

# 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 these countries' Protestant and Catholic heritage plays a role in this. Analyzing data from the International Social Survey Program data (ISSP 1998 and 2008) 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. In secular countries polarization moreover stems from religious fervency, whereas in countries with a Catholic heritage it stems from anti-religious fervency.*

## Keywords

Anti-Religiosity – Non-Religiosity – Religious heritage – Secularization – Western Europe

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## **Introduction**

Whether secularization leads to cultural conflict between the religious and the non-religious in Western Europe has recently become a deeply contested question (Achterberg et al. 2009; Bagg and Voas 2010; Bruce 2002; Fox 2016; Kaufmann, Goujon and Skirbekk 2012). Kaufmann, Goujon and 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, “End of Secularization”. Authors like Bruce (2002, 41, 2011, 38), Voas (2009), and Bagg and Voas (2010) argue against such a dual revival of religion and anti-religiosity alike 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 militant atheist contention of religion, but rather widespread attitudes of non-religious indifference vis-à-vis religion. The question that underlies this disagreement, i.e., 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 itself however not been conclusively answered yet. Building on recent contributions by Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme in this journal (2016) and the *Sociology of Religion* journal (2014) about increases in religious polarization, this paper therefor addresses this problem by means of the data of 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 brings 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 to 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 (i.e. Alberta/British Columbia, Great Britain) and not so much in those with higher shares of Catholic affiliates (i.e. among others Northern Ireland, Ontario, Quebec [2014, 290]). Following up on this finding in “Distinctions”, she 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 to 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 to either disaffiliate or become more fervent 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 midfield 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, she refers to secular 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 (2014, 287, referencing Cesari 2005; Husbands 1995). Whether or not such intolerance of religion is merely targeting Islamic religious manifestations or pertains to religion more generally speaking does not become very clear in Wilkins-Laflamme’s argument (see for an extended discussion of this point Bornschier 2010; Ribberink, Achterberg and Houtman 2015; Van Bohemen et al. 2011), but in “Distinctions”, she writes that “[t]hose 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” (2016, 166). She indeed 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” (177).

Yet, Wilkins-Laflamme’s analysis does not provide empirical support for these suggestions. First, her analysis is based on polarization in levels of religious commitment, not on the contestation of religion among the non-religious. She hence focuses on polarization at the religious pole, not taking into account what is happening at the secular pole. Indeed, “Distinctions” excludes non-Catholics and non-Protestants from the analysis (174), so that religious groups are compared with each other rather than with their non-religious environment. Like many others before her, she 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 Becker and Vink (1994) and Norris and Inglehart (2004, 186), respectively, notwithstanding the fact that the latter 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. Indeed, several 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 even 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 underwent processes of religious decline, it is clear that they do not represent the advanced levels of secularization the Western European countries do (Bruce 2011; Voas and Chaves 2016). Studying the latter would moreover allow including the path dependencies of Protestant and Catholic religious heritage, which Wilkins-Laflamme refers to (see also Inglehart and Baker 2000; Martin 1978, 24). An analysis of the contestation of religion among the non-religious in Western Europe hence promises to add considerably to the understanding of 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 (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 amongst the religious, i.e., to distancing and detaching oneself from secular society (ibid).

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 indeed the case. Indeed, other relevant literature suggests rather the opposite, i.e., less instead of more anti-religious opposition among the non-religious in secular contexts. Comparing religious and non-religious parents, for instance, Kelley and De Graaf (1997, 641) maintain that in secular countries, non-religious parents constitute the majority, which implies they have less to fear from a shrinking religious minority. Hence, if they worry less, why should they bother or have very anti-religious

feelings? Only when the non-religious find themselves in a minority position in religious contexts, they might become more fervent and committed (Asad 2008; Stahl 2010), like the way the experiences of religious minorityhood in secular contexts appear to spark religious fervency among the religious (Achterberg et al. 2009). What is more, Kelley and De Graaf argue that in fact, this might work out differently for the non-religious than it does for the religious (1997, 642). They point out that in religious contexts (let alone in secular contexts) non-religious parents have little problems with their children learning 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 (ibid). 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 us with two reasons why to expect religious indifference, rather than militant secular and atheist attitudes among the non-religious in secular contexts.

Even though some scholars suggest that religion can also trigger anti-religious responses in massively 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, 2014; 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 the relatively religious countries in 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 the latter 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 revisiting the classic divide between Protestantism and Catholicism, in order to understand “more advanced patterns of secularization” (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 18<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup>-century socialist movements (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 rather 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 imbued in society<sup>ii</sup>.

These values, like solidarity, respect for authority and nationalism, foreground the importance of the collective realm and create strong and dominant monocultures (Martin 1978, 18 ff) 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 here provides a sense of unity, community and belonging, closely intertwined with family-bonds and notions of national identity. Even more, Hervieu-Léger (2006, 51) argues that many issues in Catholic countries (even in 'secular' France) which have basically nothing to do with religion as such (i.e. food quality or demands for workers' rights) are nonetheless imbued with Catholic values. This cultural aspect of Catholicism makes it more difficult for the typical Catholic in doubt to disaffiliate from the church than it would be for the typical Protestant, which also accounts for the higher Catholic levels of nominal affiliation indicated above (Wilkins-Laflamme 2014). This Catholic hold on national cultures has empowered the defense of national identities and values against competing totalitarian powers, as 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 (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>iii</sup>, then, the reason to oppose religion in Catholic contexts is very much informed by religion's cultural all-pervasiveness and omnipresence. 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 more demystified and rationalized faith in a transcendent and independent God (Bruce 2011, 28-29), which opened up 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 'elect'. This Protestant focus on individual salvation, rationality, and purity opened up the way for pluralism, relativism, doubt, and ultimately disaffiliation (Berger 1967; 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 national culture in the way Catholicism does.

Protestant and the Catholic value patterns have been instilled upon Western European countries from the Reformation period and the political turmoil that followed it onwards (1517-1648) (Daiber 2002; Gillespie 1999; Gorski 2000; Woodhead 2004). Although there have been major political, cultural and social changes and upheavals (like the Enlightenment, modernization and two world wars, to name a few), and despite massive secularization, the distinct value patterns associated with Catholicism and Protestantism continue to be recognizable in Western Europe (Hervieu-Léger 2006; Martin 2014). 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, putting a premium on sincerity, frankness, and openness (Protestant), although not religious in and of themselves, have their roots in respective religious heritage (Lindholm 2013; Magill 2012). Likewise, we argue that these heritages continue to influence Western European countries, influencing non-religious people's attitudes towards morality and politics (Inglehart and Baker 2000; Norris and Inglehart 2012) and attitudes towards religion among the non-religious (Ribberink, Achterberg and Houtman 2013). 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 monoculture, which despite declining levels of belief and attendance imbues all segments of society. They might have stayed within the church for a long time, perhaps partly to avoid conflict with their community, but when they become openly non-religious, this constitutes an act of defiance against a

strong cultural dominance. Our second hypothesis then reads 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 how 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 about this, we have used two waves of International Social Survey Program (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), since 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, which are: Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, East and West Germany<sup>iv</sup>, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Northern Ireland with N=41,146 in 32 country/waves.

Our dependent variable is anti-religiosity, which is measured by a scale tapping the respondents' attitudes towards the influence religion can have on the public domain. We used four questions that straightforwardly ask for people's views on this matter. Two of these ask for respondents' attitude towards religious leaders influencing governments' decisions and peoples' votes. The two others address intolerance of religious people and whether religion creates conflict or not. We linearly combined the four abovementioned Likert items, with answer categories ranging between 1 (strongly agree) – 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>v</sup>.

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

Questions:	Factor Loading
How much do you agree or disagree that:	
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

<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.53
Cronbach's $\alpha$	0.71
<i>N</i>	42,092

Source: ISSP 1998 and 2008.

Non-religiosity is measured as non-belief. There are also other ways in which non-religiosity could have been measured, like non-affiliation or non-attendance. We choose 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 purely indicates reluctance to believe, and later on we will see how this is related to attitudes towards religious institutions and religious identities.

Respondents who answer 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 either 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.

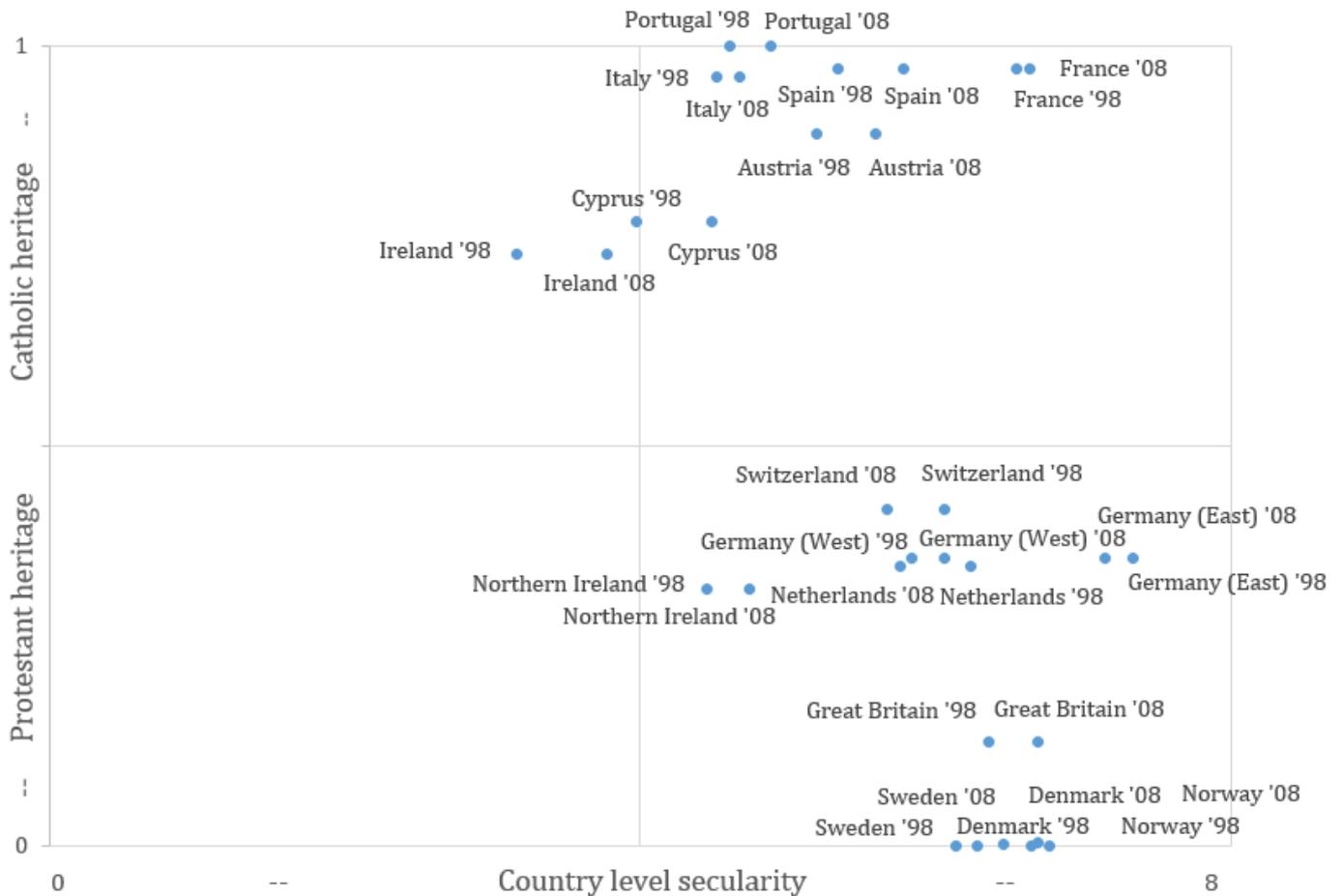
Country-level secularity is measured by aggregating the individual scores for non-attendance for each country per wave. Here, we use the non-attendance measure, which is the most commonly used measure for assessing country level secularity (Bagg and Voas 2010; Bruce 2013; Ribberink, Achterberg and Houtman 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>vi</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 either Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, with some countries having a mixed background. 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 given in Figure 1.

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

<b>Country</b>	<b>Secularity</b>	<b>Proportion Catholics 1900</b>
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



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

In order to validate this measure, i.e., 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>viii</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 from 1900 is very high (Pearson's  $r = 0.971$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that, despite the degree to which it has secularized, a country's religious *identity* has not changed significantly in one 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 control variable on the macro level, apart from the earlier mentioned wave-variable, we used the country's GDP per capita (\$) (Inglehart 1997; Inglehart and Baker 2000), using the UN statistics website<sup>viii</sup> for data on this variable. On the individual level, we also controlled for gender, level of education and age (Houtman 2003). We standardized all variables used. See Table 3 for the descriptive statistics of the variables that we have thus created.

**Table III.** 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

## 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 simultaneously estimate 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, etc.) are nested in 32 *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 IV.** 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*	--	--	--	0.02* (0.01)
Non-belief	--	--	--	0.04** (0.01)
Secularity country*	--	--	--	0.04** (0.01)
Non-belief	--	--	0.0030	0.0016
-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

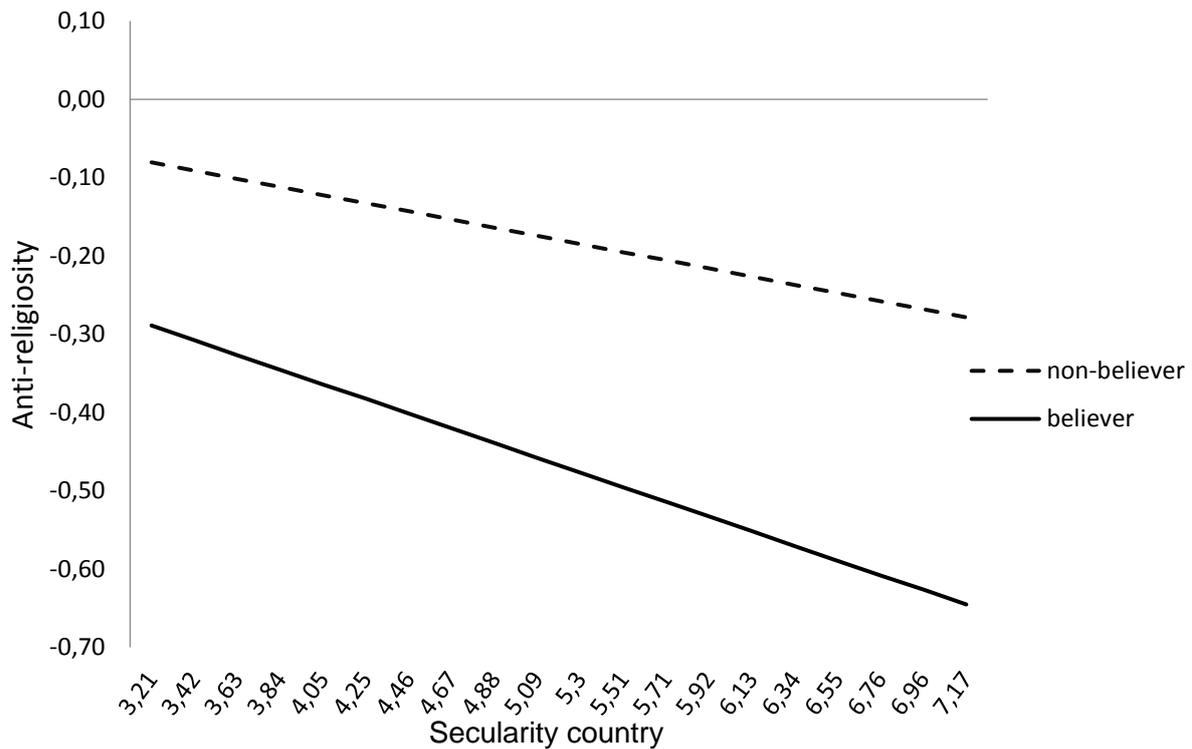
\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001 (two-tailed test for significance). Source: ISSP 1998 and 2008, RCS

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 people's anti-religious attitude<sup>ix</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 on this level, compared to the country level. To the extent that this attitude is more prevalent in some countries rather than others, this must hence be attributed to that country's composition (more people living there with that attitude). The control variable education has no independent effect on people's opposition to religion. Only males and older people appear to oppose to 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, i.e. for them not going to church is an expression of not liking the church, whereas among non-believers there is more diversity. Among them, for example, some might feel a sense of belonging without believing (Davie 1994). This would mitigate the score on anti-religious attitude for this group. Nevertheless, compared to believers, non-believers are on average significantly more anti-religious in their attitude, 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, gives a positive effect for country-level secularity (.02 n.s.) and increases the non-belief effect (.19\*\*\*).

Considering the question in what context the non-believers have the strongest anti-religious attitudes, we expected less instead of more anti-religiosity among 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 over the place of religion is stronger when a country is more secular. See figure 2 for a representation of this finding<sup>x</sup>. In appendix B, a marginal effects plot for this interaction is also presented, to show its substantive and statistical significance (based on Golder 2003).



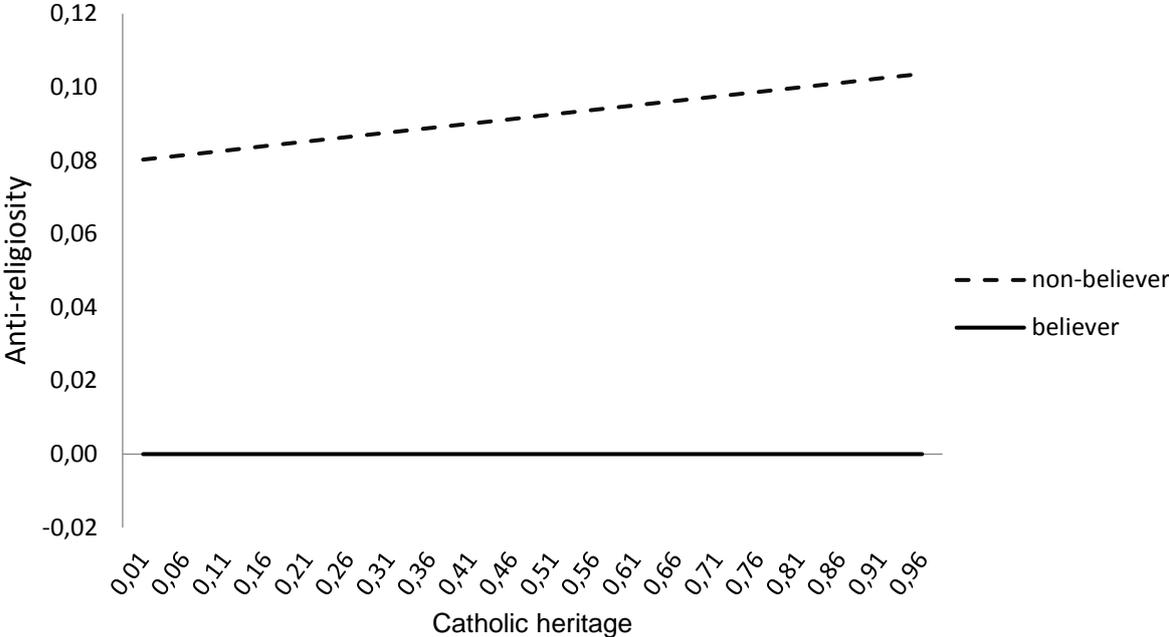
**Figure 2.** Predicted anti-religiosity for believers and non-believers in countries with low and high levels of secularity in 32 country-waves in 1998 and 2008 (ISSP).

However, figure 2 also demonstrates how in secular contexts in particular believers have relatively low levels of anti-religiosity. This implies that stronger religious-secular polarization in secularized contexts can be attributed mostly to the remaining religious fervent core, who of course maintain strong pro-religious attitudes. In secular contexts, then, our findings 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). In effect, this nuance confirms our hypothesis and also 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 we can attribute this polarization to, first and foremost.

Now 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 table 4, model 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 (also see appendix C for a marginal effects plot for this interaction).



**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).

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, this polarization between religious and non-religious can be attributed to relatively high levels of anti-religiosity among the non-religious. Since our operationalization measures a historical presence of Catholicism and we included country level secularity in our model as well, 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, this is quite an interesting finding (2016, 168).

## Discussion

In this paper, 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 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 for 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 well 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 Campbell's expectation that anti-religious protests are more often than not cries of moral outrage and ethical rebellion (1971, 125), directed to the norms and values which have become dominant in a group or community (see also Campbell 2007, 224; Lehmann 2013; Martin 1978, 24; McLeod 1997, 214; Ribberink, Achterberg and Houtman 2017).

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 have expressed the expectation that these conflicts counter the arguments for a continuation of secularization (Achterberg et al. 2009; Casanova 1994, 2004; Gorski et al. 2012). For some, Western Europe even has arrived at a post-secular stage, where religion again takes center stage in public life (Beckford 2012; Dillon 2010; Fox 2016; Gorski 2000; Moberg, Granholm and Nynäs 2012). 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 room for apostasy (Campbell 2007, 125). This

is what we find, with lower levels of anti-religiosity among the non-religious in countries where already many people have 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 these countries' cultures, 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. Hence, referencing 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 maintained: “[t]he 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 as well, then, as for example European politics (Lehmann 2013). As an illustration, a recent newspaper article on the euro crisis referred to religious heritage, i.e., 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*, July 17, 2015). This was a quote from the French minister of Economy Emmanuel Macron, talking about the clash between the Greek government and the European Union, dominated by the German Prime Minister Merkel, on the conditions for Greece to stay within the EU. Religious heritage, then, 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.

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<sup>i</sup> 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).

<sup>ii</sup> 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 (2005, 86-87; also Bruce 2011, 8). In terms of its value pattern, it shares with Catholicism and differs

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from Protestantism in its tendency to monopolize the religious domain of a national culture and compete with secular authorities for power.

<sup>iii</sup> See De Graaf (2013) and Gambetta (1994) on the way this would influence religious institutions' reputation and ensuing differences in support.

<sup>iv</sup> These are separate countries in this dataset.

<sup>v</sup> 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%.

<sup>vi</sup> When data was not available, the dataset-editors calculated data based on an extrapolation from the available sources, so that comparisons are made possible. See the codebook and explanations on method and design here: <http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/BROWN.asp> (Web 18 Nov. 2015).

<sup>vii</sup> Cyprus is the only Orthodox country in this selection of Western European countries. See note ii and Martin 2005, 86-87; also Bruce 2011, 8.

<sup>viii</sup> <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/dnlList.asp> (Web 8 Dec. 2015).

<sup>ix</sup> 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. First, the ISSP, only consists of three waves on Religion (1991, 1998 and 2008). Even if we would have included the third wave, this would not have allowed for testing the within country cross level interaction, which Te Grotenhuis et al. (2015) point out as relevant. Second, even if three waves would be sufficient and we had included the nine Western European countries from 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.

<sup>x</sup> 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 Brambor et al. (2006).

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## Appendixes

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

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

Source: RCS, ISSP 1998 and 2008

<sup>2</sup> Data of 1800 are in fact from 1857.

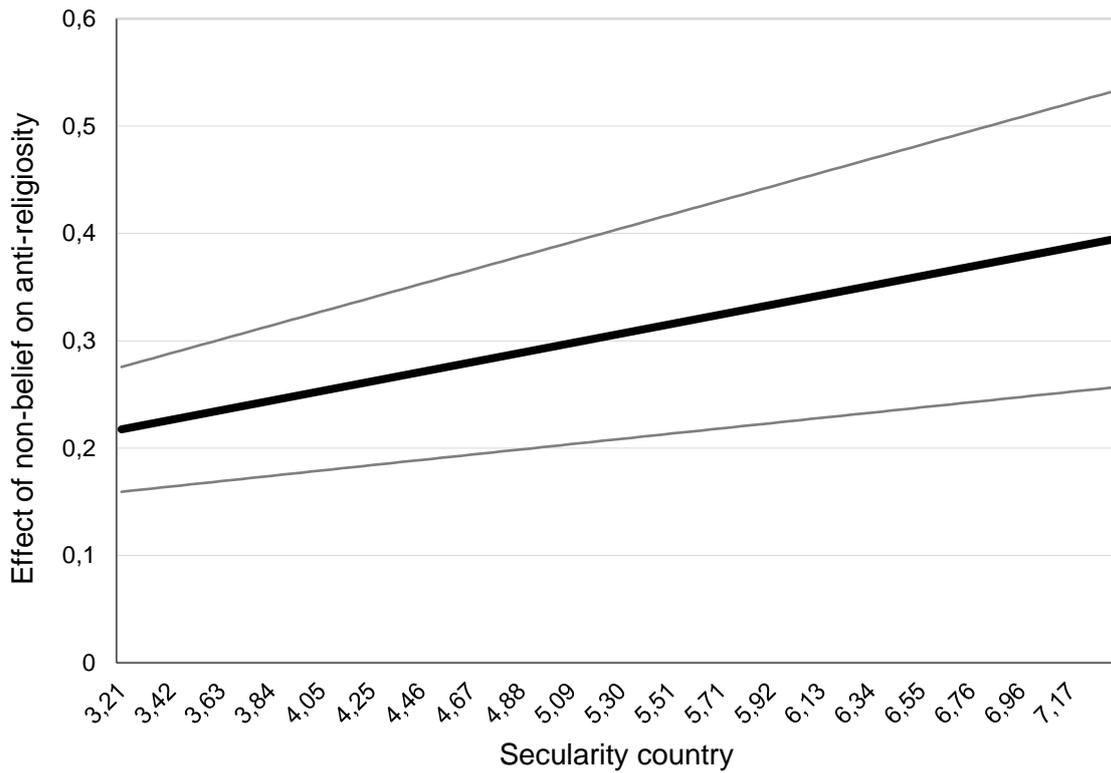
<sup>3</sup> Data of 1800 and 1900 include Northern Cyprus, which has a large share of Muslim population. ISSP data exclude Northern Cyprus.

<sup>4</sup> ISSP data of East and West Germany taken together

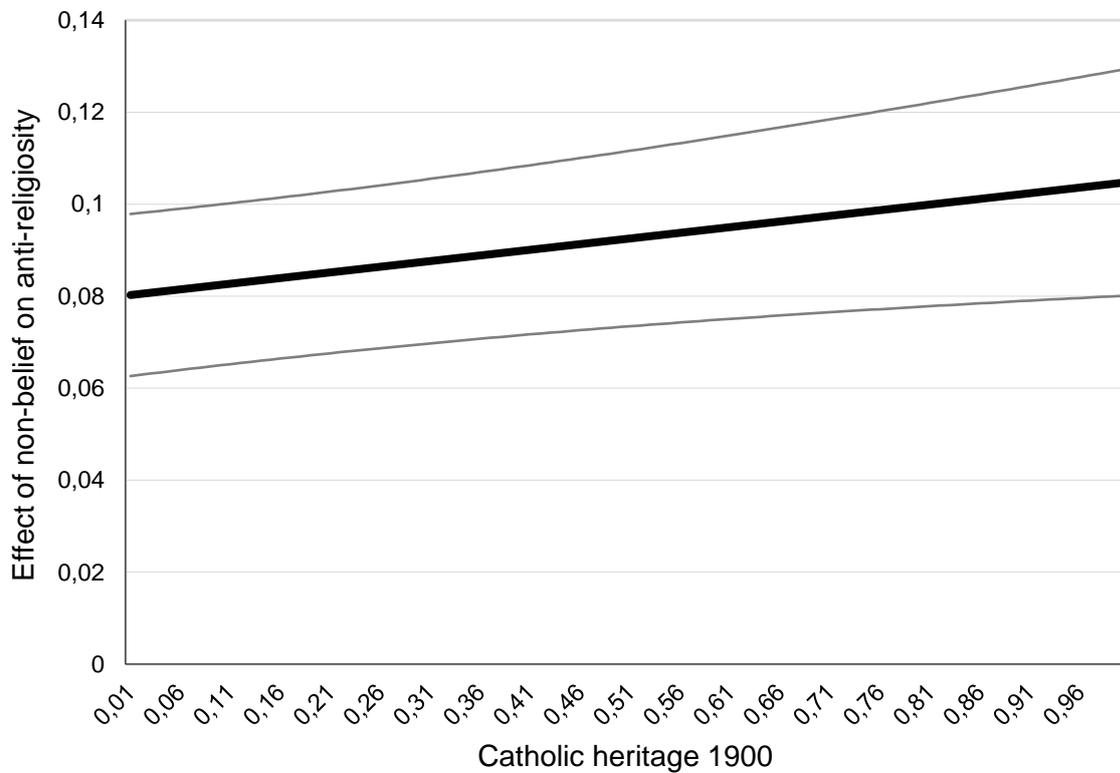
<sup>5</sup> Data of 1800 are in fact from 1801 and include Northern Ireland.

<sup>6</sup> Data of 1800 are in fact from 1816. This also holds true for Germany in 1800.

<sup>7</sup> Data of 1900 is based on calculation extracting Northern Ireland census data of 1921 from 1920 census total of Ireland.



**Appendix B** Predicted effect of non-belief on anti-religiosity for countries with different degree 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).