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**Changing patterns of religious affiliation, church attendance and marriage  
across five areas of Europe since the early 1980s: trends and associations**

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**Changing patterns of religious affiliation, church attendance and marriage  
across five areas of Europe since the early 1980s: trends and associations**

## **Abstract**

This study draws on three waves of the European Values Survey (conducted between 1981 and 1984, between 1989 and 1993, and between 1999 and 2004) across five countries for which full data are available (Great Britain, Italy, The Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Spain, and Sweden) in order to address five research questions. Question one examined changes in religious affiliation. Across all five countries, the proportions of the non-affiliated increased. Question two examined changes in church attendance. Across all five countries, the proportions of the non-attenders increased. Question three examined changes in marital status. Across all five countries the proportions of the population checking the category 'married' declined, although in Spain the decline was marginal. Question four examined the association between religious affiliation and being married. The religious affiliated were more likely to be married than the non-affiliated. Question five examined the association between church attendance and being married. Weekly attenders were more likely to be married than the non-attenders. Overall these data support the close association between religion and marriage across five European countries (where there are very different religious climates) and support the hypothesis that changing religious values and changing family values go hand-in-hand.

## **Introduction**

Historically religion and family life seem to have been closely linked across much of Europe (shaped both by the Catholic tradition and by the Protestant reformed tradition) and this linkage seems to have been exported to a wider world shaped by European colonialism. Across much of Europe the post-war years since the early 1950s have witnessed significant erosion of traditional social values, including family life, as well as religious adherence and practice. Social scientific interest has been shown in assessing the extent to which these two fields are related.

From a scientific perspective, however, neither construct (family life and religion) has been simple to define and to operationalise. One research tradition that has tackled this problem has taken marital status as both a convenient and powerful indicator of family life. It has been noted that traditional views of family life being consolidated by indissoluble marriage vows have been eroded by increasing rates of cohabitation and by increasing rates of divorce. Properly framed questions assessing ‘marital status’ should be able to generate insight into trends and patterns fundamental to family life.

Within established social scientific research, religion has long been characterised as a multi-dimensional construct, embracing dimensions like affiliation, practice, belief, orientation and attitude. Moreover, within the social scientific literature, there are well-recognised and well-rehearsed strengths, limitations, and weaknesses with the operationalisations of each of these dimensions. Research concerned with assessing the association between marital status and religion has tended to rely in particular on two indicators, namely religious affiliation and church attendance. These two indicators are routinely available in many social surveys and generally prove to be relatively robust. For example, associations between self-

assigned religious affiliation and various aspects of marital status have been demonstrated by Bahr and Chadwick (1985), Lehrer (2004), Dempsey and de Vaus (2004), de Graaf and Kalmijn (2000) and Pearce and Thornton (2007). Associations between self-reported church attendance and various aspects of marital status have been demonstrated by Petrowsky (1976), DeMars and Leslie (1984), Bahr and Chadwick (1985), Thornton, Axinn, and Hill (1992), Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite (1995), Chatters, Taylor, and Lincoln (1999), Berrington and Diamond (1999), Zimmerman and Easterlin (2000), Wilcox and Wolfinger (2007), and Maselko and Buka (2008).

Unique opportunities to explore the association between marital status and both self-assigned religious affiliation and self-reported church attendance may be provided by the various social attitude surveys conducted within various European countries. The usefulness of such surveys for this purpose has been recently explored in a series of four papers drawing on the British Social Attitudes Survey dataset (Williams & Francis, in press; Village, Williams, & Francis, under review a, under review b; Francis, Williams, & Village, under review).

The British Social Attitudes Survey was established in 1983 (see Jowell, 1984) and has been repeated every subsequent year apart from 1988 and 1992. Each year data have been collected on marital status, self-assigned religious affiliation and self-reported church attendance. Analyses of these data are, however, somewhat complicated by certain changes in the way in which these key questions on marital status and religion were posed. In terms of marital status, the four options provided in 1983 were: married, separated/divorced, widowed, and never married. In 1984 there were still four options, but the category 'married' was now expanded to 'married or living as married'. In 1984 these two notions were separated into two distinct

categories: 'married' and 'living as married'. Since 1985 no further changes have taken place in this question, and comparisons between years become straightforward.

In terms of self-assigned religious affiliation, the question posed to the interviewee in 1983 was this: 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' If the answer was affirmative, the interviewer was required to probe for the faith group, and, if Christian, for the denomination. The question has remained stable since 1983, but the pre-coded list of possible responses has undergone change and development. In order to establish comparison between years it is necessary to try to construct comparable classification by combining categories.

In terms of self-reported church attendance, the data are somewhat more problematic. In 1983 the religious attendance question followed immediately after the religious affiliation question and the assumption was made that non-affiliates never attend, so the attendance question was only asked of affiliates. In 1989, however, a new question was added to the survey concerning previous affiliation, or affiliation of family during childhood, and the attendance question was asked of the wider group who responded positively to this question.

Even allowing for these problems with the indicators of marital status and religion, in their first paper, Williams and Francis (in press) were able to address and to provide illustrative answers for four research questions. Question one examined changes in self-assigned religious affiliation in Britain between 1983 and 2005. The data found that, in spite of increases in non-affiliates and in affiliates to other world faiths, by the mid 2000s around 55% of the population still self-assigned as Christian. Question two examined changes in self-reported church attendance between 1983 and 2005. The data found that during this period weekly attenders declined only slightly from around 12% to 11%. Question three examined the association between religious

affiliation and marital status. The data found that, among non-affiliates, cohabitation rose from around 5% in the mid 1980s to around 14 in the mid 2000s. In 2005, cohabitation was reported by 14% of non-affiliates, 9% of Roman Catholics, 6% of Anglicans and 3% of Free Church members. Question four examined the association between church attendance and marital status. The data found that the highest level of cohabitation was among those classified as having no religion and of whom the attendance question was not asked (19%), followed by those who never practice (10%), those who attend once or twice a year (6%) and those who attend weekly (2%). On the basis of these data, Williams and Francis (in press) concluded that ‘continuing decline in self-assigned religious affiliation may be reflected in further growth in cohabitation and, consequently, further decline in marriage.’

Also in the conclusion to their paper, Williams and Francis (in press) recognised that a major limitation with their presentation concerned the reliance on examining the transparent bivariate association between religion and marital status. They argued that future research concerned with extracting from the database further insights into the nature of the links between religion (self-assigned religious affiliation and self-reported church attendance) and family status (being married, cohabiting or divorced) would benefit from employing multi-variate models of analysis. Responding to this invitation, in the next two papers in the series, by Village, Williams, and Francis (under review a, under review b) employed multi-level analyses and confirmed the robust nature of the association.

A second limitation with the first study reported by Williams and Francis (in press) concerned the invisibility of the individual non-Christian faith traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism) within analyses that examined trends year-on-year, given the small number of individuals affiliated with these

traditions with each year's sample. In the fourth paper in the series, Francis, Williams, and Village (under review) compared aggregated data for the ten surveys conducted between 1983 and 1995 (recalling that no surveys were conducted in 1988 and 1992) with aggregated data for the ten surveys conducted between 1996 and 2005. These analyses draw attention to the limitations of the data source (given the small number of adherents to the minority faith groups even when ten surveys have been combined), to the clear and complex associations between faith traditions and marital status, to the persistence of these associations across the period for which data are available, and to the way in which members of faith groups are following the liberalising trends prevalent among the religiously unaffiliated.

These three strands reported by Williams and Francis (in press), Village, Williams, and Francis (under review a; under review b), and Francis, Williams, and Village (under review) have demonstrated the value of the British Social Attitudes Survey for exploring and illuminating the link between religion and changing patterns of family life as accessed by marital status between 1983 and 2005 in Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales). Against this background, the aim of the present study is to extend this research tradition by drawing on the European Values Survey where comparable question have been asked in various European countries at roughly comparable intervals.

The European Values Survey was established in 1979 to understand and measure the beliefs and values of people across Europe. According to Halman (2001:2)

The intention of EVS is to explore basic values and it does not focus so much on testing particular hypotheses. The project does not aim at rejecting or confirming specific theoretical ideas. The main purpose of the project is to attain a better insight into fundamental human values and value differences, similarities, and changes within Europe.

The European Values Survey (EVS) has been run over three waves. The first wave (1981-1984) was distributed to ten member nations of the European Community. The next two waves (1989-1993 and 1999-2004) were distributed to all countries in Europe, with the 1989-1993 wave also distributed in the United States of America. While the EVS sets out to cover every country in the European Community, the current paper focuses on just five countries that participated in the first wave and have consistently participated in both subsequent waves, thus enabling comparisons to be drawn at three points in time: the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Great Britain and Northern Ireland. These countries have been selected not only because they represent the core group of countries originally surveyed but because they also represent diverse and differing religious traditions. The Netherlands and Northern Ireland experience the influence of both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant traditions; Spain is mainly influenced by the Roman Catholic tradition; Sweden is influenced by both the Protestant and the Reformed traditions; and Great Britain is influenced by the Anglican, Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions in England and the Reformed tradition in Scotland and Wales.

Drawing on the EVS from the three waves conducted within five areas on Europe, the present study plans to address five specific questions. The first question concerns charting the levels of self-assigned religious affiliation across the five countries during the early 1980s, and monitoring the rate of change over the subsequent two decades. The second question concerns charting the levels of self-reported church attendance across the five countries during the early 1980s and monitoring the rate of change over the subsequent two decades. The third question concerns charting the levels of being married across the five countries during the early 1980s and monitoring the rate of change over the subsequent two decades. The fourth

question examines the association between self-assigned religious affiliation and being married across the five countries and the three waves of the survey. The fifth question examines the association between self-reported church attendance and being married across the five countries and the three waves of the survey.

## **Method**

### Sample

For the five countries utilised in this study the following sample sizes were achieved. For wave one: the Netherlands, 1221; Spain, 2303; Sweden, 954; Great Britain, 1167; Northern Ireland, 312. For wave two: the Netherlands, 1017; Spain, 4147; Sweden, 1047; Great Britain, 1484; Northern Ireland, 304. For wave three: the Netherlands, 1003; Spain, 2409; Sweden, 1015; Great Britain, 1000; Northern Ireland, 1000.

### Measures

*Marital Status* was assessed by the question, ‘What is your current legal marital status?’ Five possible answer categories were given: married, living as married, divorced, separated, widowed and single/never married. In wave three of the Great British questionnaire, the living as married category was omitted.

*Self assigned religious affiliation* was assessed by the question, ‘What is your religious denomination?’ A range of response categories were given, including major Christian denominations and other major faith groups, as well as the option none. For the purposes of the present analysis these categories were recoded to distinguish between the religiously affiliated and the religious non-affiliated

*Self reported religious attendance* was assessed by the question ‘Apart from weddings, funerals and baptisms, about how often do you attend religious services

these days?’ Respondents were asked to choose between: more than once a week, once a week, once a month, Christmas/Easter Day, other specific holy days, once a year, less often, and never or practically never. For the purposes of the present analyses, the more than once a week and once a week categories have been collapsed into the category ‘weekly’ and contrasted with those who never or practically never attend.

## **Results**

### Patterns of religious affiliation

In order to achieve comparability between the different countries, affiliation within the different religious groups has been aggregated to make one overall distinction between those who are religiously affiliated and those who are not religiously affiliated. According to the data presented in table 1, in the 1980s the Netherlands

- insert table 1 about here -

emerged as the country with the lowest level of religious affiliation (62%), while the other four countries maintained a level of religious affiliation above 90%.

Comparison between religious affiliation and religious attendance, however, clearly demonstrates how religious affiliation functions differently across the five countries.

While affiliation remained high in Sweden and Great Britain (countries which maintained established churches), church attendance was much lower in these countries than in the Netherlands where affiliation was so much lower.

According to these data, all five countries experienced erosion in self-assigned religious affiliation between the first wave and the third wave of the EVS. In Northern Ireland affiliation dropped from 97% to 83%, in Sweden from 93% to 74%, in Spain from 91% to 83%, in Great Britain from 90% to 85%, and in the Netherlands

from 62% to 45% (in the context of these clear trends, no explanation can be provided for the data from wave two for Great Britain).

### Patterns of religious attendance

In order to clarify patterns of religious attendance, table 1 presents the proportions of the population who attend church at least weekly (combining more than once a week and once a week) and those who never attend church apart from weddings, funerals, and baptisms. According to these data, in the 1980s Sweden emerged as the country with the lowest level of religious attendance (6%), followed by Great Britain (13%). The Netherlands occupied the middle position (25%), with Spain (40%), and Northern Ireland (52%) displaying higher levels of attendance.

According to these data four of the five countries experienced erosion in self-reported religious attendance between the first wave and the third wave of the EVS, with Great Britain being the exception to this trend. In terms of non-attendance, the proportions of the population who never attended church rose in all five countries: Great Britain from 42% to 55%, the Netherlands from 42% to 48%, Sweden from 38% to 46%, Spain from 26% to 32%, and Northern Ireland from 12% to 22%.

### Patterns in marital status

Table 2 presents the proportions of the samples who report being married for the three waves across the five countries. According to these data, in the early 1980s there was little difference in these figures between the five countries: the Netherlands (65%), Sweden (62%), Northern Ireland (62%), Spain (61%), and Great Britain (58%). Moreover, these small differences do not reflect differences either in levels of religious affiliation or in levels of religious practice.

According to these data, four of the five countries experienced erosion in the status of being married between the first wave and the third wave of the EVS. In the Netherlands the proportion of people who reported being married dropped from 65% to 55%, in Northern Ireland from 62% to 56%, in Sweden from 62% to 47%, and in Great Britain from 58% to 52%. The exception to this trend was Spain where the proportion of people who reported being married remained roughly stable between 61% and 60%.

### Marital status and religious affiliation

Table 2 explores the association between being married and religious affiliation across the five nations and for each of the three waves. According to the chi-square

-insert table 2 about here –

test a clear and consistent association exists between self-assigned religious affiliation and being married across all three waves in the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden. The same basic pattern applies to Great Britain, but is distorted somewhat by the inexplicable figures for religious affiliation reported in table 1. The same basic pattern applies to Northern Ireland, but is rendered less stable by small sample sizes and low proportions reporting non-affiliated status in wave one and wave two of the survey.

Two further features of these data are also worth comment. First, apart from Northern Ireland (where the number of non-affiliates in the samples for the first two waves were too small to be stable), there is a clear decline in the proportions of the non-affiliates who report being married from wave one to wave three of the survey: from 58% to 50% in the Netherlands, from 49% to 41% in Sweden, from 45% to 39% in Great Britain, and from 40% to 37% in Spain. Second, apart from Spain, this

pattern of decline is also clearly evident among the religiously affiliated: from 70% to 61% in the Netherlands, from 63% to 57% in Northern Ireland, from 63% to 49% in Sweden, and from 59% to 55% in Great Britain. While religious affiliation may be associated with slowing the erosion of marriage, it is by no means a complete antidote to the trend.

### Church attendance and marital status

Table 2 also explores the association between being married and church attendance across the five nations and for each of the three waves. According to the chi-square test a clear and consistent association exists between self-reported church attendance and being married across all three waves in the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. The same pattern applies in Northern Ireland for all three waves, although for waves one and two the findings are not statistically significant in light of the small samples and the low proportions of non-attenders. The same pattern applies in Great Britain for waves one and three, although not for wave two.

Once again, two other features of these data are also worth comment. First, there is a clear decline in the proportions of the non-attenders who report being married from wave one to wave three of the survey: from 60% to 49% in the Netherlands, from 54% to 47% in Great Britain, from 52% to 46% in Spain, from 49% to 39% in Sweden, and from 49% to 43% in Northern Ireland. Second, apart from Great Britain, this pattern of decline is also clearly evident among the weekly attenders: from 72% to 60% in the Netherlands, from 68% to 62% in Spain, from 67% to 58% in Sweden, and from 66% to 62% in Northern Ireland.

## **Conclusion**

The major strength of databases like the European Values Survey is that they permit two kinds of comparisons to be made: comparisons between countries and comparisons over time. In the present study, re-analyses of three key variables (marital status, religious affiliation, and church attendance) across five countries (Great Britain, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Spain, and Sweden) and at three periods (1981-1984, 1989-1993, and 1999-2004) has generated an informed picture of a relatively consistent pattern of change. Overall, the proportions of the population who are not religiously affiliated, who are not participating in religious practices, and who are not married are growing. The simple bivariate test of association confirms that religiosity and marital status are linked in a consistent way across the five countries and at the three periods in time. Further multi-level analyses are needed to confirm whether these associations persist after taking into account key contextual variables, like age.

While this kind of cross-sectional survey is well able to demonstrate the link between religiosity and marital status, it is not able to pronounce on the direction of causality. The data are open to two different paths of interpretation. On one account, since religious institutions have played such an important role in regulating family life and upholding the ideal of marriage, it is reasonable to hypothesise that those who dissociate themselves from religious affiliation and religious practice are less likely to feel influenced by religious teaching. In other words, the religiously unaffiliated and those who are not religiously practising may be less likely to seek marriage. On another account, since religious institutions tend to generate communities of like-minded individuals who may appear to look with disapproval on those who adopt alternative values and alternative lifestyles, it is reasonable to hypothesise that those

who live outside conventional (married) family structures may wish to distance themselves from religious communities. In other words, those who choose to live outside conventional marriage relationships may be less likely to seek religious affiliation or to engage in religious practice. Possibly there is truth in both accounts. Nonetheless, what remains clear from the data is the conclusion that changing religious values and changing family values go hand-in-hand.

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**Table 1** Religious affiliation and religious attendance (%)

	Valid N	Religious affiliation		Religious Attendance	
		Affiliated	Non Affiliated	Weekly	Never
<b>Great Britain</b>					
Wave 1	1167	90	10	13	49
Wave 2	1484	57	43	14	47
Wave 3	1000	85	15	15	55
<b>Netherlands</b>					
Wave 1	1221	62	38	25	42
Wave 2	1017	51	49	20	43
Wave 3	1003	45	55	14	48
<b>Northern Ireland</b>					
Wave 1	312	97	3	52	12
Wave 2	304	91	10	50	13
Wave 3	1000	84	16	46	22
<b>Spain</b>					
Wave 1	2303	91	9	40	26
Wave 2	4147	85	15	29	30
Wave 3	2409	83	17	26	32
<b>Sweden</b>					
Wave 1	954	93	7	6	38
Wave 2	1047	82	18	4	49
Wave 3	1015	74	25	4	46

**Table 2** Association between being married and church attendance and religious affiliation

	N	whole population %	<u>religious affiliation</u>		$\chi^2$	p<	<u>church attendance</u>		$\chi^2$	p<
			none %	yes %			weekly %	never %		
<b>Great Britain</b>										
Wave 1	1167	58	45	59	8.22	.01	56	54	0.41	NS
Wave 2	1148	61	58	64	6.28	.05	65	57	4.75	.05
Wave 3	965	52	39	55	11.48	.001	65	47	13.19	.001
<b>Netherlands</b>										
Wave 1	1189	65	58	70	17.99	.001	72	60	11.93	.001
Wave 2	1011	57	46	68	52.49	.001	70	50	20.87	.001
Wave 3	988	55	50	61	12.72	.001	60	49	12.08	.001
<b>Northern Ireland</b>										
Wave 1	312	62	20	63	7.62	.01	66	49	3.80	NS
Wave 2	304	65	52	66	2.28	NS	67	53	2.84	NS
Wave 3	995	56	40	57	14.23	.001	62	43	22.84	.001
<b>Spain</b>										
Wave 1	2303	61	40	63	48.02	.001	68	52	40.41	.001
Wave 2	4145	61	48	64	52.67	.001	67	51	63.24	.001
Wave 3	2405	60	37	62	86.27	.001	63	46	40.52	.001
<b>Sweden</b>										
Wave 1	949	62	49	63	5.74	.05	67	49	6.36	.05
Wave 2	1042	52	42	55	10.10	.05	64	46	5.21	.05
Wave 3	1013	47	41	49	4.91	.05	58	39	5.35	.05