

Christian Religion in the West

Privatization or Public Revitalization?

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1. Introduction

“After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophecies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper ‘requiescat in pace’” (Stark 1999: 269). Stark’s words, published just before the turn of the century, may count on much approval among sociologists of religion today. Secularization theory has been discredited because of its inability to account for religious change in the modern world (e.g., Berger, 1999; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Houtman and Mascini, 2002) and because of its sheer broadness and lack of specificity, as emphasized by Hadden (1987: 587), for instance, when he noted that it is a “hotchpotch of loosely employed ideas rather than a systematic theory”.

Secularization theory’s two principal subtheses, the ‘decline-of-religion thesis’ and the ‘privatization thesis’ (Casanova, 1994), have both become increasingly contested and recent research even suggests that these two aspects of secularization may develop in a remarkably uneven way. That idea is put forward by Achterberg et al. (2009), who point out that the decline of Christian religion in the West spawns its public revitalization rather than its further privatization. This paper elaborates on this by assessing the empirical merits of two objections that suggest that these recent findings may after all not contradict the established notion that religious decline and religious privatization occur in tandem.

2. Privatization or Public Revitalization?

2.1. *Public Revitalization of Christian Religion in the West?*

According to the decline-of-religion thesis, one of the principal subtheses of secularization theory, religion continues to lose ground in modern societies. This thesis is critiqued nowadays by those who maintain that it is only *institutionalized* religion (read: church Christianity) that loses ground in *Western* countries (with the possible exception of the United States), while in the non-Western world Islam and Christianity (in particular Pentecostalism) are thriving (Berger, 1999). Moreover, even in Western countries, and particularly in those where the Christian churches have declined most, post-Christian inner-life spiritualities of the 'New Age' variety have come to flourish in precisely the same period during which the Christian churches declined (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Houtman and Aupers, 2007; Houtman and Mascini, 2002; Houtman et al., 2009).

According to the privatization thesis, the second major subthesis of secularization theory, religion withdraws increasingly from the public realm and recedes into the private domain (Luckmann, 1967). Much like the decline-of-religion thesis, it has meanwhile become a major target of critique, with critics drawing attention to the renewed public assertiveness and vitality of contemporary religion, whether in politics (Casanova, 1994; Habermas, 2001), the media (Meyer and Moors, 2006), civil society (Casanova, 1994), and corporate life (Aupers, 2008[2004]; Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Costea et al., 2007).

Somewhat surprising against the background of the almost universal acknowledgment that secularization is a multidimensional phenomenon, the possibility that religious decline and religious privatization may develop in different directions has received only scant attention in the literature. The typical (albeit usually tacit) assumption is hence that declining levels of Christian religiosity tend to coincide with a decline in its social significance for the faithful (e.g., Halman et al., 1999). In his plea for considering secularization as a decline in religion's social significance for individual believers, Chaves (1994) does not seriously consider the alternative possibility of an increase in social significance either (see also: Lechner, 1991). In his historical critique of the debate on secularization, Gorski (2000: 162) on the other hand stresses the importance of having an eye for the possibility that different dimensions of secularization may not necessarily develop in a similar fashion.

Acknowledging secularization's multidimensionality, Bruce (2002: 39) also takes care to point out that "the secularization paradigm is not the sociological equivalent of synchronized swimming. It does not require or expect that all indices of religious vitality will decline at the same speed or evenly". As a consequence, he argues, secularization theory – or, more correct and preferred by Bruce, "the secularization paradigm" – is not threatened by

minor or exceptional counter indications: “We should never forget that [general social changes] are abstractions created by colour-washing the jagged edges of events in the real world. (...) The jagged bits are a problem only if it can be plausibly argued that a different abstraction can be better drawn from the same material. If there are too many exceptions, then we should consider painting ‘growth’ or even just ‘random fluctuations’. But some small reversals need not trouble the paradigm” (Idem: 40). In other words: if an all-out process of secularization is taking place, then we will surely find a number of outliers and exceptions, but the general pattern will be a decline of individual religiosity coinciding with a declining role of religion in driving preferences about the role of religion in public life.

Yet, recent research suggests that religion’s social significance at the level of individual believers has increased rather than decreased. Based on research conducted in the Netherlands – a country in which personal religiosity has dropped to much lower levels than in virtually all other countries in the world (Norris and Inglehart, 2004) –, Dekker (2007) has presented evidence that the number of Christians who say that their belief is “significant” or “very significant” for them has increased by almost 30 per cent in recent decades (from 33 per cent in 1979 to 42 per cent in 2006). He concludes that “[t]he development already visible 10 years ago has continued during the last decade: faith plays a role in the lives of fewer and fewer people, yet becomes increasingly significant for those who *do* believe. Especially the number of believers who say that their faith is very significant in their lives has increased relatively very strongly” (Idem: 56; our translation from Dutch, emphasis in original).

Recent research by Achterberg et al. (2009) has elaborated on this, building on the quintessentially Weberian notion that the study of secularization should not remain confined to the institutional level, as many a secularization theorist has done, but should address micro-level changes in religion’s significance for individual believers as well (Chaves, 1994; Turina, 2007). Besides a replication of the trend found by Dekker (2007) for the Netherlands, Achterberg et al. have yielded cross-national patterns for 18 Western countries that are consistent with the notion that in countries where Christian religion has declined most, aspirations for religion’s public revitalization are not weaker, but stronger than in other countries. What these recent findings suggest, in other words, is that religious decline coincides with religion’s public revitalization rather than with its further privatization: that while their numbers have shrunk, Christians in the West have become less rather than more willing to accept the ‘secularist truce’, the secular contract that guarantees religious freedom

on the one hand, yet bans religion from the public sphere by relegating it to the private realm on the other (see also: Taylor, 2007).

The present paper aims to elaborate on the aforementioned studies by critically interrogating the theoretical interpretation of the earlier findings in terms of religion's public revitalization. It does so by scrutinizing the empirical merits of two objections to this theoretical interpretation that, if confirmed, suggest that religious decline and religious privatization may nonetheless develop in tandem after all.

2.2. Two Objections to the Notion of Religion's Public Revitalization

Skepticism about the claim that religious decline spawns its public revitalization may firstly be informed by the suspicion that Christian longings for religion's public revitalization in the most secular contexts are perhaps particularly present among the older cohorts of Christians. If such is the case, these aspirations are merely typical of the gradually waning older cohorts of Christians, while the younger ones are satisfied with the privatized status the secular truce intends for their creed. It is after all virtually uncontested that religious decline is driven by the logic of cohort replacement, with older and more typically Christian cohorts gradually dying out and being replaced by younger and less Christian ones (Bruce, 2009: 152; Voas, 2003; Voas and Crocket, 2005). Needless to say, then, such a finding would clearly contradict the notion that religious decline stimulates religion's public revitalization rather than its further privatization. This notion instead leads us to expect not only that Christian aspirations for religion's public revitalization are most typically found in the countries where Christian religion is least widespread (Hypothesis 1, which is identical to the hypothesis confirmed previously by Dekker (2007) and Achterberg et al. (2009)), but also that these aspirations are not only found among older Christians, but just as much among younger ones (Hypothesis 2).

We also need to consider a second objection. This is the possibility that aspirations for religion's public revitalization in the most secular contexts remain nothing more than mere longings that are not acted out and have no real public consequences. To study the validity of this second objection we will compare Christian religiosity's role in shaping voting behavior across countries. If religious decline coincides with religious privatization, Christian religion must after all be less important for voting in countries where it has declined most; if, on the other hand, a public revitalization of religion takes place in these countries, it must play a more important role there.

If the previous findings really signify a public revitalization of Christian religion, we should not merely find widespread aspirations for the latter in countries where it has declined most (as Hypothesis 1 predicts), then, but also that Christians in these countries are more inclined than elsewhere to vote for rightist-Christian political parties (Hypothesis 3). Moreover, we should find for basically all countries under study that Christians with strong aspirations for religion's public revitalization are more likely to actually vote for rightist parties than Christians for whom this aspiration is only weak (Hypothesis 4). Finally, the notion of religion's public revitalization due to religious decline informs the hypothesis that these aspirations affect the voting behavior of Christians most strongly in countries where Christian religion has declined most (Hypothesis 5).

These hypotheses contradict the notion that religion has lost its former political salience in the wake of its numerical decline. This notion is widespread in the literature, as Broughton and Ten Napel (2000: 4) note when they state that "[i]t has become common for religion not even to be mentioned in analyses of voting behaviour (...). If the topic of religion is mentioned at all, it is usually only in passing and largely to conclude that it doesn't matter anymore, that religion has 'declined' in its impact on electoral choice". Bruce (2003: 94ff) and Norris and Inglehart (2004) are only two examples of studies that maintain that religion's political significance has declined along with processes of religious decline. These claims run counter to other studies, however, which maintain that religion remains a significant trigger for political behavior, including voting, in Western countries. Even though much of this literature is devoted to the United States (e.g., Lichterman, 2005; Weithman, 2002), where the Christian Right features a strong political presence and salience, studies from other countries maintain as well that the political salience of Christian religion has not declined (cf. Ruiter, 2008).

If anything, these competing claims in the literature about changes in the political salience of religion point out that it would be premature to consider the debate about the implications of religious decline for religion's public and political salience as closed.

3. Data and Measurement

3.1. Data

To compare (aspirations for) religion's public revitalization between countries in which Christian religion has declined strongly and countries in which it still holds a firm position, we rely on the *International Social Survey Program, Religious II 1998* data set. From this data source, we have selected the 18 western countries in which Christianity was the dominant religious tradition during the second half of the twentieth century, and in which it has declined during the last half century, albeit of course much more so in some than in others: Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United States, Switzerland and West Germany. For the technical report of the *International Social Survey Program* data set, the reader is referred to www.iisp.org.

Because all our hypotheses pertain to differences in the public salience of Christian religion among Christians between countries in which this type of religion has declined less or more, we use country-level variables in our analysis that are hence based on statistical analyses for each of the 18 countries separately. We report our findings in the simplest possible manner, i.e., by means of plots that show the bivariate relationships between the country-level variables addressed by each of the hypotheses.

3.2. Measurement

Christian (non-)religiosity is measured simply as being a member of a Christian religious denomination or not. Respondents have been asked to indicate whether they were a member of a religious denomination and if so, which one. Those who indicated that they were not a member of a religious denomination, i.e. the non-religious, have been coded as 1, while those who indicated that they were a member of a Christian denomination have been coded as 0. Because the aim of this paper is to study the relationship between the proportion of non-Christians and (aspirations for) religion's public revitalization, non-Christian religions like Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism have been coded as missing. Needless to say, those with a Christian denomination consisted almost exclusively of Catholics and Protestants from various strains.¹

Birth cohort was coded into three equally sized categories. The young (year of birth: 1963-1980) were coded as 1, the old (born before 1943) were coded 3, and those born between 1943 and 1962 were coded as 2.

Aspirations for religion's public revitalization are defined as support for a role of religion in public life, thus indicating a preference for deprivatization of religion. It is measured by means of four Likert items that together yield a reliable scale (see Table 1).

Table 1. Factor and reliability analyses of the scale for aspirations for religion's public revitalization.

Item	Factor loading
Do you think that churches and religious organizations in this country have too much power or too little power?	0.77
Would your country be a better country if religion had less influence?	0.83
How much do you agree or disagree that religious leaders should not try to influence government decisions?	0.62
Religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections	0.66
Eigen value	2.10
R ²	0.53
Cronbach's α	0.69
N	16,785

Source: International Social Survey Program (1998)

Voting behavior has not been coded as voting for either a religious or a non-religious party, because specifically religious parties do not exist in all countries, although even then a particular rightist party tends to attract the bulk of the religious votes. Even though there are no specifically religious parties in the United States, for instance (Lane, McKay and Newton, 1997: 146-147), the rightist Republican Party assembles the bulk of the religious votes in this country. Therefore, instead of distinguishing religious from non-religious parties, we have made use of the coding of the various parties on a left-right scale by those who are responsible for the *International Social Survey Program*.² Norris and Inglehart (2004), Elff (2009), Lago et al. (2009), and many others have used similar coding procedures in their studies of the electoral consequences of religion.

More specifically, respondents' answers to the question which party they would vote for if elections were held tomorrow, have been coded into the five following categories: 1) Far left (communists etcetera); 2) Left, centre left; 3) Centre, liberal; 4) Right, conservative; 5) Far right (fascists etcetera). Those who indicated not to vote, not to know what to vote, and those

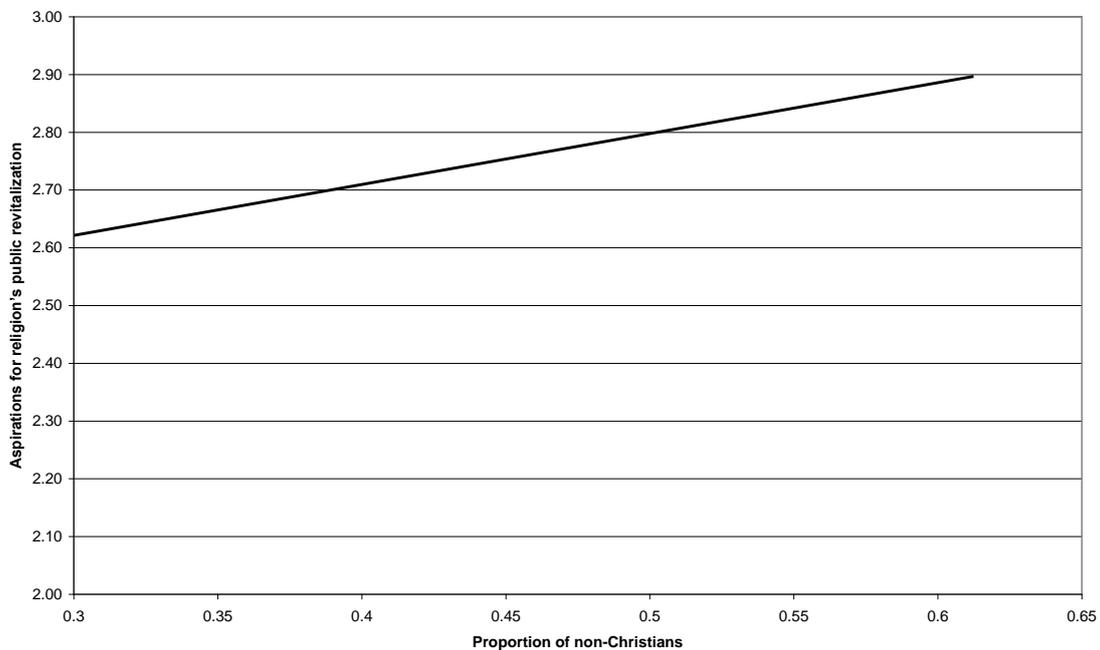
without a party preference were excluded from the analysis (N=5,292 which makes up for 24.9% of the total sample). Needless to say, to the extent that non-Christians vote for far-rightist parties and Christians do not exclusively vote for rightist ones, this coding procedure yields an *underestimation* of religious voting and is hence biased against finding religiously inspired voting.

4. Results

4.1. Aspirations for Religion's Public Revitalization by Birth Cohort

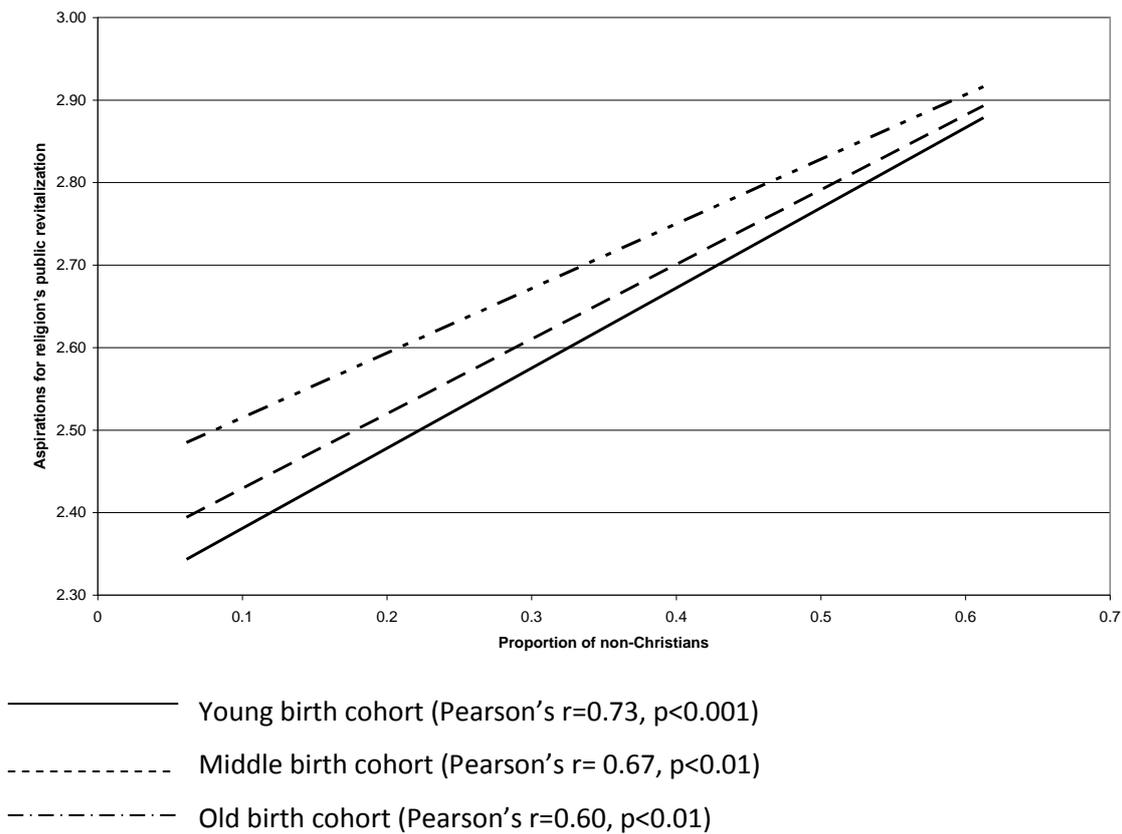
Figure 1 plots the percentage of non-Christians in each of the countries (x-axis) against the mean aspirations for religion's public revitalization among Christians in these countries (y-axis), which yields the same findings as those reported previously by Achterberg et al. (2009).

Figure 1. Association between proportion of non-Christians and mean aspirations for religion's public revitalization among Christians (1998, N=18 countries, Pearson's $r=0.72$; $p<0.001$).



This means that Hypothesis 1 is confirmed: in striking contrast to the notion that religious decline and religious privatization occur in tandem, Christian aspirations for religion’s public revitalization are not weakest, but strongest in countries where Christian religion has declined most and hence weakest in countries where it is most widespread. At no less than 0.72, the relationship between the two variables is moreover very strong and highly significant. In order to study whether this pattern truly signifies a public revitalization of Christian religion, or is consistent with the notion that religious decline and religious privatization occur in tandem after all, we now move to the testing of our remaining hypotheses, which are informed by the two objections to the former interpretation that have been discussed above.

Figure 2. Association between proportion of non-Christians and mean aspirations for religion’s public revitalization for three birth cohorts of Christians separately (1998, N=18 countries).



Hypothesis 2 pertains to differences between birth cohorts when it comes to aspirations for religion’s public revitalization. As explained, the notion that religious decline coincides with

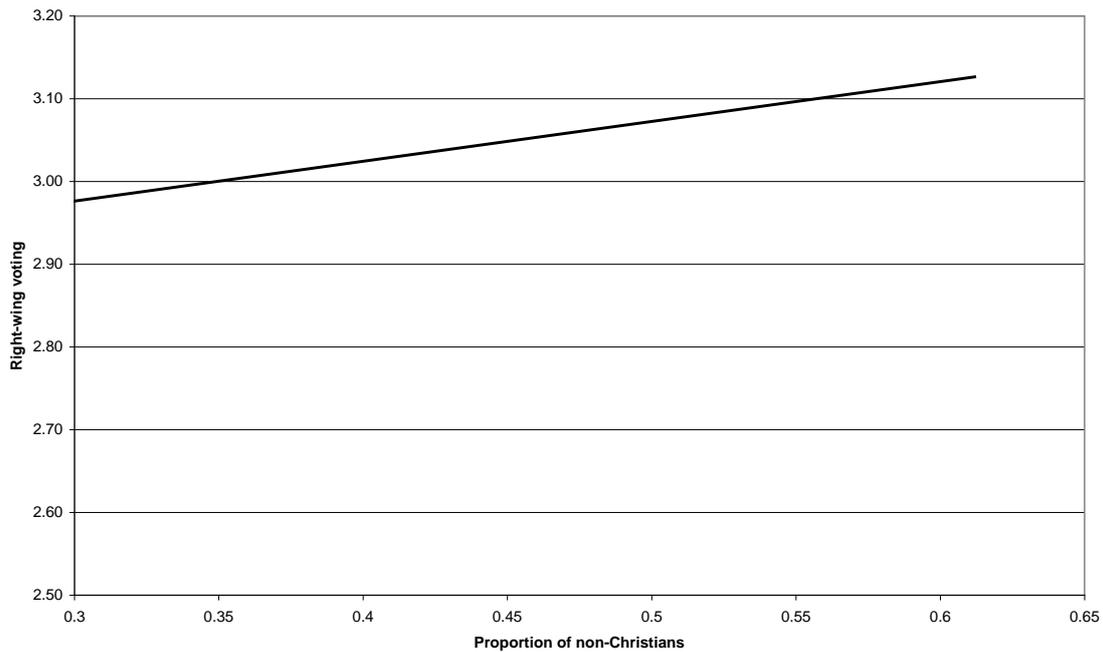
religious privatization, would lead us to expect that in countries where Christian religiosity has declined most, aspirations for religion's public revitalization are particularly found among the older, yet waning cohort of Christians. The notion that religious decline spawns its public revitalization, on the other hand, predicts that these aspirations are found among younger Christians as much as among older ones.

Figure 2 features three regression lines, representing the mean aspirations for religion's public revitalization for the three Christian birth cohorts that we have distinguished. It is clear that there are hardly any differences between the three cohorts. For the Netherlands, one of the countries where Christian religion is numerically most marginal, for instance, the mean scores for young and old Christians are exactly identical ($M=2.91$), which means that the young attach as much value to a public role for religion as the elderly do. In Great Britain, which rivals the Netherlands for the status of having the lowest proportion of Christians, the young value a public role of religion even more than the elderly do. These findings confirm Hypothesis 2, then: in countries where Christian religion has declined most, Christian aspirations for its public revitalization are not only found among older Christians, but just as much among younger ones.

4.2. Christian Voting for Rightist Parties

Moving to the analysis of Christian religion and voting behavior in the various countries, we first consider the possibility that the strong aspirations for a public presence of religion in the most secular contexts are not actually acted out and hence remain without real public consequences. To assess this possibility, we test Hypothesis 3, according to which Christians in countries where Christian religion has declined most are not less, but more inclined to vote for rightist Christian parties than those in countries where Christian religion is still widespread. To test this hypothesis, Figure 3 plots the percentage of non-Christians in each of the countries (x-axis) against the mean tendency among Christians in these countries to vote for a rightist party (y-axis).

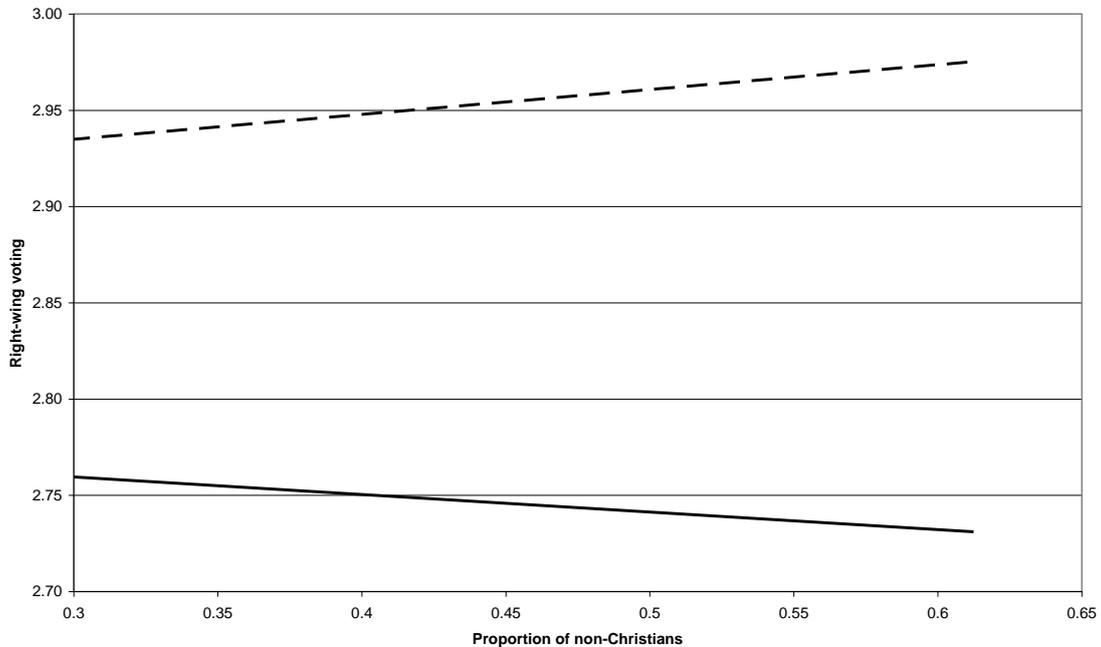
Figure 3. Association between proportion of non-Christians and mean right-wing voting behavior by Christians (1998, N=17 countries, Pearson's $r=0.37$; $p=0.14$).



Although it is clear that in countries where religion has declined most, Christians tend to vote more often for rightist parties than in massively Christian countries, the relationship between the two variables is not strong enough to reach statistical significance. This means that Hypothesis 3 needs to be rejected. Nonetheless, it is clear that the relationship is positive instead of negative, indicating that there is even less support for the notion that religious decline coincides with religious privatization.

Hypothesis 4, also informed by the theory that religious decline spawns its public revitalization rather than furthering its privatization, predicts that in all countries under study Christians with strong aspirations for religion's public revitalization are more likely to vote for rightist parties than Christians for whom this aspiration is only weak. To test his hypothesis, Figure 4 plots the percentage of non-Christians in each of the countries (x-axis) against the mean tendency of Christians in these countries to vote for a rightist party (y-axis), for Christians with high and low aspirations for religion's public revitalization separately. It is clear that Christians with strong aspirations for religion's public revitalization are more likely to vote for rightist parties than Christians for whom this aspiration is only weak. This confirms Hypothesis 4, which underscores once more that these aspirations are actually acted out and hence have real public consequences.

Figure 4. Association between proportion of non-Christians and mean right-wing voting behavior, for Christians with strong and weak aspirations for religion's public revitalization separately (1998, N=17 countries).



- Christians with weak aspirations for religion's public revitalization (Pearson's $r=-0.07$; $p=0.81$)
- - - - - Christians with strong aspirations for religion's public revitalization (Pearson's $r=0.14$; $p=0.63$)

Figure 4 also enables a test of Hypothesis 5, according to which public aspirations for religion among Christians affect their voting behavior most strongly in countries where Christian religion has declined most. As predicted, the regression lines for the two categories of Christians are farther apart in countries where Christian religiosity is least widespread, indicating that there is indeed a tendency for these aspirations to drive voting behavior more strongly in the countries where Christian religion has declined most. Again, however, the difference between the massively Christian countries on the one hand and these where Christian religion has become marginalized fails to reach statistical significance (tested by means of multilevel analysis; not shown in Figure 4), so that Hypothesis 5 is refuted. However, even though we yet again fail to find firm evidence for Christianity's public revitalization in the

countries where it is numerically most marginal, it is clear that we once again find even less evidence for stronger religious privatization in these countries.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have elaborated on previous findings by Dekker (2007) and Achterberg et al. (2009), that in contexts where Christians are numerically most marginal, they nonetheless have stronger aspirations for a public role of their creed than in contexts where the proportion of Christians is high. This is clearly a remarkable finding against the background of the debate about secularization, which has dominated sociology of religion for decades, because it throws the notion that religious decline and religious privatization typically occur simultaneously into doubt. Therefore, we have studied in the present paper whether these previous findings truly signify a public revitalization of Christian religion in contexts where Christians find themselves in minority positions.

First of all, we have demonstrated that Christian aspirations for a public revitalization of religion are not only most typical in countries where Christian religion is least widespread, but also that these aspirations are found just as much among younger Christians than among older ones. This contrasts with what we would expect to find if religious decline and religious privatization occurred together, because in that case aspirations for religion's public revitalization would more typically be found among older Christians than among younger ones. This patterning across birth cohorts hence points in the direction of Christian religion's public revitalization rather than its privatization in countries where it is numerically most marginal.

By focusing on variations in religion's relevance for voting behavior across countries, we have furthermore studied whether aspirations for religion's public revitalization are actually translated into publicly relevant political behavior. First of all, we have found that Christians with strong aspirations for religion's public revitalization are more likely to vote for rightist parties than Christians for whom this aspiration is only weak, underscoring that desires are actually translated into behavior. We could however find no firm evidence for either the hypothesis that Christians in countries where Christian religion has declined most are more inclined than elsewhere to vote for rightist-Christian political parties, or the hypothesis that Christian aspirations for the public revitalization of their creed affect their voting behavior

most strongly in these countries. Nonetheless, we find clear albeit non-significant tendencies in the predicted directions in both instances, which means that these findings contradict the notion that religious decline coincides with religious privatization even more than the notion that it stimulates its public revitalization. For that reason, although obviously not fully convincing, we feel that our findings incline to religion's public revitalization rather than its privatization.

This conclusion contrasts with that of Bruce (2003) and Norris and Inglehart (2004), who maintain that the social and public impact of religion is weaker in contexts where religion has declined. Yet, as we already noted above, it would be premature to consider the debate about the implications of religious decline for religion's public and political salience as closed. This is all the more so, because studies by Kelley and De Graaf (1997), Ruiters and De Graaf (2006), Dekker (2007) and Ruiters (2008) have demonstrated that the social (rather than political) impact and significance of religion is strongest in precisely the contexts where it is numerically least present. For future research, then, we consider it vital to carefully and critically examine the differences between these and related studies, so as to gain an understanding of how these strikingly different results could have been obtained and to subsequently contribute to the (re)construction of empirically-informed theories of secularization and post-secularism.

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¹ To be more precise: respondents indicating Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Druse, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, Congregationalist, Episcopal, Unitarian, Protestant (free church), Protestant (else), Orthodox, United Church CDN, Free Presbyterian, Brethren, Pentecostal, Mormon, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventists, Hussites, and Other Christian religions as their denominations were coded as Christian.

² Because no codes are available for the parties in Northern Ireland, this country has been excluded from the analyses that test the hypotheses that require scores on this variable (i.e., Hypotheses 3, 4 and 5).