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# Religious polarization: contesting religion in secularized Western European countries

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## ABSTRACT

In light of recent claims about increasing religious polarization in secularized countries, we study the extent to which the non-religious contest religion in Western European countries and whether and how the Protestant and Catholic heritage of these countries plays a role in this. Analyzing data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP 1998 and 2008) data by means of multilevel analysis, we demonstrate that religious polarization is stronger in the most secularized countries and in countries with a Catholic religious heritage. Moreover, in secular countries, polarization stems from religious fervency, whereas in countries with a Catholic heritage, it stems from anti-religious fervency.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Anti-religiosity; non-religiosity; religious heritage; secularization; Western Europe

## Introduction

Whether secularization leads to cultural conflict between the religious and the non-religious in Western Europe has become a deeply contested question (Achterberg et al. 2009; Bagg and Voas 2010; Bruce 2002; Fox 2016; Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk 2012). Eric Kaufmann, Anne Goujon, and Vegard Skirbekk predict the emergence of anti-clerical European atheism in the coming decades, in response to a combination of religious decline bottoming out and religious growth due to demographic factors — hence the title of their article: “The End of Secularization” (Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk 2012). Authors like Steve Bruce (Bruce 2002, 41, 2011, 38), David Voas (Voas 2009), and Samuel Bagg and Voas (Bagg and Voas 2010) argue against such a dual process of revival of religion and anti-religiosity and for a continued, gradual, and generational process of religion losing its individual, social, and public adherence and significance. This process of religious decline does not so much produce a militant atheist contention of religion, but rather widespread attitudes of non-religious indifference toward religion. The question that underlies this disagreement—whether secular contexts spark either “anti-clerical atheism” (Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk 2012, 88) or “religious indifference” (Bagg and Voas 2010) among the non-religious has, however, not been conclusively answered yet. Building on recent contributions by Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme in *Sociology of Religion* (Wilkins-Laflamme 2014) and in this journal (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016) about increases in religious polarization, the present article addresses this problem by means of data from the International Social Survey

Program Religion II and III modules (ISSP 1998 and 2008). It applies multilevel analysis to study whether country-level secularity affects the degree to which the non-religious contest religion and whether Protestant or Catholic religious heritages play a similar role.

## Theory

### *Wilkins-Laflamme's polarization thesis*

The principal thesis Wilkins-Laflamme puts forward in her articles on religious polarization is that, as a result of religious decline, a remaining core of fervently religious people and a growing non-religious majority increasingly come to stand opposite each other. In both articles, she relies on statistical analyses of repeated cross-sectional survey data from the United States, Great Britain, and Canada (1985–2012), conceiving of religious polarization as the combination of a proportional decline of those who are merely nominally religiously affiliated on the one hand and a proportional increase (or at least non-decline) of those who are either religiously unaffiliated or seriously religiously committed. This polarization proves to be most visible in regions and countries with higher shares of Protestant affiliates (Alberta/British Columbia, Great Britain) and less so in regions and countries with higher shares of Catholic affiliates (e.g. Northern Ireland, Ontario, Quebec) (Wilkins-Laflamme 2014, 290). Following up on this finding in her subsequent article (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016), Wilkins-Laflamme uses the same datasets and geographical locations to demonstrate that, although Protestants have lost more ground than Catholics in terms of belief and affiliation, the remaining Protestant core is nonetheless more religiously committed in the more rather than the less secular contexts.

In fact, Wilkins-Laflamme demonstrates that Catholic resilience regarding secularization does not show in stable *attendance* rates, but in *affiliation* rates, which she associates with strong cultural and identity ties: Catholics tend to hold on to their religious identity, even if they are no (longer) religiously active. This is different for Protestants who tend either to disaffiliate or to become more fervent in and committed to their religion. Wilkins-Laflamme explains this Protestant tendency by referring to Protestantism's marked individualism, which can also be seen in its foregrounding of sincerity and authenticity (Lindholm 2013) and accounts for its marked proneness to fragmentation. This individualism leads inactive liberal Protestants to disaffiliate, as this choice is understood as more logical, sincere, and honest than remaining merely nominally affiliated. The fragmented Protestant landscape reinforces this trend, as the absence of strong boundaries between Protestants and non-Protestants makes it socially quite acceptable to disaffiliate. Basically, the same Protestant logic encourages religious fervency among the remaining core of pure believers by the foregrounding of individual salvation through personal faith and the marked emphasis on born-again experiences in more evangelical Protestant groups rather than the mere fact of being born into a religious community (also see McCleary 2007). The outcome is greater polarization between fervently religious minorities and non-religious majorities in Protestant contexts, whereas, in Catholic contexts, much more of a nominal religious mid-field remains intact (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016, 168).

This analysis has far-reaching implications for the issue of the religious–secular polarization in secular societies. Wilkins-Laflamme after all suggests, but does not actually demonstrate, increased contestations of religion among the non-religious. In her “Polarization” article

(Wilkins-Laflamme 2014), she refers to secular<sup>1</sup> reactions to the Muslim presence in Great Britain and other European countries, such as the ban on religious dress in schools and public buildings and opposition to the construction of mosques (Wilkins-Laflamme 2014, 287, with reference to Cesari 2005 and Husbands 1995). Whether or not such intolerance of religion merely targets Islamic religious manifestations or pertains to religion more generally does not become very clear in Wilkins-Laflamme's argument (for an extended discussion of this point, see Bornschier 2010; Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2015; Van Bohemen et al. 2011), but, in her "Distinctions" article, she writes that

Those opposed to religion, such as members of active atheist and humanist movements, hope for a religion-free future where scientific reasoning and forms of secular morality trump all. But rather than disappearing into obscurity, religion appears to have become even more contentious in contemporary Western societies, with debates surrounding issues as home-grown extremism and the presence of religious symbols in public settings. (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016, 166)

Indeed, she suggests that the polarization of a "fervent, vocal, and politically active religious core with values starkly different from non-religious individuals [...] harbors the potential for social conflict with secular society and between religious minorities" (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016, 177).

Yet, Wilkins-Laflamme's analysis does not provide empirical support for these suggestions. Firstly, her analysis is based on polarization regarding levels of religious commitment, not on the contestation of religion among the non-religious. She thus focuses on polarization at the religious pole, not taking into account what is happening at the secular pole. Indeed, Wilkins-Laflamme excludes non-Catholics and non-Protestants from the analysis (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016, 174), so that religious groups are compared with each other rather than with their non-religious environment. Like many others before her, Wilkins-Laflamme treats the non-religious group as basically one homogeneous left-over category. Non-believers and non-attenders are, for instance, referred to as atheists by Jos Becker and René Vink (Becker and Vink 1994) and by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (Norris and Inglehart 2004, 186), respectively, notwithstanding the fact that the latter term constitutes a contested identity (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Smith 2013), so that those thus categorized are unlikely to understand themselves in this, or indeed any other, homogeneous and unitary way. A number of recent publications have raised awareness that there is a significant difference between atheists as non-believers and atheists as religion-haters (Bainbridge 2005; Bullivant 2008; Guenther 2014; Lee 2012; Ribberink and Houtman 2010; Zuckerman 2009). In 2012, this journal dedicated a special issue to the diversity in the non-religious category (Bullivant and Lee 2012).

A second reason why Wilkins-Laflamme's analyses do not provide empirical support for increased contestations about religion among the non-religious in the most secularized countries is that they are confined to the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Although these countries have indeed undergone processes of religious decline, it is clear that they do not represent the advanced levels of secularization of the Western European countries (Bruce 2011; Voas and Chaves 2016). Studying the latter would moreover allow including the path dependencies of Protestant and Catholic religious heritage, to which Wilkins-Laflamme refers (see also Inglehart and Baker 2000; Martin 1978, 24). An analysis of the contestation of religion among the non-religious in Western Europe thus promises to add considerably to the understanding of the religious–secular polarization in secular contexts.

### ***Secularization and anti-religious attitudes***

Wilkins-Laflamme's analysis centers on the process of religion losing its taken-for-grantedness and cultural legitimacy and becoming a matter of choice and voluntary commitment (Wilkins-Laflamme 2014, 287). On the one hand, in contexts of secularity, people allegedly no longer understand it as necessary to remain even loosely linked to a religious institution. On the other hand, if they do remain religious in those contexts, they are allegedly more likely to participate fully and with increased commitment, as this constitutes an active and positive choice. This in turn leads to a focus on religious piety and purity among the religious, that is, to distancing and detaching oneself from secular society (Wilkins-Laflamme 2014, 287).

Whereas Wilkins-Laflamme appears to assume that the non-religious react to these increased religious commitments with a similar fervency, she does not actually study whether this is the case. Indeed, other relevant literature suggests rather the opposite, which is less, instead of more, anti-religious opposition among the non-religious in secular contexts. Comparing religious and non-religious parents, for instance, Jonathan Kelley and Nan Dirk De Graaf maintain that, in secular countries, non-religious parents constitute the majority, which implies they have less to fear from a shrinking religious minority (Kelley and De Graaf 1997, 641). Hence, if they worry less, why should they bother or have very anti-religious feelings? It is only when the non-religious find themselves in a minority position in religious contexts that they might become more fervent and committed (Stahl 2010, 107), similar to the way the experiences of being a religious minority in secular contexts appear to spark religious fervency among the religious (Achterberg et al. 2009, 698). Further, Kelley and De Graaf argue that, in fact, this might work out differently for the non-religious than for the religious (Kelley and De Graaf, 1997, 642). They point out that, in religious contexts (let alone in secular contexts), non-religious parents have hardly any problem with their children learning about religious beliefs and values at school, as these are rarely seen as onerous, and the emotional support and sense of meaning and purpose religion provides are seen as valuable (Kelley and De Graaf, 1997, 642). By contrast, religious parents aim to insulate their children as much as possible from secular influences in order for them to acquire and retain their orthodox beliefs and in order to find devout friends and marriage candidates. This provides two reasons why religious indifference, rather than militant secular and atheist attitudes, is to be expected among the non-religious in secular contexts.

Even though some scholars suggest that religion can also trigger anti-religious responses in predominantly secular contexts (Casanova 2004; Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk 2012; Putnam and Campbell 2010), there is not much empirical support for this in Western Europe (Bruce 2011, 38, 2013, 380; Glendinning and Bruce 2011). Indeed, most recent studies of non-religious and atheist contention of religion support the argument that anti-religious sentiments are particularly pronounced in the United States and in the relatively religious countries of Western Europe (Amarasingam 2010; Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2013; Zuckerman 2009). Considering the contemporary situation in Western Europe, we thus expect the non-religious to oppose religion most strongly only in contexts where religion has a strong hold on society. We expect weakest anti-religious attitudes among the non-religious in the most secular countries (Hypothesis 1).

### ***Protestant and Catholic distinctions in anti-religious attitudes***

In her 2016 article, Wilkins-Laflamme argues that it is worth re-visiting the classic divide between Protestantism and Catholicism, in order to understand “more advanced patterns of secularization” (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016, 165). Indeed, throughout the literature on secularization, references are made to the resistance and opposition Catholicism has faced from “rivalrous secular universalisms” (Martin 1978, 76), like the French revolutionaries of the eighteenth century and the socialist movements of the twentieth century (see also Bruce 2011, 31; Campbell 2007, 224; Martin 2000; Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2015). Whereas Protestants have historically tended to retreat from strong political involvement, as long as their religious freedom was guaranteed (Woodhead 2004), Catholic societies have tended to incite a split between the Catholic social order, in which God, Church, and State were virtually synonymous, and its secular rivals. Whatever their precise political or social ideology (rationalist, Freemason, socialist, etc.), secular and even mildly religious movements became basically anti-religious in contexts where Catholicism constituted the dominant cultural power and where its cultural and political values became deeply embedded in society.<sup>2</sup>

These values, such as solidarity, respect for authority, and nationalism, foreground the importance of the collective realm and create strong and dominant mono-cultures (Martin 1978, 18–20) that stem from the Catholic notion of the Church as God’s city on earth, as the representative through which He reveals himself (Troeltsch 1922; Woodhead 2004). The Church provides a sense of unity, community, and belonging, which is closely intertwined with family bonds and notions of national identity. Moreover, Danièle Hervieu-Léger argues that many issues in Catholic countries (even in ‘secular’ France), which have basically nothing to do with religion as such (e.g. the quality of food or demands for workers’ rights), are nonetheless imbued with Catholic values (Hervieu-Léger 2006, 51). This cultural aspect of Catholicism makes it more difficult for the typical Catholic who is in doubt as to whether to disaffiliate from the Church than would be the case for the typical Protestant, which also accounts for the higher levels of nominal affiliation among Catholics as indicated above (Wilkins-Laflamme 2014). The Catholic hold on national cultures has empowered the defense of national identities and values against competing totalitarian powers, for instance, in Poland during the Cold War (Martin 1978, 24), and in doing so, it has also played a major role in withstanding secularizing forces (at least for the time being, see Bruce 2002, 31). Apart from political rivalry, and even apart from contemporary moral outrage about scandals of sex abuse,<sup>3</sup> the reason to oppose religion in Catholic contexts is very much informed by the cultural all-pervasiveness and omnipresence of religion. Becoming non-religious in such a context entails a marked act of deviance that places one outside the community.

This is different in Protestant societies. After the Reformation, Protestants maintained a rather demystified and rationalized faith in a transcendent and independent God (Bruce 2011, 28–29), which opened the way for the exploration of nature with scientific methods and for a more privatized spirituality, not focused on establishing God’s Kingdom in the here and now, but on seeking moral and spiritual purity in small communities of the ‘elect’. The Protestant emphasis on individual salvation, rationality, and purity paved the way for pluralism, relativism, doubt, and ultimately disaffiliation (Berger 1967, 111; Bruce 2011, 47). In Protestant countries, non-religiosity is in effect less of a problem and more common

because Protestantism does not dominate the public domain or the national culture in the way Catholicism does.

Protestant and Catholic value patterns have been instilled in Western European countries since the Reformation period and the political turmoil that followed it (1517–1648) (Daiber 2002; Gillespie 1999; Gorski 2000; Woodhead 2004). Although there have been major political, cultural, and social changes and upheavals (e.g. the Enlightenment, modernization, two world wars) and despite significant secularization, the distinct value patterns associated with Catholicism and Protestantism continue to be recognizable in Western Europe (Hervieu-Léger 2006, 50; Martin 2014, 15). Even in everyday life, values like prudence, tactfulness, and conflict avoidance (Catholic) and the need to demonstrate purity of the soul and honesty of intentions as well as putting a premium on sincerity, frankness, and openness (Protestant), although not religious in and of themselves, have their roots in these respective religious heritages (Lindholm 2013, 365; Magill 2012, 27). Likewise, we argue that these heritages continue to influence Western European countries, influencing non-religious people's attitudes toward morality and politics (Inglehart and Baker 2000, 49; Norris and Inglehart 2004, 20) and attitudes toward religion among the non-religious (Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2013, 116). The non-religious in Protestant countries will see no harm in the relatively small-scale, privatized, and individualized religion which stimulates moral living without dominating the public domain. By contrast, the non-religious in Catholic countries will feel strong aversion against the Catholic mono-culture, with which, despite declining levels of belief and attendance, all segments of society are imbued. They might have stayed within the church for a long time, perhaps partly to avoid conflict with their communities, but when they become openly non-religious, this constitutes an act of defiance against a strong cultural dominance. Our second hypothesis thus states that anti-religious attitudes among the non-religious will be strongest in countries with a Catholic rather than a Protestant heritage (Hypothesis 2).

## Operationalization

We are interested in the way the level of secularity and the Protestant and Catholic religious heritage influence understandings of religion among the non-religious in Western European countries. In order to test our hypotheses, we have used two waves of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP)—the Religion II and Religion III datasets—that contain the questions about the religious practices and attitudes that we need for our analysis. We wanted to use every ISSP wave that is available for each country, but we could not include the first wave (Religion I), as it has no data on two of the four variables that we used to construct our dependent variable. We included all Western European countries available in the ISSP datasets: Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, East and West Germany,<sup>4</sup> Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Northern Ireland, with N=41,146 in 32 countries/waves.

Our dependent variable is *anti-religiosity*, which is measured by a scale tapping the respondents' attitudes toward the influence religion can have on the public domain. We used four questions that straightforwardly ask for respondents' views on this matter. Two of these ask for their attitudes toward religious leaders influencing government decisions and people's vote. The two others address intolerance of religious people and whether religion creates conflict or not. We linearly combined the four above-mentioned Likert items, with

**Table 1.** Factor and reliability analysis for the anti-religiosity scale.

Questions	Factor Loading
How much do you agree or disagree with: Religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections.	0.81
Religious leaders should not try to influence government decisions.	0.79
Looking around the world, religions bring more conflict than peace.	0.65
People with very strong religious beliefs are often too intolerant of others.	0.65
Eigen value	2.13
$R^2$	0.53
Cronbach's $\alpha$	0.71
$N$	42,092

Source: ISSP 1998 and 2008.

answer categories ranging between 1 (strongly agree) and 5 (strongly disagree) that together yield a reliable scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ : .71, see Table 1). We reversed the scale, so that higher scores indicate higher levels of anti-religiosity.<sup>5</sup>

Non-religiosity is measured as *non-belief*. There are other ways in which non-religiosity could be measured, like non-affiliation or non-attendance. We chose non-belief because it is the most open and neutral measure, in the sense that it does not say anything about either commitment to religious institutions or religious identity. It simply indicates reluctance to believe. We shall show below how this is related to attitudes toward religious institutions and religious identities. Respondents who answered either "I do not believe in God" or "I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out" to the question what best describes their belief are coded as 'non-believers' (1) and all others as 'believers' (0). To be comprehensive, we control for the effect of *non-attendance*, with answer categories ranging from several times a week (coded 1) to never or not religious (coded 8). This measure correlates moderately with the non-belief measure (Pearson's  $r = 0.423$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but not enough to create multicollinearity in our multilevel model.

*Country-level secularity* is measured by aggregating the individual scores for non-attendance for each country per wave. Here, we use the non-attendance measure, which is the most commonly used measure for assessing country-level secularity (Bagg and Voas 2010; Bruce 2013; Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2013; Voas 2009). We include *wave* as a separate variable to control for the time effect.

The *Catholic heritage* measure is operationalized using the Religious Characteristics of States dataset (RCS), which includes all available historical data on religious affiliation (Barrett 1982; Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001; Bennett and Stam 2000; Johnson and Grim 2013; Mitchell 1998; United Nations 2012).<sup>6</sup> This variable shows that, in 1900, almost 100% of the Western European population was registered as religiously affiliated and that countries were almost completely Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, with some countries having a mixed heritage. An overview of this variable together with the country-level secularity measure is given in Table 2 and a visual mapping of countries' religious heritage according to these measures is shown in Figure 1.

In order to validate this measure, that is, to assess whether these historical patterns can still be recognized today, we designed a variable based on the aggregated shares of religious affiliates of either Catholic/Orthodox<sup>7</sup> or Protestant churches, ranging from 0 (100% Protestant heritage) to 1 (100% Catholic heritage). An overview of this variable is presented in Appendix A. The correlation coefficient between this measure of a country's share of Protestant and Catholics in 2008 and the historical data of 1900 is very high (Pearson's



**Table 2.** Country level secularity and Catholic heritage for 32 Western European country waves.

Country	Secularity	Proportion Catholics 1900
Ireland '98	3.17	.74
Ireland '08	3.78	.74
Cyprus '98	3.97	.78
Cyprus '08	4.49	.78
Northern Ireland '98	4.45	.32
Northern Ireland '08	4.74	.32
Portugal '98	4.61	1.00
Portugal '08	4.89	1.00
Italy '98	4.67	.96
Italy '08	4.52	.96
Austria '98	5.20	.89
Austria '08	5.60	.89
Spain '98	5.34	.97
Spain '08	5.78	.97
Switzerland '08	6.06	.42
Switzerland '98	5.67	.42
Germany (West) '98	6.06	.36
Germany (West) '08	5.84	.36
Sweden '98	6.14	.00
Sweden '08	6.65	.00
Netherlands '98	6.24	.35
Netherlands '08	5.76	.35
Great Britain '98	6.36	.13
Great Britain '08	6.70	.13
Denmark '98	6.46	.00
Denmark '08	6.28	.00
France '98	6.55	.97
France '08	6.64	.97
Norway '98	6.70	.00
Norway '08	6.77	.00
Germany (East) '98	7.34	.36
Germany (East) '08	7.15	.36

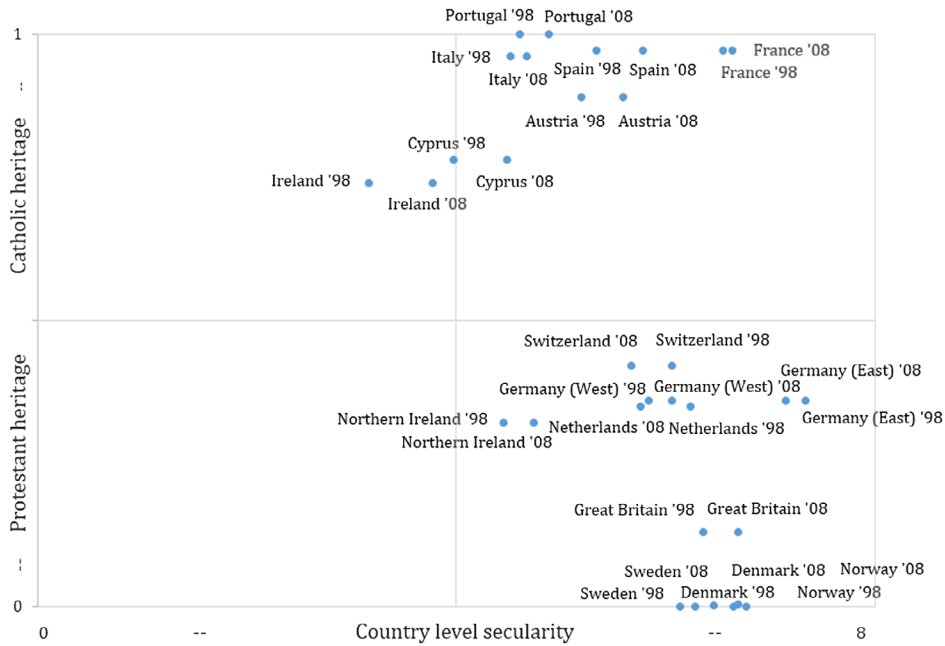
Source: ISSP 1998 and 2008, RCS.

$r = 0.971$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that, despite the degree to which it has secularized, a country's religious *identity* has not changed significantly in a hundred years. We did not include the ISSP-based measure of shares of religious affiliates in our model, but ran a separate multilevel model with this measure, replacing the RCS 1900 measure, which yields almost identical results.

As a control variable on the macro-level, apart from the wave variable mentioned earlier, we used the country's GDP per capita (US\$) (Inglehart 1997, 221; Inglehart and Baker 2000, 34), using the UN statistics web site<sup>8</sup> for data on this variable. On the individual level, we also controlled for gender, level of education, and age (Houtman 2003, 63, 97). We standardized all variables used. Table 3 provides the descriptive statistics of the variables that we thus created.

## Results and analysis

We used ordinary least squares linear multilevel analysis with maximum likelihood estimation to test our hypotheses. We did so for two reasons. First and foremost, multilevel analysis makes it possible to estimate simultaneously effects of individual-level variables and country-level variables. Our data are structured in such a way that there are two levels: 41,146 *individuals* with certain characteristics (e.g. affiliation, attitudes) are nested in 32



**Figure 1.** Representation of Protestant and Catholic heritage and level of secularity of 32 country waves in 1998 and 2008 (ISSP).

country waves with certain characteristics (aggregated level of secularity, religious heritage, GDP). In such cases, multilevel analysis is the most suitable option. Secondly, as we aim to investigate whether and how individuals respond to differences in country-level secularity and religious heritage, multilevel analysis is particularly suitable as it allows for testing these expected cross-level interactions. We estimated different models with different effects. These are effects of variables at either the individual or at the country level and we estimated the interactions between these variables. Each of the models also contains so-called random effects. These effects, noted as variances, are estimations of the variability of the mean level of anti-religiosity in a country and of the variability of anti-religiosity at the individual level. Each model that shows lower levels of these types of variability explains anti-religiosity a bit better. Table 4 shows the results of our analysis.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics of all variables used.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Secularity country wave	32	3.17	7.34	5.6869	.98615
Proportion Catholics in 1900 country	32	0	1	.5326	.37767
GDP (\$) per capita	32	24,789	96,683	53,033.7359	16,875.5861
Wave (1998=0, 2008=1)	42,769	0	1	.5435	.49811
Male (1) or female (2)	42,769	1	2	1.5354	.49875
Age	42,747	16	98	47.57	17.332
Level of education	42,378	.00	5	2.5773	1.46943
Anti-religiosity	42,636	1	5	3.9453	.78135
Non-belief	42,344	0	1	.2389	.42645
Non-attendance	41,996	1	8	5.6914	2.2446
Valid N (listwise)	41,146				

Source: ISSP 1998 and 2008.

**Table 4.** Explaining anti-religiosity (OLS multilevel analysis, Maximum Likelihood, N=41,146 in 32 country waves).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	0.00(0.03)	0.01(0.04)	0.00(0.04)	0.00(0.05)
Wave 1998 (ref. =2008)	–	–0.03(0.06)	–0.03(0.06)	–0.03(0.06)
Secularity country wave	–	–0.09*(0.04)	–0.09*(0.04)	–0.09*(0.04)
Proportion Catholics country 1900	–	0.00(0.05)	0.00(0.05)	0.00(0.05)
GDP (\$) per capita country	–	0.02(0.04)	0.02(0.04)	0.02(0.04)
Non-belief	–	0.09***(0.01)	0.08***(0.01)	0.08***(0.01)
Non-attendance	–	0.31***(0.01)	0.31***(0.01)	0.31***(0.01)
Gender male (ref. = female)	–	0.02*(0.01)	0.02*(0.01)	0.02*(0.01)
Education	–	0.01(0.01)	0.01(0.01)	0.01(0.01)
Age	–	0.02**(0.01)	0.02**(0.01)	0.02**(0.01)
Catholic heritage country*	–	–	–	–
Non-belief	–	–	–	0.02*(0.01)
Secularity country*	–	–	–	–
Non-belief	–	–	–	0.04**(0.01)
-2loglikelihood	115231.22	110612.60	110542.41	110544.66
Variance individual level	0.96	0.86	0.85	0.85
Variance country level	0.035	0.030	0.031	0.031
Variance non-belief	–	–	0.0030	0.0016

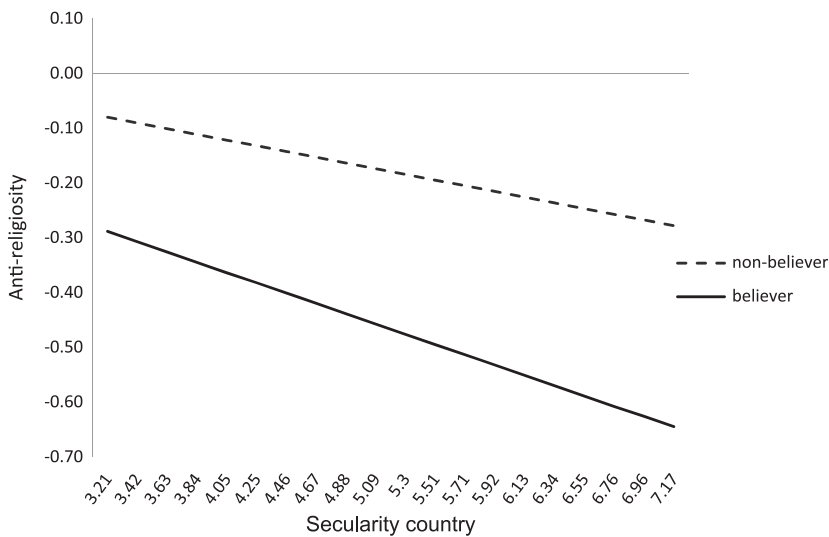
\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed test for significance).

Source: ISSP 1998 and 2008, RCS

Looking at the outcomes of our analysis, we notice that, apart from country-level secularity, none of the country-level variables has a significant effect on respondents' anti-religious attitude.<sup>9</sup> This means that anti-religious attitudes are primarily related to people's individual characteristics. This is also visible in the relatively high level of explained variance at this level, compared to the country level. To the extent that this attitude is more prevalent in some countries than in others, this must therefore be attributed to that country's composition (more people living there with that attitude). The control variable 'education' has no independent effect on respondents' opposition to religion. Only males and older people appear to oppose religion a bit more than females and younger people, respectively.

Considering the two indicators of non-religiosity, namely non-belief and non-attendance, it is noticeable that non-attenders have higher scores on anti-religiosity than non-believers. This could be explained by the fact that non-attenders already speak with their behavior—for them, not going to church is an expression of not liking the church, whereas among non-believers there is more diversity. Of these, for example, some might feel a sense of belonging without believing (Davie 1994). This would mitigate the score on anti-religious attitudes for this group. Nevertheless, compared to believers, non-believers are on average significantly more anti-religious in their attitudes, which is, of course, what we would expect to find. The strong anti-religiosity among non-attenders also explains the negative effect of country-level secularity, as these variables are related (the country variable is an aggregation of the individual-level variable). Leaving out the individual variable from this model results in a positive effect for country-level secularity (.02 n.s.) and increases the non-belief effect (.19\*\*\*).

Considering the question of the context in which non-believers have the strongest anti-religious attitudes, we expected less, rather than more, anti-religiosity among the non-religious in the most secular contexts (Hypothesis 1). In Model 4 of Table 4, the cross-level interaction effect between non-belief and country secularity is, however, positive. At first sight, this is a refutation of our hypothesis. It shows that the polarization between non-believers and believers regarding the place of religion is stronger when a country is more



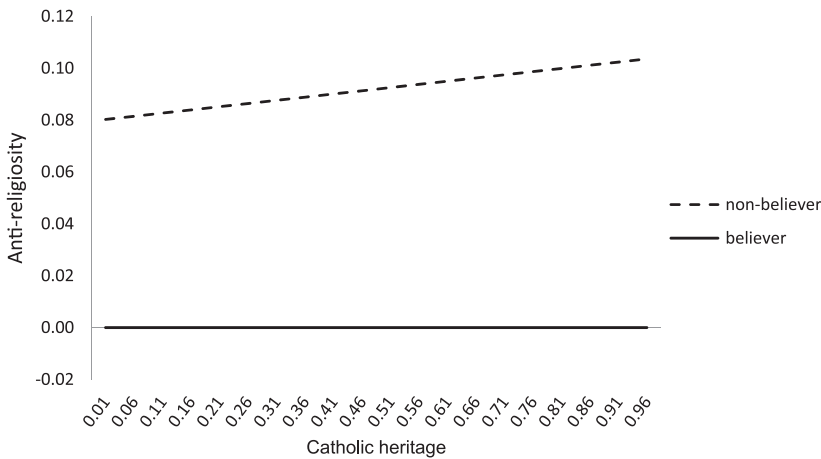
**Figure 2.** Predicted anti-religiosity for believers and non-believers in countries with low and high levels of secularity in 32 country waves in 1998 and 2008 (ISSP).

secular. Figure 2 gives a representation of this finding.<sup>10</sup> In Appendix B, a marginal effects plot for this interaction is presented, to show its substantive and statistical significance (based on Golder 2003).

However, Figure 2 also demonstrates how, in secular contexts, believers in particular show relatively low levels of anti-religiosity. This implies that stronger religious–secular polarization in secularized contexts can be mostly attributed to the remaining religious fervent core, who, of course, maintain strong pro-religious attitudes. In secular contexts, our findings thus point to heightened contention of religion, really because of fewer religious people creating more turmoil over religious issues (Casanova 1994, 221; Achterberg et al. 2009, 698). In effect, this nuance confirms both our hypothesis and Wilkins-Laflamme’s polarization thesis. We find the religious and non-religious to lie further apart in their anti-religiosity, whereas Wilkins-Laflamme observed these groups to lie further apart in their religious commitment. However, her suggestion that this increased polarization could lead to social conflict with secular society finds no support in our findings as far as the non-religious are concerned. Not the secular majority, but the religious minorities are the ones to whom we can primarily attribute this polarization.

Considering our second hypothesis, we expected to find a stronger religious–secular polarization, indicated by higher levels of anti-religiosity among non-believers, in countries with a Catholic heritage. Again, in Model 4 of Table 4, we find the cross-level interaction effect between non-belief and Catholic heritage on anti-religiosity to be positive, this time confirming our hypothesis. Figure 3 is a visual representation of this finding (see also Appendix C for a marginal effects plot for this interaction).

This figure indicates that the polarization between believers and non-believers is higher in countries with a Catholic heritage, compared with Protestant heritage countries. The ascending slope for non-believers indicates that, in countries with a Catholic heritage, the polarization between the religious and the non-religious can be attributed to relatively high



**Figure 3.** Predicted anti-religiosity for believers and non-believers in countries with a Protestant and Catholic heritage in 32 country waves in 1998 and 2008 (ISSP).

levels of anti-religiosity among the non-religious. Since our operationalization measures a historical presence of Catholicism and since we included country-level secularity in our model, we can interpret this finding as a specific link between a country’s Catholic cultural identity and anti-religious opposition. Both this stronger polarization and the fact that it can be attributed to non-religious fervency support our hypothesis. In light of Wilkins-Laflamme’s analysis that these countries have lower levels of religious polarization (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016, 168), this is quite an interesting finding.

## Discussion

In this article, we set out to do a complementary analysis of Wilkins-Laflamme’s polarization thesis by evaluating the religious–secular polarization from the side of the non-religious. In particular, we analyzed the contention of religion in secularized contexts, as Wilkins-Laflamme suggested that this was a growing phenomenon. Interestingly enough, we found the contestation of religion to be related to *religious fervency* in secular contexts and to *non-religious fervency* in contexts with a Catholic heritage. The former form of polarization is similar to the one Wilkins-Laflamme found. The latter situation is different. Wilkins-Laflamme concluded that the religious–secular polarization was strongest among the Protestants living in secularized countries. As to Catholics in secular countries, they would embrace nominal religious commitment as an expression of their cultural and identity ties and would not become more committed. Although this might be true for religious Catholics, our analysis points to stronger anti-religious attitudes among the non-religious in countries with a Catholic religious heritage. This indicates that the same cultural climate that encourages nominal affiliation by the religious encourages opposition to religion by the non-religious. This corresponds with Colin Campbell’s expectation that anti-religious protests are generally cries of moral outrage and ethical rebellion (Campbell 1971, 125), directed at the norms and values which have become dominant in a group or community (see also Campbell 2007, 224; Lehmann 2013, 658; Martin 1978, 24; McLeod 1997, 214; Ribberink, Achterberg, and Houtman 2017, 264).

As far as the most secular countries are concerned, our findings confirm Wilkins-Laflamme's picture of stronger religious commitment and larger polarization in secular environments. In the debate on conflicts over the place of religion in Western Europe, some scholars have expressed the expectation that these conflicts counter the arguments for a continuation of secularization (Achterberg et al. 2009, 696; Casanova 1994, 57, 2004, 2; Gorski et al. 2012, 21). For some, Western Europe has even arrived at a post-secular stage, where religion again takes center stage in public life (Gorski and Altinordu 2008, 76; Moberg, Granholm, and Nynäs 2012, 2; see also Beckford 2012; Dillon 2010). However, our findings show that the contestation of religion in secularized societies cannot be attributed to the non-religious. Anti-religious protests must be seen as a stage in a process of religious decline, since the latter challenges and desacralizes religious commitment, which opens up the possibility of apostasy (Campbell 2007, 125). This is what we find, with lower levels of anti-religiosity among the non-religious in countries where many people have already left the church and higher levels of anti-religiosity in the case of the Catholic countries, where religious affiliation and cultural ties with the church continue to influence the culture of these countries, notwithstanding lower levels of religious commitment. This leads us to expect that the trend of religious decline will not be reversed in the near future. Therefore, reference to the incidence of religious–secular polarization as signaling some kind of post-secular stage is untimely in our view (see also Bruce 2013). Admittedly, due to lack of data, our multilevel analysis did not allow for an analysis of whether and how religious decline affects anti-religiosity among the non-religious. Clearly, this is a vital issue that needs to be addressed by future research that can rely on longitudinal data (see Te Grotenhuis et al. 2015).

When the distinctive religious heritage of Catholicism and Protestantism continues to influence secular Western Europeans, as we have found, this is also relevant for the study of secular cultural values, attitudes, and practice. As David Martin maintains: “The post-Protestant North still preens itself on its capacity to internalize rules and laws, rather than to accept them in principle while venally evading them in practice” (Martin 2005, 77). Our findings have implications for other fields of study, for example, European politics (Lehmann 2013, 658). An illustration is a recent newspaper article on the Euro crisis, which refers to religious heritage, the divide between a “Calvinist Northern Europe that doesn't want to forgive sinners, and a Catholic Europe that wants to turn the page” (*Financial Times*, 17 July 2015). This is a quote from the French Minister of the Economy Emmanuel Macron, talking about the clash between the Greek government and the European Union, dominated by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on the conditions for Greece to stay within the European Union. Religious heritage thus emerges as an interesting explanatory variable, not only in studies of religion and religious conflict, but also in the field of culture, economics, and politics.

## Notes

1. Wilkins-Laflamme calls these responses ‘secular’, where others would perhaps use the term ‘secularist’, as they are mostly political in nature, coming from governments who want to enforce a strict separation of church and state (see Casanova 2004, 2012).
2. David Martin convincingly argues that the cultural heritage of the Orthodox Church that can be found in countries like Cyprus, but also in Greece, is very similar to the Catholic heritage and thus speaks of a Catholic/Orthodox monopoly (Martin 2005, 86–87; see also Bruce 2011,

- 8). In terms of its value pattern, it shares with Catholicism, and differs from Protestantism in, its tendency to monopolize the religious domain of a national culture and to compete with secular authorities for power.
3. See Nan Dirk De Graaf (2013) and Diego Gambetta (1994) for the way this would influence the reputation of religious institutions and ensuing differences in support.
  4. These are separate countries in this dataset.
  5. In order to limit the number of missing values, we recoded “don’t know” to the middle (3: neither agree nor disagree), which gives 1.6% missing values instead of 9.3%.
  6. When data were not available, the dataset editors calculated data based on an extrapolation from the available sources, so that comparisons are possible. See the codebook and explanations on method, design, and sources, accessed 9 March 2018. <http://thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/BRWNREG2.asp>
  7. Cyprus is the only Orthodox country in this selection of Western European countries. (See note 2 and Martin 2005, 86–87; see also Bruce 2011, 8.)
  8. Accessed 8 December 2015. <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/dnlList.asp>
  9. Manfred Te Grotenhuis et al. (2015) note that comparing countries at one particular moment in time does not necessarily produce the same results as comparing historical contexts within countries. We are aware of this risk, but we could not follow up on their suggestion to include as many waves as possible, for two reasons. Firstly, the ISSP only consists of three waves on Religion (1991, 1998, 2008). Even if we had included the third wave, this would not have allowed for testing the within-country cross-level interaction, which Te Grotenhuis et al. point out as relevant. Secondly, even if three waves were sufficient and if we had included the nine Western European countries of the 1991 wave, we would have had to settle for a limited and insufficient measurement of anti-religiosity for that year, because the questions about religious conflict and religious people’s intolerance were not asked in 1991. This would have left us with only the two items about political influence for that year.
  10. This figure is an illustration of the interaction effect only. Because interaction effects cannot be interpreted in isolation of the other effects, they need to be interpreted carefully. Our illustrations satisfy the criteria developed by Thomas Brambor, William Roberts Clark, and Matt Golder (2006).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

*Egbert Ribberink* is affiliated with the Centre for Sociological Research at the KU (Catholic University) Leuven, Belgium. His primary research interests include atheism, anti-religion, and the secularization of Western Europe.

*Peter Achterberg* is Professor of Sociology at Tilburg University, Tilburg, the Netherlands. He is a cultural sociologist with a general interest in studying cultural, political, and religious change in the West.

*Dick Houtman* is Professor of Sociology of Culture and Religion at the KU (Catholic University) Leuven, Belgium. His latest book is *Weber* (Boom Filosofie, 2017, co-authored with Rudi Laermans)

CORRESPONDENCE: Egbert Ribberink, Centre for Sociological Research, KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45, box 3601, 3000 Leuven, Belgium.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Percentage of religious affiliates per country in 1800, 1900, 1998, and 2008.

Country	Religious affiliation	RCS 1800	RCS 1900	ISSP 1998	ISSP 2008	Share Prot./Cath. religious 2008
Austria <sup>a</sup>	Catholic	89	89	81	73	.92
	Protestant	2	3	7	6	.08
Cyprus <sup>b</sup>	Orthodox	59	77	100	100	1.00
	Catholic	1	1	0	0	.00
Denmark	Protestant	0	0	0	0	.00
	Catholic	2	0	0	1	.01
France	Protestant	98	99	87	83	.99
	Catholic	95	97	50	52	.98
Germany <sup>c</sup>	Protestant	4	3	2	1	.02
	Catholic	37	36	21	29	.40
Ireland <sup>d</sup>	Protestant	61	63	36	33	.60
	Catholic	82	74	90	88	.96
Italy	Protestant	18	25	5	4	.06
	Catholic	99	96	90	89	.99
Netherlands	Protestant	0	0	1	0	.01
	Catholic	38	35	19	28	.51
Norway	Protestant	60	60	17	26	.49
	Catholic	0	0	0	1	.01
Portugal	Protestant	100	99	89	82	.99
	Catholic	100	100	90	89	.97
Spain	Protestant	0	0	2	3	.03
	Catholic	100	97	85	76	.99
Sweden	Protestant	0	0	0	1	.01
	Catholic	0	0	1	2	.03
Switzerland <sup>e</sup>	Protestant	99	99	69	67	.97
	Catholic	41	42	48	35	.56
United Kingdom	Protestant	59	58	39	35	.44
	Catholic	2	13	9	9	.17
	Protestant	61	65	43	41	.83
Northern Ireland <sup>f</sup>	Unknown	36	19	0	0	.00
	Catholic		32	39	36	.41
	Protestant		67	51	50	.59

<sup>a</sup>Data of 1800 are in fact of 1857.

<sup>b</sup>Data of 1800 and 1900 include Northern Cyprus, which has a large share of Muslims in its population. ISSP data exclude Northern Cyprus.

<sup>c</sup>ISSP data of East and West Germany taken together

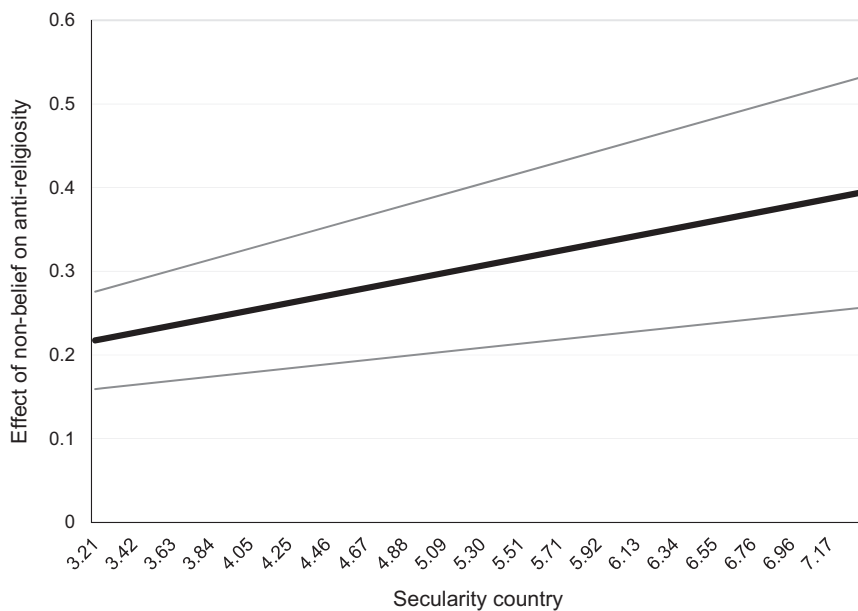
<sup>d</sup>Data of 1800 are in fact of 1801 and include Northern Ireland.

<sup>e</sup>Data of 1800 are in fact of 1816. This also applies to Germany for 1800.

<sup>f</sup>Data of 1900 are based on calculation extracting Northern Ireland census data of 1921 from 1920 census total of Ireland.

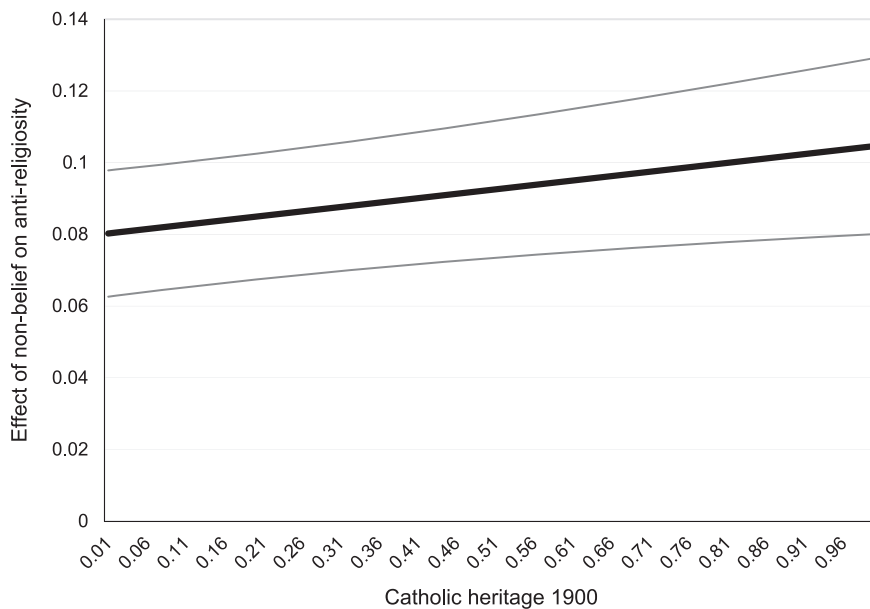
Source: RCS, ISSP 1998 and 2008.

## Appendix B



Predicted effect of non-belief on anti-religiosity for countries with different degrees of secularity, 32 country waves in 1998 and 2008 (ISSP).

## Appendix C



Predicted effect of non-belief on anti-religiosity for countries with a Catholic heritage, 32 country waves in 1998 and 2008 (ISSP).