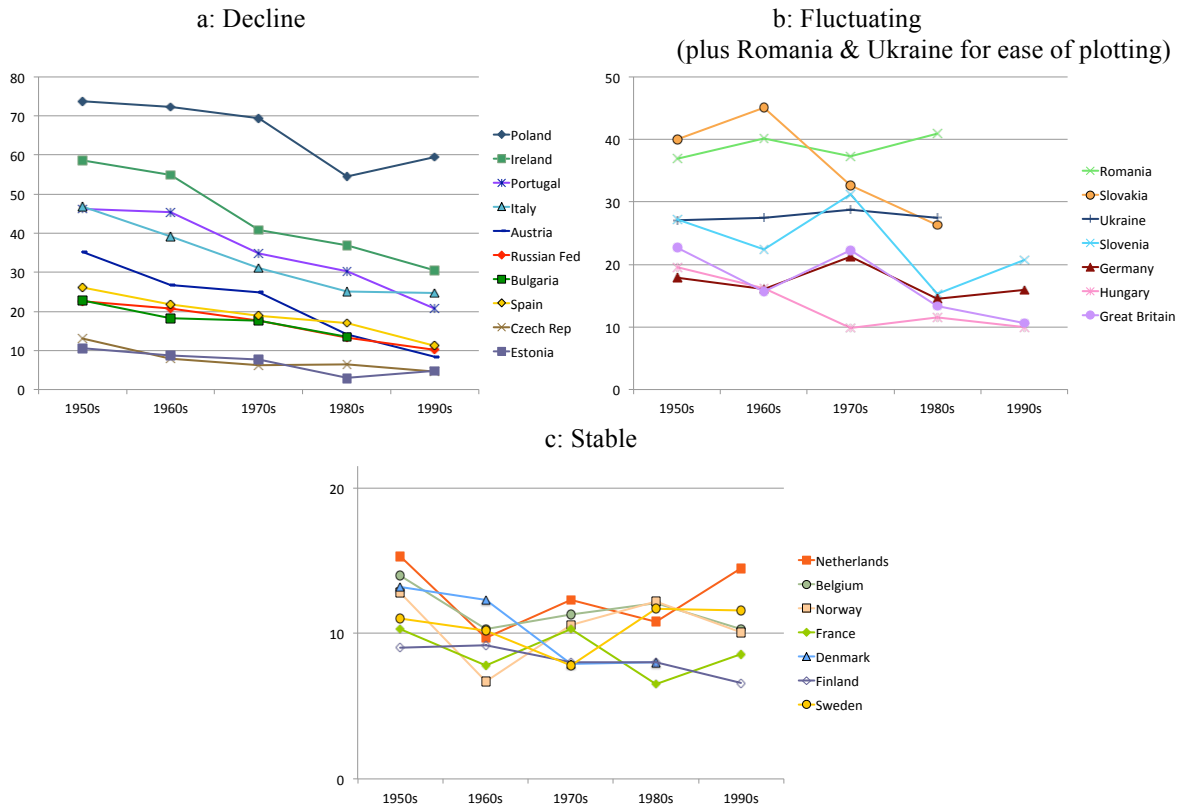
For the ESS 2008, the mean sample size for the young age group (18-29) is just over 400, with Denmark having the smallest (243) and Russia the largest (623). The sample size has been fairly consistent across all ESS waves. For the EVS 2008/2009, the mean sample size of young people is slightly smaller than for the ESS at 299, with a range of 182 (Finland) to 391 (Portugal). The confidence limits for the relevant sample sizes are around 5 percent: therefore anomalies greater than this were examined and the suspect values are highlighted in Table 2. These five suspect cases were not included in our analyses. However, in all other cases it was decided to use the ESS values for 2008 (rather than an average of the ESS and EVS for 2008), as we think this provides more overall consistency for comparative purposes; however, data for countries with EVS surveys in 2009 were included.

Table 2: Comparison of youth attendance rates from ESS2006, ESS2008, ESS2010, EVS2008 and EVS2009

	ESS2006	ESS2008	ESS2010	Mean (ESS2006, ESS2010)	ESS2008 minus (Mean ESS2006, ESS2010)	EVS2008	EVS2009	EVS2008 minus (Mean ESS2006, ESS2010)	EVS2008 minus ESS2008	EVS2009 minus (Mean ESS2008, ESS2010)
Austria	18.1			18.1		15.0		-3.1		
Belgium	7.7	10.0	9.0	8.4	1.7		7.1			-2.4
Bulgaria	9.2	12.5	10.6	9.9	2.6	14.5		4.6	2.0	
Czech Rep		10.0	5.5	5.5		8.5		3.0	-1.5	
Germany	13.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	-2.2	10.1		-2.6	-0.4	
Denmark	7.1	6.2	8.6	7.9	-1.7	5.4		-2.5	-0.8	
Estonia	4.7	4.8	6.2	5.5	-0.7	4.0		-1.5	-0.8	
Spain	10.5	11.9	11.3	10.9	1.0	13.4		2.5	1.5	
Finland	12.4	8.6	12.6	12.5	-3.9		9.5			-1.1
France	8.8	6.8	9.7	9.3	-2.5	6.1		-3.2	-0.7	
Great Britain	11.7	14.0	16.2	14.0	0.1		16.1			1.0
Hungary	12.6	10.6	12.6	12.6	-2.0	10.0		-2.6	-0.6	
Ireland	38.9	42.6	39.1	39.0	3.6	35.1		-3.9	-7.5	
Netherlands	17.5	14.2	16.0	16.8	-2.6	24.6		7.9	10.4	
Norway	11.0	7.4	11.5	11.3	-3.9	8.9		-2.4	1.5	
Poland	70.0	66.0	64.5	67.3	-1.3	61.8		-5.5	-4.2	
Portugal	29.7	29.5	29.7	29.7	-0.2	29.7		0.0	0.2	
Romania		39.2				38.6			-0.6	
Russian Fed	8.7	13.4	11.2	10.0	3.5	13.8		3.9	0.4	
Sweden	6.6	7.7	8.4	7.5	0.2		4.7			-3.4
Slovenia	21.7	18.3	15.6	18.7	-0.3	13.0		-5.7	-5.3	
Slovakia	35.1	31.8	37.5	36.3	-4.5	38.7		2.4	6.9	
Ukraine	33.8	23.8	18.1	26.0	-2.2	24.4		-1.6	0.6	

Notes: Italy not in ESS 2006, 2008, 2010
Two ESS cases and three suspect EVS cases are suspect: these are highlighted.
Ignoring suspect and ambiguous cases, EVS is smaller than ESS in 12 cases and higher in five cases

Figure 1
Intercohort comparison of religious attendance rates (%) *Note different Y-axis scales*



Note: Source: ESS 2016, except Romania (2008), Slovakia, Ukraine and Bulgaria (ESS 2012) and Denmark (ESS 2014)

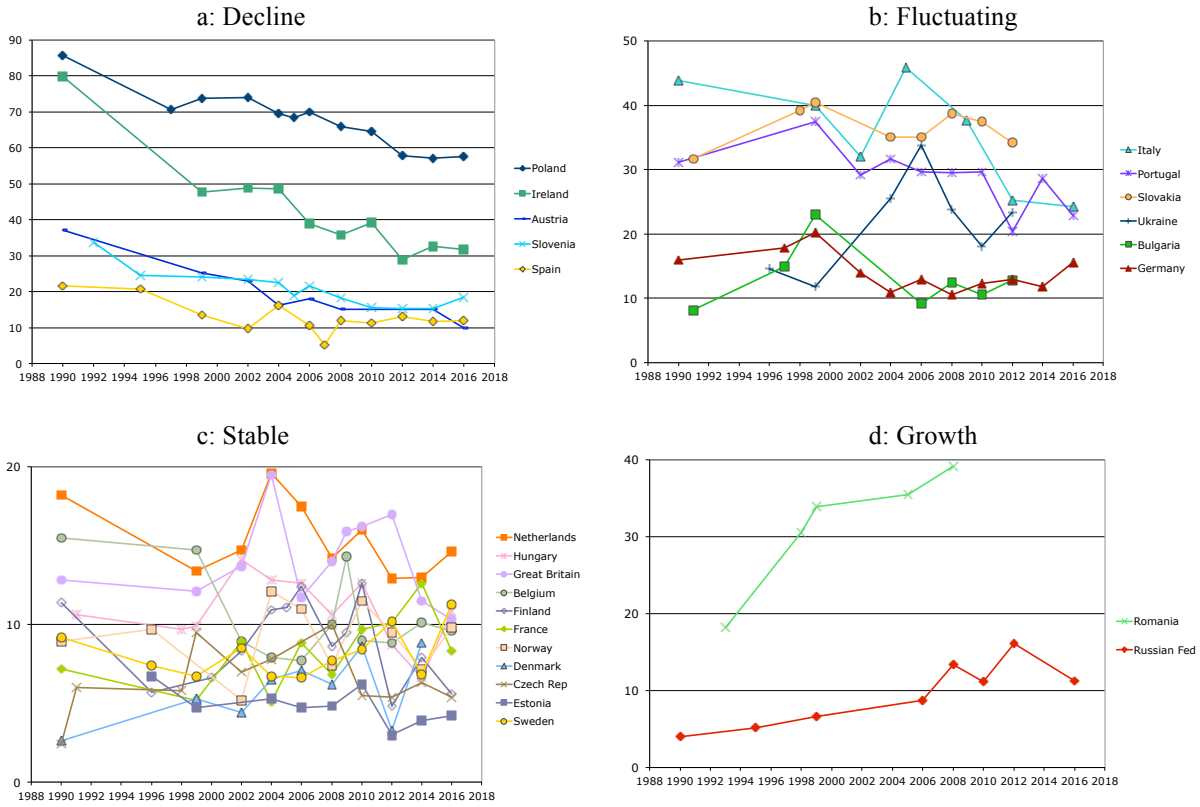
It would appear that the EVS may give a slight bias to giving a lower value for attendance rates than the ESS. Ignoring the suspect and ambiguous cases, the EVS gives a lower value for twelve countries in 2008/2009 and a higher value in five. This possibility–influenced by the category choices–is discussed in Appendix 1. However, it should be said that overall the results of this validation exercise are encouraging and give confidence in both the ESS and EVS data.

It is possible that the surveys of the 1990s were less reliable as survey methods may have been less well-defined or rigorous, but higher response rates in those days may have improved their accuracy. What we seek to find from our analyses are consistent trends over time and across surveys; individual data points may be suspect, but what we are trying to determine are broad trends.

INTERCOHORT DIFFERENTIALS

Previous work by Voas (2009) and Voas and Doebler (2011) amongst others has pointed to the decline in religious attendance of each successive cohort across Europe. We assess the data for 24 countries to investigate whether we find the same pattern. We used the most recent cohort attendance rates available, mostly from the ESS 2016. What we found was that, for almost all countries examined, people born after the Second World War (the 1950s cohort) had a lower attendance rate than those born before the war (the 1930s cohort). The only exceptions were Italy, Bulgaria and Russia, where the difference is not significant.

Figure 2
Trends in proportion of young people aged 18–29 attending religious services at least monthly (%)

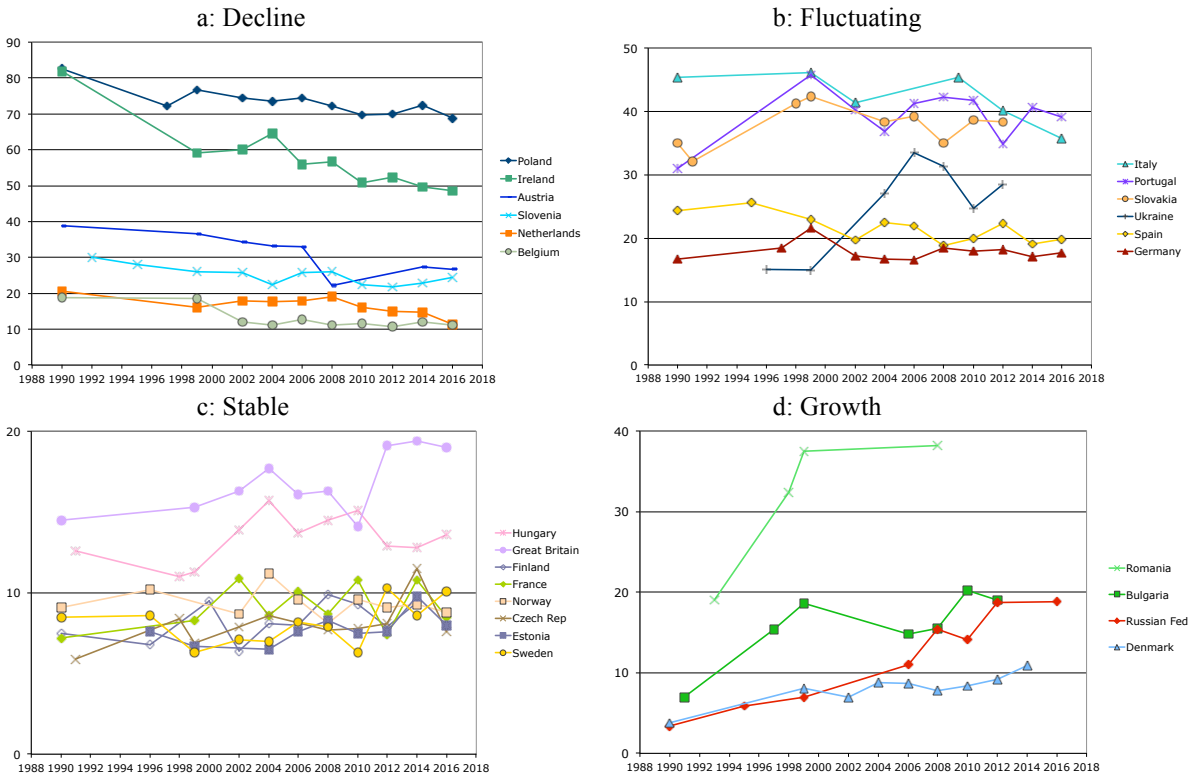


Note: Data: EVS and WVS for pre-2002 data points; mostly ESS for post-2002 data points; WVS for data in 2005 and EVS in 2009 where available. Values for Portugal EVS 1999 are suspect and so not plotted, in addition to those marked as suspect in Table 2. *Note different Y-axis scales*.

We suspect that the higher level of religious participation of those who were affected by the war is a relic of the instability of those times (this would echo the insecurity hypothesis of Norris and Inglehart, 2004). The subsequent decline could be an effect of the secularization era of the 1960s, with those who went through this period as young adults (i.e. if they were born immediately post-war) being more likely to reject their elders' religious behaviour than those who were older at the time.

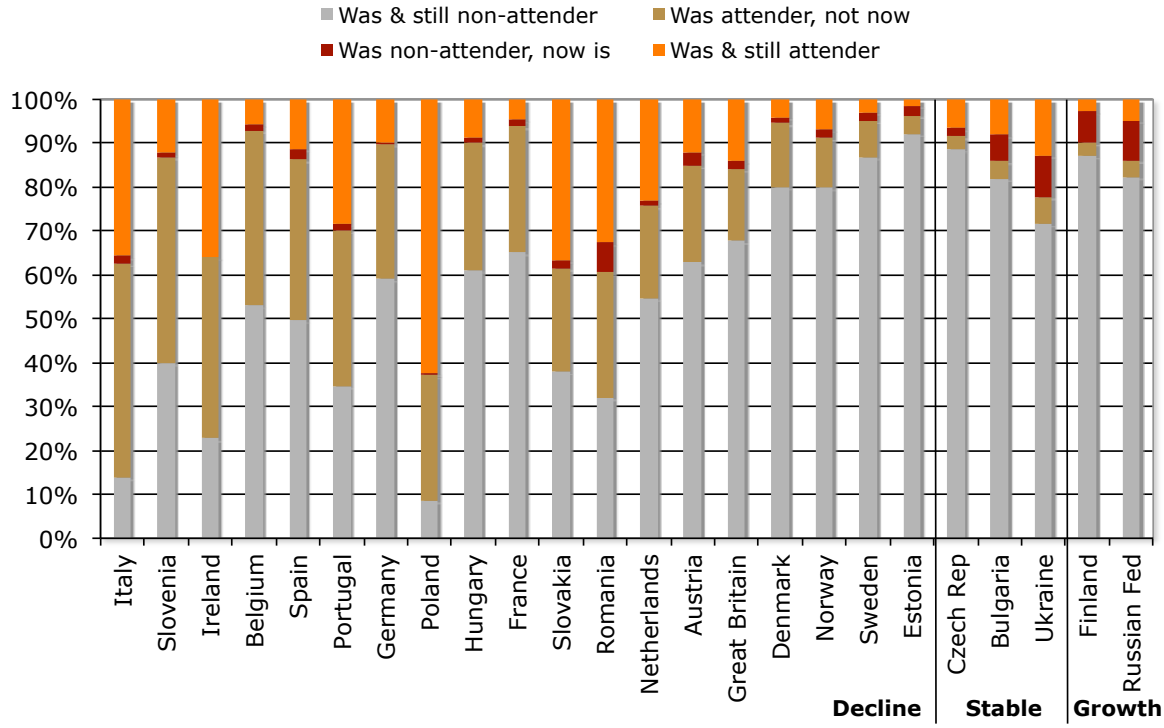
When we look at the intercohort differentials of those born in the 1950s and later (Figure 1), we find declines in ten countries; fluctuating levels in five countries; and relative stability in nine others, where the intercohort range of variability was less than 5 percent. Of the 1990s cohort band sampled by the ESS in 2016, 15 out of 19 countries had attendance rates in the 6-20 percent range; Poland and Ireland still had the highest attendance rates; the Czech Republic and Estonia had the lowest rates at less than 5 percent. The following countries had decline between each successive decade cohort band from the 1950s to the 1990s: Ireland, Portugal, Italy, Austria, Spain, Russia and Bulgaria.

Figure 3
Trends in cohorts 1950–1981 and aged <60 attending religious services at least monthly (%)



Note: Same data sources as Figure 2. *Note different Y-axis scales*.

Figure 4
Proportion of young people attending religious services in 2008/9 versus when they were 12



Note: Source: EVS 2008/2009

If we compare our figures with Figure 4 of Voas and Doebler (2011), which also plots intercohort differentials of attendance rates, then we see a similar but not quite the same pattern. For the comparable regions (Northern, Western, Central and Eastern Europe) then they demonstrate intercohort decline–not always significant for the post-1950s cohorts, but ongoing. Why is this not seen in our analysis? We consider that the most likely explanation is that bundling countries together, as Voas and Doebler do, may mask the different trajectories of individual countries. If the stable countries are combined with declining countries, then the average trend will be one of decline.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S ATTENDANCE RATES

For this study we concentrate on the trends of young people in particular, as they can be seen as the bellwether of change. They are less tied to ingrained habits and beliefs; they are often more educated than their forebears; they are often highly mobile; they are marrying later and less, and entering parenthood significantly later than previous generations. However, at the same time they have many uncertainties in life, especially because of high unemployment rates; they are also more socially interconnected through social media, even when their friends are dispersed geographically. A significant and, in some countries, an increasing proportion of young adults were not born in the country where they are now living, and immigrants, both Christian and of other faiths, are commonly more religiously active than the local population. Countries with the highest proportion of foreign-born young adults are: Ireland (where there was an increase from 3 to 26 percent between 2004 and 2008 before dropping again to 17 percent in 2014 then 20 percent in 2016); Great Britain (over 16 percent but declining); and Austria, Germany, Spain and Sweden (over 12 percent and increasing slightly). The probability of attendance rates being influenced by the behaviour of these new arrivals is potentially significant in these countries.

Changes in the behaviour of young people are a valuable indicator of changing "fashions". As discussed by Chaves (1991), there is commonly a trough in religious observance, at least in western Europe, as people pass through their 20s. Therefore, if we look at the trends in the attendance rate of young people (aged 18–29 at the time of survey), we have the possibility of observing what we would term "emergent" behaviour and a baseline level of religious involvement. As young people are entering parenthood later, then their "non-settled" period of life is becoming longer, which may be expected to cause a deeper or longer "trough" in religious observation. As an initial hypothesis, therefore, we expect declining youth attendance rates since 1990. Because of sampling problems of this age group, we could also expect statistical "noise". Taking into account the sample sizes, we consider trends to be significant only if there are changes (declines, fluctuations or increases) of over 8 percent.

The graphs in Figure 2 plot the full data set of attendance rates of young people over time. The four categories of "decline", "fluctuating", "stable" and "increase" are descriptors of the trends over the full period 1990–2016. The countries which have seen the most marked declines in youth attendance in recent years are the predominantly Catholic countries, but not all Catholic countries have been affected to the same extent, e.g. Italy and Portugal. Two countries which have seen significant growth are ex-communist states (Romania and Russia)–but not all ex-communist states have experienced a religious revival amongst young people. Many western European countries have seen relative stability in youth attendance levels since 1990. It is impossible to tell whether the apparently fluctuating levels in attendance in some countries (e.g. Italy, Ukraine and Bulgaria) reflect true variations, or are simply statistical or sampling "noise". Looking only at the group of countries in the 'stable' group (Figure 2c) we find that the average of these countries (using only ESS data) is in the

rather narrow range of 8-11 percent over the period 2002-2016. Since 2000 the following countries have joined this 'stable' group: Austria, Slovenia, Spain, Bulgaria and Germany.

So have declining attendance rates amongst young adults been the norm since 1990? In 5 countries there has been significant decline (although three of these are now at a stable low level), but in 2 countries there has been significant growth. In the majority of countries the changes have not been statistically significant.

WITHIN-COHORT ATTENDANCE TRENDS

Previous studies have found that the religiosity of cohorts tends to be stable through adult life, at least after they have passed through the early adult "dip" (e.g. Chaves, 1991; Voas and Doebler, 2011). Although individuals may come and go, the average level of attendance of a cohort band tends to stay stable over time. We investigate this generalization with the survey data available (Figure 3). If trends are seen, we consider these to signify important period effects.

In examining within-cohort trends, our aim was to try and filter out as much as possible any age effects–either the early-adult trough or an older age rise in religiosity. Knowing the large differences in religious observance between those born in the 1940s compared to the 1950s (see earlier section), we also decided to discount those born pre-1950. We first investigated whether different cohorts had followed different trajectories and so we looked at a number of different bands (1950–1965; 1961–1972; 1970–1981). From this initial investigation we found no significant differences in the trends for these three bands. Therefore, for our final analysis, we used a wider band, all those born 1950–1981, but we discounted individuals aged less than 18 or over 59 at any survey. Obviously this cohort band became older during the span of the surveys: from 18–40 in 1990 to 35–59 in 2016.

We would expect the majority of countries to exhibit very little change of attendance rates within this cohort band over the past 26 years. As the cohort has aged over the period, there may be a slight rise simply due to age effects: the whole cohort was past early adulthood by 2016. Because of a higher proportion of the sample being in the potential early adult "trough" in 1990, then we might expect a jump between 1990 and 1999 in particular. Comparing the graphs with those of young attendance (Figure 2), we would expect them to be slightly higher; we would also expect less statistical noise with having larger sample sizes; these expectations were borne out.

What we see from the summary graphs in Figure 3 is that, as expected, within-cohort attendance rates have been essentially stable in many countries across Europe over the past decade. However, in some countries there has been a significant decline of attendance, while in others there has been growth. As with trends in youth attendance, the initially high-attendance Catholic countries have tended to see the greatest losses (Ireland having the most), whilst some ex-communist countries have experienced significant growth (Romania, Bulgaria and Russia).

Voas and Doebler (2011: Figure 14), using EVS data, noted a within-cohort increase in religiosity (as defined by a composite measure) in the northern European countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden that they found puzzling. We did not see any significant change in attendance levels affecting all the northern European countries, as although there has been a significant rise in Denmark, especially in the 1990-1999 period, other movements have been very small. The rise in Christian adherence in Denmark for the post-1937 cohorts has recently been independently confirmed by longitudinal data (Andersen, Gundelach and Lüchau, 2013). In 2016 the lowest attendance rates for this cohort band were 7.6 in the Czech Republic, 8.0 in Estonia, 8.5 in France and 8.8 in Norway. Back in 1990 the

minimum rates for this cohort were 3.4 percent in Russia and 3.8 percent in Denmark; in Russia the rate is now 18.8 and in Denmark (2014) it is 10.9.

Comparing our hypotheses to the results, we see that in the majority of countries the changes in attendance rates of this cohort over the past two decades are minor; evidence of the "age effect" is slight, i.e. young people becoming more religious as they move into middle age. Even in the 1990–1999 time period, when age effects could have been expected to be most strong, just as many countries saw sudden drops as significant increases.

What is apparent is that although within-cohort stability is the norm, this is not the case everywhere: some countries are experiencing significant decline (Ireland in particular) while others are seeing growth (Romania, Bulgaria, Russia and, to a smaller extent, Denmark). Since 2000 the rates have been stabilising and in the latest survey wave of 2016 all except Poland, Ireland, Portugal and Italy are in the 7–27 percent band.

CHANGE IN ATTENDANCE FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

In the EVS wave of 2008, respondents were asked not only about their current religious attendance rate, but also their rate at around 12 years of age. We could, therefore, see net gains and losses at an individual level, and again we focused on young people up to the age of thirty, to try and elucidate "emergent" trends. Figure 4 shows a summary of the results. The countries are ordered by net change in child to adult attendance rates, from greatest losses to (modest) gains. Changes of ± 3 percent defined the cut-off between growth, stability and decline.

This indicator shows that there are very different patterns of religious attendance over the life course between different countries. In some countries attendance as a pre-teen is still clearly the "norm" (primarily the Catholic countries of Italy, Slovenia, Ireland, Portugal and Poland). After childhood there is commonly a considerable falling off in attendance in these countries. In other countries attendance as a child is not the norm, and people are more likely to become religiously active in adult life; this tends to be the case in some (but by no means all) ex-communist countries, and also, perhaps surprisingly, in Finland.

Does this comparison of individual's recollections of their attendance as a child with their current frequency of attendance give a fair assessment of whether growth or decline is occurring in a country? It is likely that respondents reported their maximum-ever attendance rate which they had at some point in their childhood (in countries where religious attendance is looked on favourably), whereas their response about their current attendance rate may give a better point estimate for the present time. We could therefore expect a mismatch and commonly a decline. The countries where an apparent decline is not seen are particularly interesting, showing that different dynamics are operating there.

Further analysis of the differences in child attendance across the generations is described in Appendix 2.

COMPILATION OF TRENDS

The aim of this study was to critically examine the indicators used to define growth or decline of religiosity at the country level and assess whether there has been a bottoming out in religious attendance. We used four different indicators and the results of these are summarized in Table 3. The countries are ordered by attendance rates, from high to low.

What is clear is that for most countries the different indicators give somewhat different conclusions as to whether there has been growth, decline or stability in religiosity. For only a few countries are the conclusions unequivocal. By all measures, in Poland, Ireland and Austria there is significant ongoing decline. The Czech Republic shows stability across

all indicators. However, for all 20 other countries analysed, the results are to a greater or lesser extent ambivalent. The explanation in some cases may be problematic interpretations in trends (and so categorized as "fluctuating"), while for others differentiating between stability and decline/growth is a question of where to draw the line (the thresholds in the various analyses are stated). However, in three cases (Romania, Bulgaria and Denmark) there are more marked disjunctures, with some indicators suggesting growth and others decline. If we consider that each measure is reliable in itself, this is likely to indicate that forces of revival or secularization have affected different segments of society (e.g. age groups or cohorts) at different times or to a different extent.

The child-adult attendance indicator tends to give a different–more negative–perspective on the trends than the other indicators (for reasons discussed in the previous section). We feel that the two central indicators of youth and post-war cohort trends give a better and more coherent assessment of the current trajectory than intercohort differentials. Looking only at these two indicators, we would generally give a more positive assessment of the direction of church attendance than, say, Voas (2009).

Table 3: Summary of different indicators of religious trends

	1950s-1980s Intercohort Differentials	Trends in Youth Attendance	Trends in Postwar Cohort Attendance	Child-Adult Attendance
Poland	Decline	Decline	Decline	Decline
Ireland	Decline	Decline	Decline	Decline
Italy	Decline	Fluctuating	Fluctuating	Decline
Romania	Stable	**Growth**	**Growth**	Decline
Portugal	Decline	Fluctuating	Fluctuating	Decline
Slovakia	Fluctuating	Fluctuating	Fluctuating	Decline
Ukraine	Stable	Fluctuating	Fluctuating	Stable
Austria	Decline	Decline	Decline	Decline
Slovenia	Fluctuating	Decline	Decline	Decline
Spain	Decline	Decline	Fluctuating	Decline
Bulgaria	Decline	Fluctuating	**Growth**	Stable
Germany	Fluctuating	Fluctuating	Fluctuating	Decline
Netherlands	Stable	Stable	Decline	Decline
Hungary	Fluctuating	Stable	Stable	Decline
Great Britain	Fluctuating	Stable	Stable	Decline
Russia	Decline	**Growth**	**Growth**	**Growth**
Belgium	Stable	Stable	Decline	Decline
Finland	Stable	Stable	Stable	**Growth**
France	Stable	Stable	Stable	Decline
Norway	Stable	Stable	Stable	Decline
Denmark	Stable	Stable	**Growth**	Decline
Czech Rep	Decline	Stable	Stable	Stable
Estonia	Decline	Stable	Stable	Decline
Sweden	Stable	Stable	Stable	Decline

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of the paper was to clarify the current trends of religious attendance across Europe by looking at the successive survey waves from 1990 to 2014. In particular the purpose was to see whether a "bottoming out" is occurring. The previous section and Table 3 summarize what we discovered about the situation for 24 countries, 14 in Western Europe and 10 ex-communist states. Some general conclusions can be drawn. We focus here on the youth and post-war cohort trends.

Decline is more common in the Catholic countries where attendance rates have traditionally been high, and which continue to be higher than average for Europe (Poland and Ireland in particular). However, not all Catholic countries with relatively high attendance rates are experiencing decline–Slovakia for example. Some ex-communist countries are experiencing sustained growth at present, such as Romania and Russia, but others have remained highly secular such as the Czech Republic and Estonia. If the survey results are accurate, then Ukraine saw a large religious revival from 1998-2006, followed by a marked fall. In Scandinavia, low attendance rates amongst the young and post-war generations were already the norm in 1990 (as low as 2.5 percent attendance rates for young adults in Denmark) and since then modest growth has generally occurred.

So is there evidence of a bottoming out of attendance rates–a stabilization at low levels? With some provisos we would say "yes". In 2014, the vast majority of the countries studied had youth attendance rates in the range 5–15 percent and, of those, none seem to be continuing on a sustained downward trajectory.

It seems likely that in many countries there could be a stabilization, with somewhat different levels for different groups of countries:

1. Most secular, with youth attendance rates less than 10 percent though rarely less than 5 percent: Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, France, Estonia, Czech Republic.
2. Slightly more religious countries, with youth attendance in the range 10-20 percent: Britain, Germany, Netherlands, Austria, Spain, Belgium, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Russia.

For the more highly religious countries, Poland and Ireland would seem likely to continue their downward trajectory, but for Italy, Portugal, Slovakia, Ukraine and Romania, the future direction is less certain. For how long will Romania follow its path of religious revival?

Kaufmann, Goujon and Skirbekk (2011), who looked at weekly attendance trends for 10 Western European countries using the EVS data, found that "levels of religiosity appear to be approaching a baseline of around 5 per cent church attendance". We find somewhat higher values for monthly and higher attendance, but we would generally agree with their conclusion. However, it will be interesting to see in the coming years whether countries remain at this low level or whether there is a rebound–something certainly evident in Russia, and to some extent in the Scandinavian countries. As Voas and Doebler (2012) commented, having found increased religiosity in Northern and Eastern Europe in recent years: "Young people acquire different values and face new conditions". Whether their current economic stresses and social interconnectedness lead to increased religious involvement, as would be hypothesized by Norris and Inglehart (2004), remains to be seen. The level of immigration and the religious composition of immigrants can also have a significant impact on attendance levels, as can be seen in Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Norway and Sweden, where currently a third or more of the young people who attend religious services are of a non-Christian faith.

Although the demise of religion has been forecast for the most secular countries (Abrams et al, 2011 and reported widely in the media, e.g. BBC website), this seems to us, from looking at the most recent data, unlikely to take place.

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Appendices are available in online version, but not printed copy

APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE WORDING

The wording of the religious attendance question and possible valid responses were as follows:

EVS and WVS: Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?

1. More than once a week
2. Once a week
3. Once a month
4. Only on special holy days/Christmas/Easter
5. Once a year
6. Less often
7. Never / practically never

ESS: Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?

1. Every day
2. More than once a week
3. Once a week
4. At least once a month
5. Only on special holy days
6. Less often
7. Never

Although these questions are almost identical, it should be noted that the EVS/WVS give three options for what we categorise as "regular" (i.e. monthly or more frequent) attenders, while the ESS gives four options. This could mean that the ESS "assumes" more frequent attendance than does the EVS/WVS, despite it being more recently instituted.

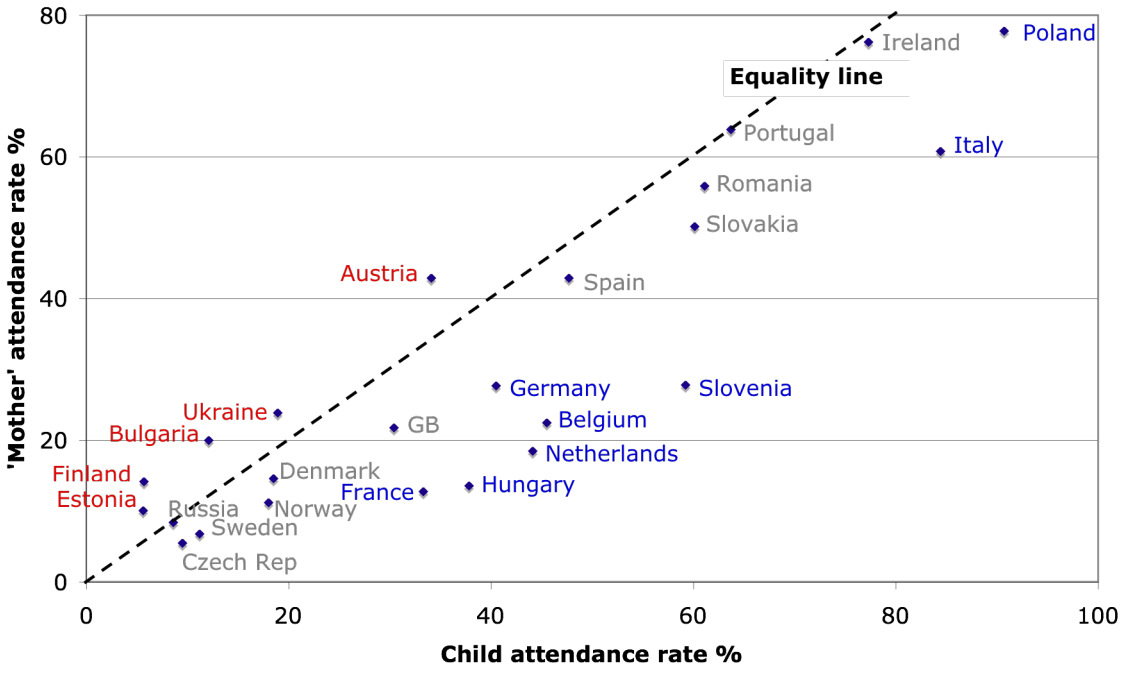
For rare attenders – who are the majority in many European countries – then differentiating between the categories and making comparisons between the EVS/WVS and the ESS is problematic. It was found that the "never" group of each did not give reliably consistent comparable results between the EVS/WVS and the ESS.

Differences in translation between the EVS/WVS and the ESS for particular countries may also mean that the results are not exactly comparable. However the coding into the different categories is well defined and remains fixed within each survey wave.

APPENDIX 2: RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE AS A CHILD; FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS

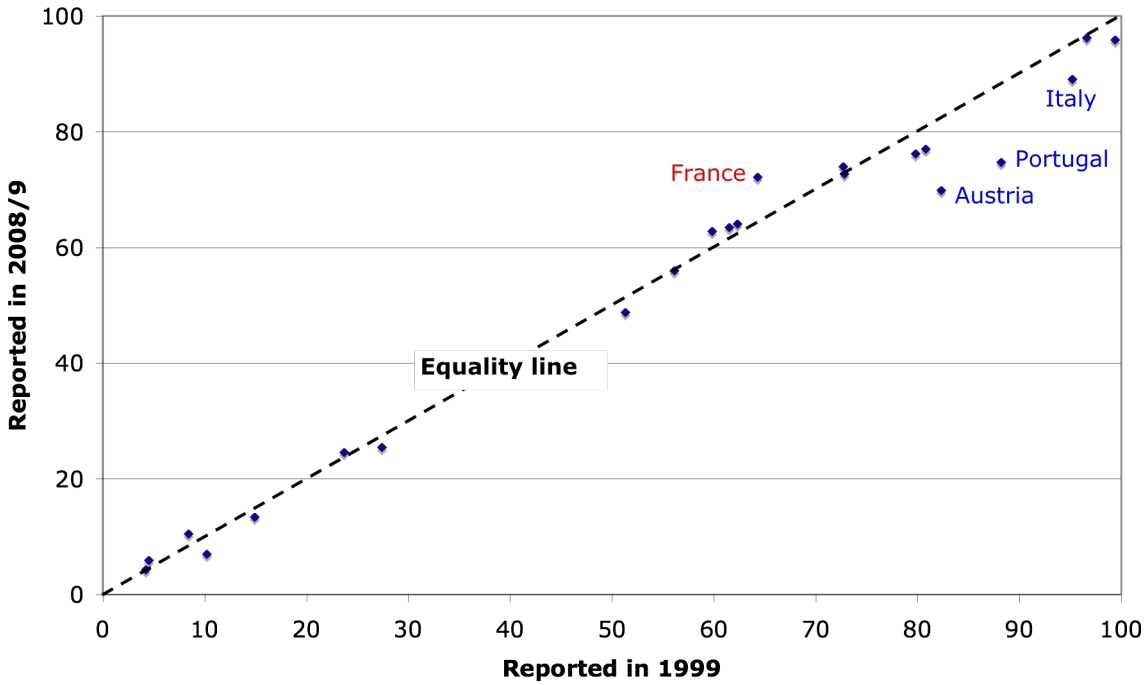
There are clearly significant cultural differences in the religious socialization of children, as parents of pre-teens may or may not seek to introduce their children to moral and/or religious teaching. We thought it likely that children aged about 12 attended religious services because at least one of their parents, often the mother, did, and we tested this hypothesis. Considering that the 18-29s in 2008 were born mostly in the 1980s and their parents would have generally been born in the 1948-1965 era (i.e. the Baby-Boom generation), we compared the age 12 attendance rate of the respondents who were young adults in 2008 with the attendance rate of Baby-Boomer women in the EVS 1999 wave (the survey closest in time to when the young adults were aged 12). Figure A1 summarizes the results. Of course, not all women are mothers and not all the women born in 1948-1965 would have had a child in the 18-29 age band in 2008; however, we thought the comparison might support or refute our hypothesis.

Figure A1
Comparison of "child" versus "mother" attendance rates in about 1999



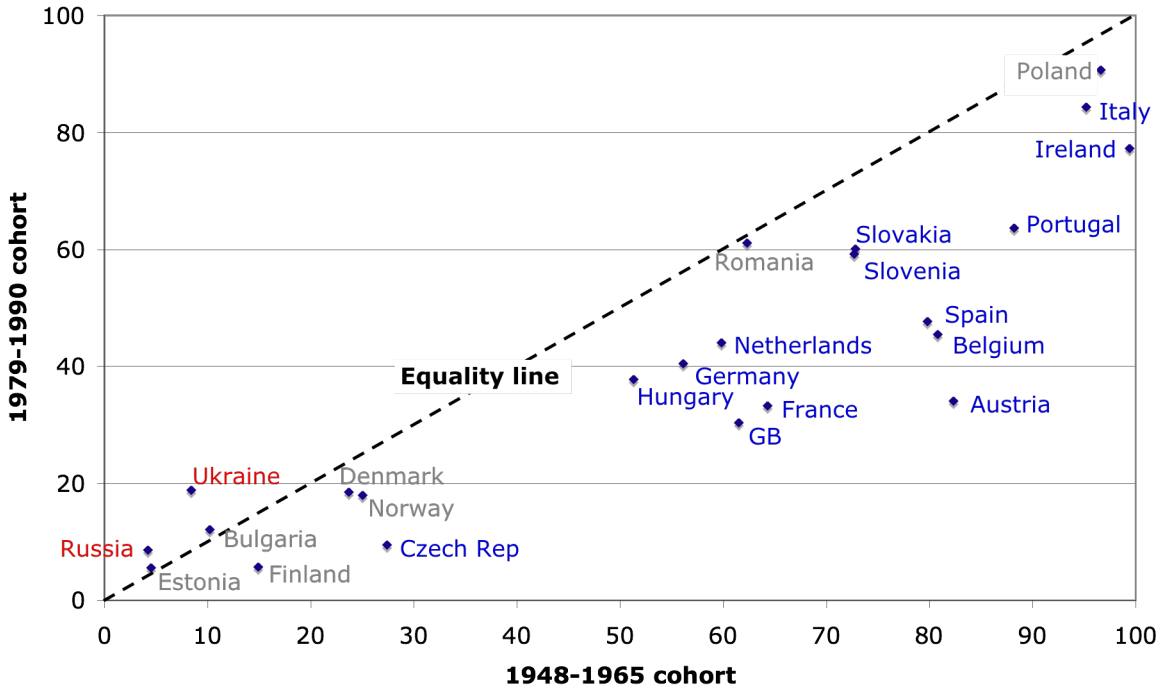
Notes: Child attendance rate = reported attendance rate at age 12 of young people aged 18–29 in the EVS wave of 2008/9. These respondents would have been aged 12 between 1991 and 2003.
"Mother" attendance rate = Attendance rate of ALL women born 1948–1965 in 1999 (EVS 1999). These respondents would have been aged 34–51 in 1999 and so if they had a 12 year old child in 1999, they would have been aged 22-39 at the birth of that child.

Figure A2
Attendance rate at aged 12 as reported in 1999 and 2008/9



Notes: Attendance rates are the reported attendance rates at age 12 for women born 1948-1965 in the EVS waves 1999 and 2008/9. Only those countries with a significant difference between the two are annotated.

Figure A3
Attendance rate at aged 12 for "mothers" and for young people



Notes: The data for the 1948-1965 cohort are only for women (EVS 1999). These are as plotted on the x-axis of Figure A2. The data for the 1979-1990 cohort are for all young people (EVS 2008/9). These are as plotted on the x-axis of Figure A1.

What we found was that the reported child attendance rates exceeded the "mother" attendance rates in the majority of cases. There are several possible explanations for this. One possibility is that many children had been "sent" to religious services without their parents (though possibly with grandparents or friends). Another possibility is that the young adults surveyed in 2008 did not accurately remember their religious attendance rate as pre-teens and tended to overstate it. It is also possible that the families (perhaps mothers in particular) of these pre-teens had a period of increased religious observance for a time (e.g. when the child/children were going through the "confirmation" process), but that it did not coincide with the 1999 survey wave. Another likelihood is that childless women (included in the EVS 1999 data) are likely to be less religious than family-oriented women (religious women generally have higher fertility: Frejka and Westoff, 2008).

The countries with the biggest mismatch between "mother" and child attendance rates–Slovenia, Netherlands, Hungary, Italy, Belgium and France–all show large declines in attendance rates from childhood to adulthood, and most of them have a significant Catholic population and so encourage children be "confirmed" (this is somewhat less common in Protestant countries). However, not all Catholic countries have a mismatch between "mother" and child attendance rates, e.g. Ireland, Spain and Portugal.

Some of the countries where "mother" attendance rates in 1999 are higher than child attendance rates (Bulgaria, Ukraine and Finland), as reported by young adults in 2008, tend to be the same countries where there is an increase in attendance rates from childhood to adulthood. It would appear that in these countries religious attendance is seen as an adult activity, not as part of the religious socialization of children.

Looking further at the child attendance rates of the "Baby Boomer" women, it is also interesting to compare the rates as reported in 1999 and 2008/2009. These values should

agree: however, they do not always do so, although most differences are within the confidence limits: see Figure A2. In the majority of countries there has been a decline between the two surveys, sometimes significant, as in the case of Portugal, Austria and Italy. Is this normal sampling error, a change in the sampled population, or a change in the perception of what was the "correct" answer to be given by the respondent? We have no evidence for favouring any of these explanations. As a counterexample, France has seen a significant increase between the two survey waves. A similar comparison was made by Iannaccone (2002) using International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) data and he discusses the potential mismatches at length.

As a third line of investigation, we compared young adults' attendance rates as children and the Baby Boomer women's attendance as children (Figure A3). As mothers tend to wish to bring up their children in a similar way to how they were brought up, then we might expect these values to be similar. However, the societal pressures of secularization seem to be more powerful: in the vast majority of countries there have been major declines. However, this is not the case for a few ex-communist states – Ukraine and Russia plus, at a less significant level, Bulgaria and Estonia – where child attendance rates apparently increased between the 1960s/1970s (when the Baby Boomers were about 12) and the 1990s (when today's young adults were the same age). This is unsurprising, as religious observance was often strongly discouraged in the communist era. However, it should be noted that the same does not hold true for the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and Poland.

Does this comparison of individual's recollections of their attendance as a child with their current frequency of attendance give a fair assessment of whether growth or decline is occurring in a country? It is likely that respondents reported their maximum-ever attendance rate which they had at some point in their childhood (in countries where religious attendance is looked on favourably), whereas their response about their current attendance rate may give a better point estimate for the present time. We could therefore expect a mismatch and commonly a decline. The countries where an apparent decline is not seen are particularly interesting, showing that different dynamics are operating there.

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