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JONATHAN KELLEY
International Survey Center and University of Nevada

National Context, Parental Socialization, and Religious Belief in 38 Nations as of 2008: The End of National Exceptionalism?

Abstract: Late in the 20th century, research found that (1) people living in religious nations will, in proportion to the religiosity of their fellow-citizens, acquire more orthodox beliefs than otherwise similar people living in secular nations; (2a) in relatively secular nations, family religiosity strongly shapes children's religious beliefs, while the influence of national religious context is small; (2b) in relatively religious nations family religiosity, although important, has less effect on children's beliefs than does national context; (3) the USA was exceptional, being more religious than other nations at its high level of development, and (4) formerly Communist nations in East-Central Europe were also exceptional, being less devout than Western nations. This paper tests whether these patterns still hold in more recent times. Almost two decades later, the effects of family and national religiosity still hold, and strongly so. But few nations are any longer noticeably exceptional: After adjusting for demographic differences, parents' devoutness, and the strong impact of national context, the USA is only fractionally more devout than comparable nations. East-Central Europe now hardly differs from the West. Poland—as devout as the USA without adjustments—is fractionally less devout than comparable nations after these adjustments. Data are from 38 nations and over 50000 respondents, analyzed by multi-level methods.

Keywords: Religion, religious beliefs, devout, secularization, parental socialization, cross-cultural, national context, US exceptionalism, Poland, Communism

Religion is a central element of life both in the past and in the present, both in the Christian West and in the Muslim world, shaping people's worldviews, moral standards, family lives, and sometimes their politics. But in many Christian nations, modernization and secularization may be eroding belief, with profound consequences that have intrigued sociologists since Durkheim. Yet this much touted secularization may be overstated—certainly it varies widely among Christian nations and may be absent among Muslim nations. In this paper I explore the degree to which religious beliefs are passed on from generation to generation in different nations. Devout parents strive to socialize their children and succeed in inculcating religious beliefs in most of them. But inevitably some offspring break with their parents' beliefs—especially between ages 10 and 30 when children come in contact with the wider world, with teachers and peer groups, when they mature and take jobs, acquire new friends, and eventually marry and form their own families (Need and de Graaf 1996; Need and Evans 2001). If there were no influences other than the family to incul-

cate belief, even a small loss in each generation would eventually produce a secular society.[1]

Earlier research suggests that one source of the durability of religious belief is the religious context of the nation as a whole: In proportion to the orthodoxy of their fellow citizens, people born into religious nations will acquire more orthodox beliefs than otherwise similar people born into secular nations (Kelley and de Graaf 1997). Following the literatures on religious socialization, secularization, and geographic differences in religious beliefs, they argued that this contextual effect comes about in part through people's exposure to religious culture (and perhaps to pro-religious government policies), and in part because the pools of potential friends, teachers, colleagues, and marriage partners are predominantly devout. Conversely, in secular societies, individuals are likely to acquire secular friends, teachers, colleagues, and marriage partners and so become secular themselves. Moreover, they go beyond these traditional claims, arguing that these processes interact with the family's religious background in ways that make family background more important in secular nations, but make national context more important in religious nations (Kelley and de Graaf 1997; Ruiter and de Graaf 2006).

We retest these arguments, which have previously been rigorously tested only toward the end of in the 20th century when it seemed secularism was ascendant in the Christian world if not in the Muslim (Breznau et al. 2011; Evans and Kelley 2004; Kelley 2009). Furthermore, we assess the continuing religious exceptionalism—or lack of it—that they found for the United States and for formerly Communist nations in East-Central Europe. Our results confirm that Kelley and de Graaf's findings from 1997 about how national context shapes the inter-generational transmission of religious belief continue to hold 17 years later. But in contrast to their findings, our 21st century data suggest that neither the United States nor the formerly Communist nations of East-Central Europe are any longer particularly exceptional in their religious beliefs. Instead their historical experiences are now mainly embedded in the religious beliefs of the parental generation (devout for the US, secular for formerly Communist nations) and the religious climate of the country as a whole (again relatively devout for the US and secular for formerly Communist nations) and exert a lasting influence mainly indirectly through these.

Theory

Devout parents inculcate religious beliefs in their children directly by explicit teaching and by role modelling, and indirectly by shaping their children's views of life (as is well known). This process is not unique to religion—parents also inculcate moral values, political preferences, and a wide variety of other attitudes, values, and preferences.

[1] The introduction and theory sections of this paper, as well as the conclusions, draw very heavily on Kelley and de Graaf 1997, the analysis I am replicating and extending. The analysis itself uses new data and different analytic methods. It reaches conclusions some of which confirm the earlier work, and others of which suggest that there have been significant changes in the almost two decades between the old data and the new.

But parents are not the only force affecting religious beliefs. Children acquire diverse friends outside the family, forming peer groups that by adolescence exert a strong in dependent influence on their religious beliefs. Children also come into contact with schools and teachers who may shape their values. Children are exposed to religious values (or their absence) in school curricula, the mass media, and the nation's culture. Some are exposed to government sponsored propaganda that can shape their views—either pro-religious (as in Ireland and many Islamic nations) or antireligious (as in East-Central Europe in Communist times). In time, children leave home, reducing their parents' impact on their beliefs, behavior, and values. They acquire new friends, new colleagues at work, and new peer groups, all of which may shape their religious views. Eventually, they marry, founding new families that become central influences on their lives, strongly shaping (and being shaped by) their religious and other values. Religious beliefs thus depend not only on parents' religious beliefs, but also on the religious content of school curricula and the mass media, on the religious policies of the government and churches, on the general religious content of the nation's culture and dominant values, and especially on the religious "environment" that people live in—their friends, peer groups, schools, teachers, and marriage partners.

Further, we argue that national religious context has different effects on the strategies of devout and secular families. In a predominantly secular society, children are likely to acquire secular friends, teachers, work colleagues, and marriage partners. This poses a serious problem for devout parents and their churches (Leonard et al. 2013; Porpora 2015): To ensure that their children acquire and retain orthodox religious beliefs, they need to control the children's social environments and restrict their choices of friends to those with compatible religious beliefs. They do this by screening potential friends, teachers, and marriage partners; by enrolling their children in church groups or sending them to religious schools to ensure an appropriate pool of potential friends and marriage partners; by socializing their children to reject the irreligious; and in many other ways. Insofar as parents succeed in controlling their children's social environments, they effectively shut out most of the irreligious national environment's secularizing pressures. Hence, the effect of the family's religious background will be large and the effect of national environment will be small.

Conversely, in a predominantly religious society, devout parents need not worry about the possibility of their children acquiring secular beliefs from friends, teachers, colleagues, or spouses, because almost everyone is devout: conformity will produce the desired result (Haun and Tomasello 2011). Therefore, devout parents need not invest time, effort, or money in controlling their children's social environments; they need not endure the emotional strain and potential conflict this imposes on parent-child relations; and they need not accept the potential loss of desirable friends and marriage partners that such restrictions would impose on their children.

Irreligious parents face the opposite constraints. In a secular society, they need not worry about their children getting into a devout social environment, because most potential friends, colleagues, and marriage partners are secular. In a religious society, however, their children are at risk of being drawn into a devout social environment.

Thus, if the prospect of their children acquiring religious beliefs is distasteful, parents have a strong incentive to control their children's networks and environment.

We suggest, however, that most secular parents will not strongly object to their children accepting some religious tenets. Few secular parents are committed atheists—most are agnostic or believe in some vague higher power if not in a personal, anthropocentric god. Even if they are convinced there is no God, parents may see little harm in their children becoming religious-the duties imposed by religion are rarely onerous, the emotional support and sense of meaning and purpose religion provides are valuable, and there is usually no "antichurch" institution encouraging secularism (save for countries under Communist rule). Moreover, being secular in a devout nation can have practical disadvantages because of prejudice on the part of the religious, and the restrictions that prejudice can impose on choices of friends, schools, jobs, and marriage partners. Hence, we suggest, most secular parents will make little effort to insulate their children from the religious pressures of a devout society. Nor will secular parents prevent their children from acquiring devout friends, colleagues, and marriage partners. As a consequence, many children of secular parents will become religious. Thus:

H1: People born into religious nations will, in proportion to the orthodoxy of their fellow-citizens, acquire more orthodox beliefs than otherwise similar people born into secular nations.

H2A: In relatively secular societies, devout families usually insulate their children from secular pressures; hence family background strongly shapes religious beliefs.

H2B: Secular families do not usually insulate their children from religious pressures; hence family background has little effect on religious beliefs in relatively devout societies while national influences are large.

Kelley and De Graaf (1997) spell out these arguments more detail and review the extensive literature. Recent research suggests these processes operate not just among native born Christians but even among Muslim immigrants to secular Western nations (Maliepaard and Lubbers 2013).

They also detail familiar 20th century arguments for US exceptionalism in matters of religion, the US being more devout than comparable Western nations. But more recent developments suggest that the US is converging with Western European patterns—a point argued by Hout—so there are conflicting expectations. This may also be true of Poland, another traditionally devout nation in some ways similarly placed although the transition from Communism and the process of integration into the European Union complicate matters (Borowik 2002; Góra and Zielińska 2014; Hanson and Gadowska 1999; Zagorski 1994). Note that the following hypotheses are net of socioeconomic development and individual-level characteristics. Here we have conflicting predictions:

H3, Alternative A (the traditional claim): The USA is exceptional, being more religious than other nations at its level of economic development. So too for Poland.

H3, Alternative B (Hout): In recent years USA is no longer exceptional, being no more religious than other nations with comparable religious histories. So too for Poland.

H4, Alternative A (the old claim): Formerly Communist nations of East-Central Europe are exceptional, being less religious than comparable Western nations.

H4, Alternative B (the new claim): In recent years formerly Communist nations of East-Central Europe are no longer exceptional, being no more religious than comparable Western nations.

Data, Method, and Measurement

Data

Data are from the International Social Survey Program's 2008 Religion-IV module. This includes a suitable range of background variables which have been found to shape attitudes towards religious issues in prior research and includes a diverse set of countries. It is a high quality, well known, well documented data set (see www.issp.org for full details). There are 38 nations[2] and over 50 thousand individual respondents. The Kelley and de Graaf analysis we replicate and extend was based on the 1991 edition of this same ISSP project.

Measurement

Religious belief is measured by a four item scale very similar to that used by Kelley and de Graaf (1997). It conceptually and empirically resembles standard religious orthodoxy scales used in previous research (Felling, Peters and Schreuder 1991; van der Slik 1994), measuring belief in a supernatural being who is concerned with each individual human. Most of the items have been used previously in the International Social Survey Programme, the NORC General Social Survey in the United States, the SOCON survey in the Netherlands, or the World Values Survey in many nations.

We score the answers conventionally in equal intervals, from a low of 0 to a high of 1.0 as shown below [in square brackets]. This scoring gives a clear and convenient metric (Evans, Kelley and Kolosi 1992: 468–469), but any other equal-interval scoring would lead to mathematically identical standardized results and metric results differing only by a linear transformation.

The questions, answer percentages and material in square brackets was not seen by respondents—they only saw the part in italics.

These four items are highly correlated in all the nations in the study, suggesting that they all measure a single underlying factor (Table 2). In the pooled sample, inter-item correlations average .66 with a scale reliability (alpha) of .88.

[2] There were serious (undocumented) errors in the data for Cyprus and the Philippines, so I have omitted them.

Table 1

Religious belief items. 38 nations, 2008

Panel A: Item God1		
Please indicate which statement below comes closest to expressing what you believe about God.		
11%	[0]	*I don't believe in God*
9%	[.20]	*I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out*
13%	[.40]	*I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind*
10%	[.50]	*I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others*
17%	[.80]	*While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God*
40%	[1.00]	*I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it*
100%	[mean .67, standard deviationn .36. N = 57010 in 38 nations.]	
Panel B: Item God2		
Which best describes your beliefs about God?		
14%	[0]	*I don't believe in God now and I never have*
9%	[.25]	*I don't believe in God now, but I used to*
15%	[.50]	[Don't know, no answer—volunteered]
7%	[.75]	*I believe in God now, but I didn't use to*
56%	[1.00]	*I believe in God now and I always have*
100%	[mean .70, standard deviationn .38. N = 57786 in 37 nations.]	
Panel C: Item GodCares		
There is a God who concerns Himself with every human being personally.		
23%	[1.00]	*Strongly agree*
27%	[.75]	*Agree*
17%	[.50]	*Neither agree nor disagree* [Don't know, no answer—volunteered]
16%	[.25]	*Disagree*
16%	[0]	*Strongly disagree*
100%	[mean .56, standard deviationn .35. N = 53486 in 38 nations.]	
Panel D: Item Heaven		
Do you believe in heaven?		
27%	[1.00]	*Yes, definitely*
24%	[.75]	*Yes, probably*
10%	[.50]	[Don't know, no answer, can't choose—volunteered]
17%	[.25]	*No, probably not*
21%	[0]	*No, definitely not*
100%	[mean .55, standard deviationn .38. N = 57786 in 38 nations.]	

Confirmatory factor loadings average .82 in the pooled analysis, with similar figures in separate analyses for each country.[3] The four items also have very similar correlations with other relevant criterion variables (Table 2, last panel).

Our religious orthodoxy scale is the average of answers to the four questions. Respondents who answered some but not all questions are assigned the average

[3] Except for the "GodCares" question in Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, and possibly Turkey.

Table 2

Measurement of religious belief and of attendance at religous services. Correlations and confirmatory factor loadings. 38 nations, 2008. N = 43 359 cases with complete information on all variables

	Religious belief				Attendance		Confirmatory factor loading	
	God1	God2	GodCares	Heaven	Mother	Father	I	II
Religious belief:								
God1	1.00						.91	.00
God2	0.81	1.00					.87	.00
GodCares	0.69	0.66	1.00				.77	.00
Heaven	0.61	0.58	0.64	1.00			.70	.00
Attendance:								
Mother	0.35	0.34	0.30	0.30	1.00		.00	.79
Father	0.34	0.33	0.31	0.31	0.72	1.00	.00	.91
Other variables:								
GDP per capita	−0.29	−0.24	−0.26	−0.21	−0.11	−0.10		
Male	−0.13	−0.13	−0.13	−0.13	−0.00	0.01		
Age	0.06	0.07	0.03	−0.05	0.07	0.05		
Education	−0.22	−0.20	−0.19	−0.17	−0.11	−0.11		

Alpha reliability = .88 for religious belief and .83 for attendance.

of the questions they did answer. Those who failed to answer any of the questions (1 percent) are omitted from the analysis.

The nation's religious context is measured by the mean level of belief in the nation as a whole. This type of contextual analysis, using the dependent variable to define the context, has a long history in sociology and political science (Blalock 1984: 353–359). At first glance, such reasoning may seem circular, but such relationships are far from tautological (Blalock 1984: 363–69). For instance, the familiar and seemingly obvious ecological hypothesis that local political context influences voting behavior (Butler and Stokes 1974: 130–137) turns out on closer analysis to be false (Kelley and McAllister 1985).

We measure the religious orientation of the family in which each respondent was raised by their parents' church attendance when the respondent was 14 or 15 years old. Previous research indicates that church attendance—a clear-cut behavior—is reliably reported and is generally the key family influence, with strong direct and indirect effects on respondent's religion. Because we are interested in the overall effect of the family, we average mother's and father's church attendance. If data were available for only one parent, we used that. Only three percent failed to answer for at least one parent. Mother's and father's church attendance are highly correlated (r = .72 in the pooled sample), and have similar correlations with other variables (Table 2, bottom panel). Previous research on their relative importance is inconclusive (Benson, Donahue and Erickson 1989), so there should be little loss in ignoring these differences. Averaging them gives a reliable measure (alpha = .83 in the pooled sample); separating them would unnecessarily complicate the analysis and would be difficult because of their high correlation.

Other variables

Other variables are measured conventionally. Gender is a dummy variable, scored 1 for men and zero for women. Age is years. Education is in years of schooling or university following ISSP definitions. Both Muslim and Jewish are measured by mother's and father's denomination (averaged when the parents were mixed, which was rare for Muslims but common for Jews living outside Israel).

Method

A key variable in our analysis is the nation's religious context, a national-level rather than individual-level variable. A traditional individual-level analysis would treat all the duplicate representations of context (which are the same for everyone in the nation) as though they were independent data for each respondent. That would bias standard errors for the coefficients biased downwards, because the correct sample size for the contextual variables is actually the number of surveys (DiPrete and Forristal 1994). Hence using ordinary individual-level statistical tests on contextual data could make a genuinely nonsignificant effect appear to be statistically significant.

To avoid these problems and to obtain the correct standard errors, we estimated a variance-components multilevel model with fixed effects because we focus on the claim that there is a general pattern that holds across societies, and with random intercepts by society to allow for variation that we do not model, and with variables coded in their natural form, not centered (Enders and Tofighi 2007; Hox 1995). Estimates are from the 'xtreg' routine in Stata 13; corresponding results from the 'xtmixed' routine are virtually identical. We use two-tailed significance tests throughout.

Results

Levels of religious belief

Levels of religious belief vary greatly from person to person and from nation. Insofar as our 38 nations are representative of the world, fully 40% of the world's population believe in God and have no doubts about it (Table 1A above). Just 11% do not believe in God. The rest, around half, have various beliefs somewhere in-between (agnostic; believe in an impersonal God; believe only sometimes; believe but have doubts). The mean is .67 points (scored zero for do not believe, 1.0 for believe without doubts, and other answers at equal intervals in-between).

On a blunter question (Table 1B above), 56% say they have always believed in God; 14% that they have never believed in God; with around 30% in-between. The mean is .70, much the same as for the first question.

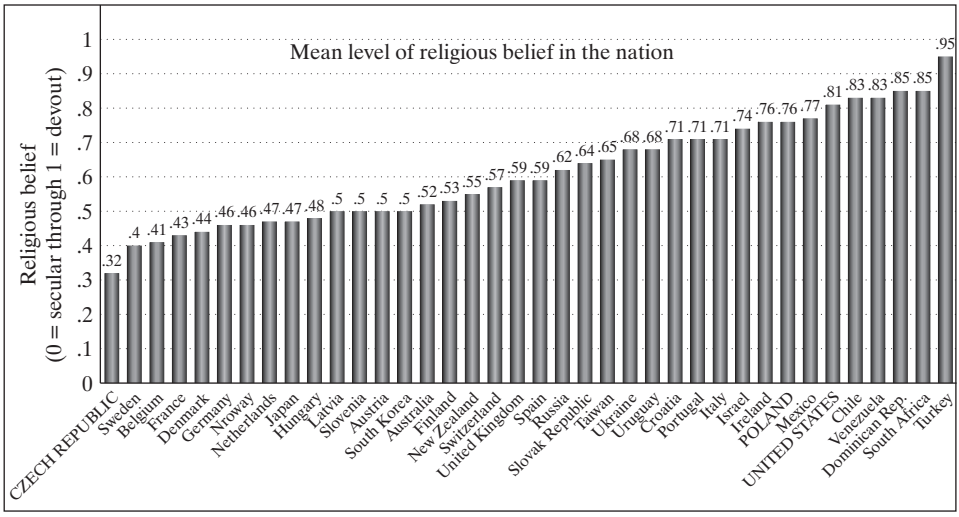
On a more human-centered question as to whether God concerns Himself with every human being personally (Table 1C above), belief is fairly evenly divided, with a mean of .56 which tends just a little toward the "agree" side.

Views about the existence of heaven are also fairly even divided (Table 1D above). The average, 55, is a little towards the "believe" side.

Taking all this together, the average level of belief worldwide is around .62, about the level typical of the UK, Spain, Russia, or Taiwan (Figure 1). The least devout nations are about two thirds of that, in the mid .40s (Sweden, France, Germany, Japan, with the Czech Republic even lower)—so even they believe somewhat, or with some reservations, rather that being outright atheists. The most devout nations are not far from unanimous in their belief in a personal God, with scores in the mid .80s (the US, Chile, and South Africa—with Poland only a little less devout and Turkey a little more).

Figure 1

Mean religious belief in each nation



The transmission of belief from parent to child: Description

The joint impact of the nation's religious environment and parents' church attendance on respondent's religious belief, without adjusting for other individual or contextual variables, is shown in Table 3 and Figure 2. (1) Clearly, parental religiosity matters greatly: People with devout parents are far more likely to acquire orthodox beliefs than are those with secular parents. (2) People born into religious societies are much more likely to hold orthodox religious beliefs than are those born into secular societies. For example, people with secular parents living in secular nations (upper left-hand corner of Figure 2 and Table 3) score only .24 points on religious orthodoxy, while those with equally secular parents residing in religious nations are far more orthodox, averaging .75 points (lower left corner). Similarly, respondents from devout families living in secular nations (upper right corner) score .60 on religious belief while those born to equally devout families in religious nations score .85 points

(lower right corner). (3) Even in secular nations, devout families are largely successful in inculcating orthodox beliefs in their children (upper right corner). Hence, the difference between those from devout families and those from secular families is large (upper right corner versus upper left corner: .60 − .24 = .36 points). The pattern is similar in nations with intermediate levels of religiosity. (4) In religious nations, even individuals born into secular families are likely to acquire relatively orthodox beliefs (lower left corner). Hence in religious nations, the difference between those from devout and those from secular families is not so large (lower right corner versus lower left corner: .85 − .75 = .11 points rounded).

Table 3

Actual level of religious belief by parents' religious attendance and national context (average level of belief of others in the nation). Means and number of cases

		Parents' religious attendance when respondent was a child					
		Parent not go	4 times year	Monthly	Twice a month	Goes weekly	*Difference [2] Weekly vs not*
Means:							
Secular nation	0.40	0.24	0.42	0.48	0.53	0.60	*0.36*
	0.50	0.34	0.49	0.54	0.58	0.63	*0.29*
	0.60	0.45	0.57	0.61	0.63	0.73	*0.28*
	0.70	0.55	0.69	0.71	0.76	0.81	*0.27*
Devout nation	0.80	0.75	0.79	0.80	0.82	0.85	*0.11*
Devout vs secular [1]		*0.50*	*0.39*	*0.36*	*0.29*	*0.25*	
Number of cases:							
Secular nation	0.40	2701	2906	468	709	1476	
	0.50	3965	4577	1090	1478	2917	
	0.60	2491	3022	1026	1723	3156	
	0.70	1677	1876	588	1151	2015	
Devout nation	0.80	1292	1834	1056	2563	8443	

[1] Difference between devout and secular nations in predicted level of religious belief.
[2] Difference between parents who attend weekly and those who do not attend at all in their children's predicted level of religious belief.

The transmission of belief from parent to child: Analysis

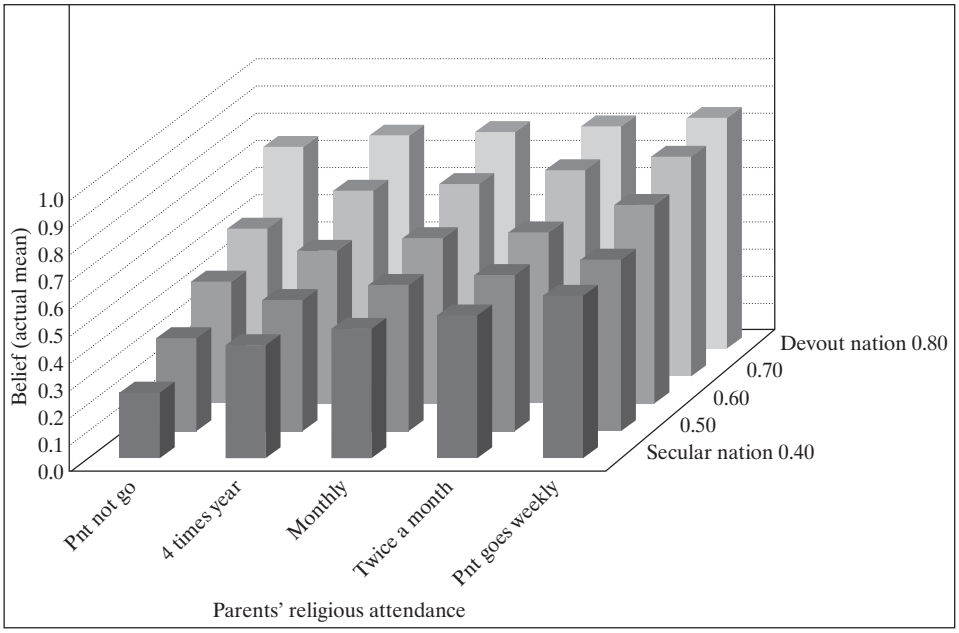
H1: People born into religious nations will, in proportion to the orthodoxy of their fellow-citizens, acquire more orthodox beliefs than otherwise similar people born into secular nations.

A clear test of our hypotheses is provided by the multivariate results which adjust for differences among nations in the experience of Communist antireligious policies, American exceptionalism; and for differences among individuals in denomination, age, sex, and education (see Tables 4 and 5, and Figure 3).

After adjusting for all these differences, parents still strongly influence their offspring's religious beliefs. It is also clear that those living in religious societies are

Figure 2

Actual level of religious belief by nation's religious environment and parents' religious attendance. Simple means without adjustment for other individual or contextual variables



Source: Table 3.

much more likely to acquire religious beliefs than are those living in secular societies even if they are from equally devout families, live in nations at the same level of modernization, are the same age, sex, and denomination, and have the same level of education.

H2A: In relatively secular societies, devout families usually insulate their children from secular pressures; hence family background strongly shapes religious beliefs.

H2B: Secular families do not usually insulate their children from religious pressures; hence family background has little effect on religious beliefs in relatively devout societies while national influences are large.

The religiosity of the nation matters more in some circumstances than in others (Table 5 and Figure 3). In very secular nations, family background matters a lot, a difference of .39 between families that never went to church and those who went weekly. But in very devout nations it matters only half as much, a difference of only .19 (see the differences in the last column of Table 5, or compare the front row versus the back row in Figure 3).

In devout societies, national context matters more than family background, although family background remains important. These differences are substantively

Table 4

Predicted religious belief by parents' attendance at religious services and religiosity of the nation: Adjusting only for social composition (column 1); for that plus differences in parents' attendance at religious services (column 2); for those plus effects of national religious context (column 3); and all that allowing also for curvature in the effect of parents' attendance. Multi-level analyses. 38 nations, 2008

	Effects on religious belief, controlling:			
	Social composition (1)	Col 1 plus Parents' attendance (2)	Col 2 plus national context (3)	Col 3 plus curviture (4)
NATIONS:				
USA	0.22*	0.19*	0.03*	0.04*
Poland	0.21*	0.11	−0.03	−0.04*
ex-Communist	−0.05	−0.03	0.02**	0.01**
Male	−0.09***	−0.09***	−0.09***	−0.09***
Age	0.0016***	0.0010***	0.0009***	0.0008***
Education	−0.01***	−0.01***	−0.01***	−0.01***
Muslim	0.20***	0.15***	0.11***	0.13***
Jewish	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01
Parents devout		0.0031***	0.0094***	0.0154***
Nation devout			1.0020***	0.9835***
Nation X parents			−0.0095***	−0.0146***
Parents devout, squared				−0.0001***
Nation X parents squared				0.0001***
Intercept	0.6406***	0.5995***	−0.0052	−0.0074
R-squared	.097	.213	.359	.365
Rho	.114	.085	.003	.003
Nations	38	38	38	38
Respondents	55000	53547	53547	53547

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 5

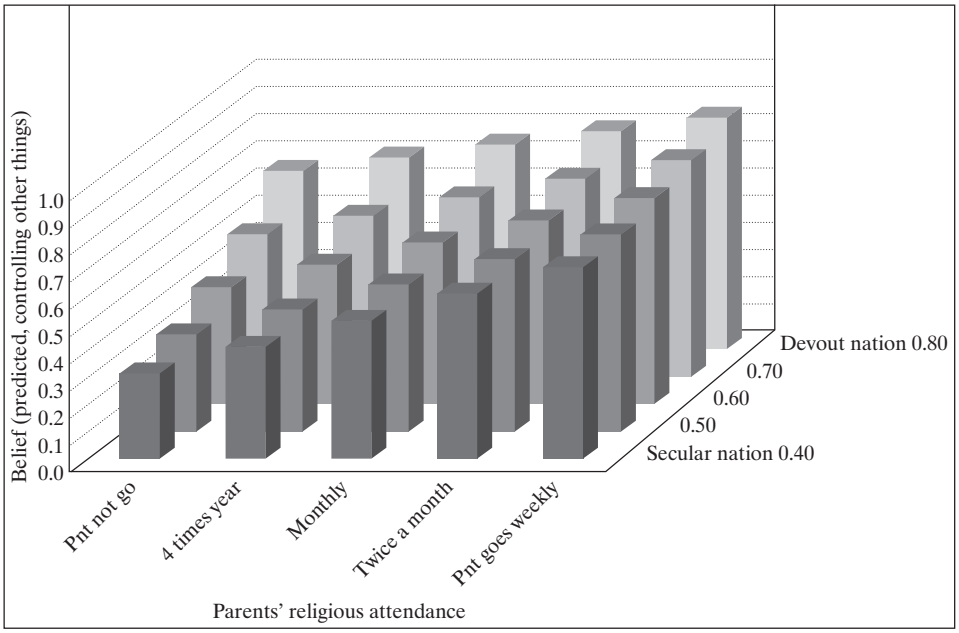
Predicted level of religious belief by parents' religious attendance and national context (average level of belief of others in the nation). Predicted values from multi-level regressions in Table 4, column 4

	Parents' religious attendance when respondent was a child					
	Parent not go	4 times year	Monthly	Twice a month	Goes weekly	*Difference [2] Weekly vs not*
Secular nation 0.40	0.31	0.41	0.51	0.61	0.71	*0.39*
0.50	0.35	0.44	0.54	0.63	0.72	*0.37*
0.60	0.42	0.50	0.58	0.67	0.75	*0.33*
0.70	0.51	0.58	0.65	0.71	0.78	*0.27*
Devout nation 0.80	0.64	0.68	0.73	0.78	0.83	*0.19*
Devout vs secular [1]	*0.32*	*0.27*	*0.22*	*0.17*	*0.12*	

[1] Difference between devout and secular nations in predicted level of religious belief.
[2] Difference between parents who attend weekly and those who do not attend at all in their children's predicted level of religious belief.

Figure 3

Joint effect of the nation's religious environment and parents' religious attendance on respondent's religious belief, adjusting by multi-level regression for other individual and contextual variables. Predicted values from Table 5



large and statistically significant, and they offer strong support for Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

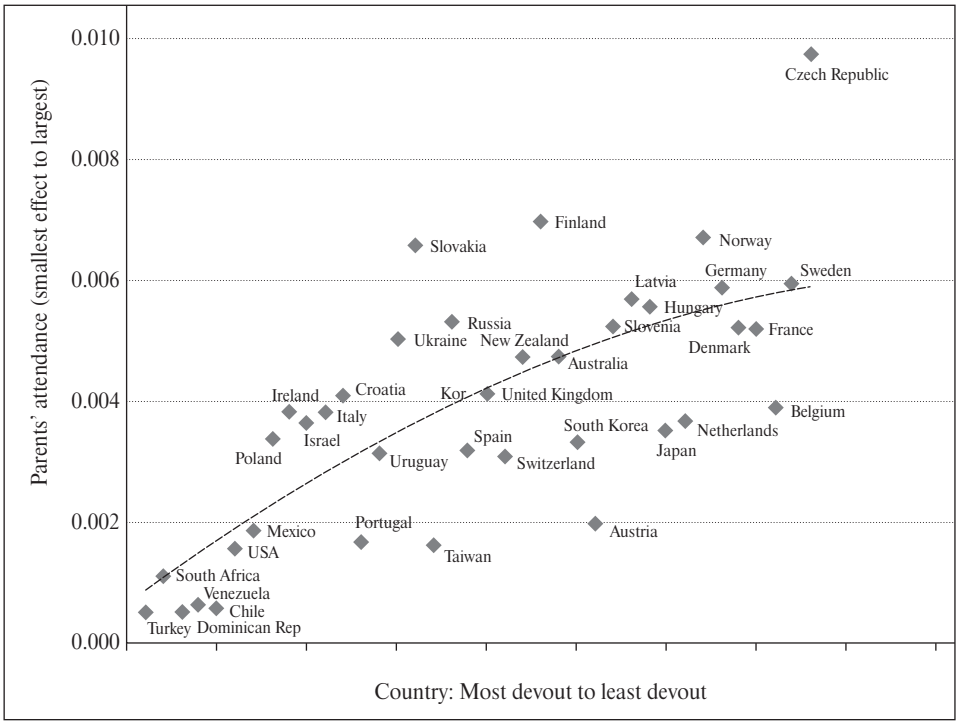
The same pattern holds for each nation separately (Figure 4 and Appendix Table A). In the most devout nations like the USA, South Africa, and Turkey parents' attendance at religious services has hardly any consequences for their children's level of religious belief (Figure 4, lower right hand corner). But in very secular nations like the Czech Republic, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark it matters greatly (Figure 4, upper left hand corner).

The Decline of National Exceptionalism: The USA, Poland, and Communism

American exceptionalism? In the past there is a long-running debate about U.S. religious exceptionalism (e.g. Warner 1993), the evidence generally supporting the view that the United States is unusually devout. Fundamentalist beliefs in a personal god and church attendance are both markedly higher in the United States. The traditional paradigm based on European experience sees the high levels of religiosity in the United States as atypical of modern societies. Our earlier analysis of data from 1991 showed that Americans then held beliefs that were, on average, .19 points (on a scale of 0 to 1) more orthodox than otherwise similar people in other nations, a large and statistically significant difference.

Figure 4

Effect of parents' religious attendance on respondent's religious belief for each nation separately, estimated by regression controlling for social composition. Metric regression coefficients from Appendix Table A. The trend line is quadratic



But by 2008 that had changed. To be sure America is still exceptionally devout, by .22 on the 0 to 1 scale (statistically significant at $p < .05$), even when its social composition is taken into account (Table 4, row 1, column 1). Some of that is because they come from more devout families; taking that into account reduces American exceptionalism to .19 (Table 4, row 1, column 2). But the main difference is national context: the US is a very devout nation (Figure 2) and that has a big impact, leading many ordinary Americans, even those from quite secular families, to believe in God. Taking that into account, Americans are only .03 or .04 of a point more devout than their peers in other nations (Table 4, row 1, columns 3 and 4). While just statistically significant (at $p < .05$), this is a very small difference.

So America is no longer religiously exceptional to any great degree—perhaps just a little exceptional, but nothing like it was in the past and not enough to really matter. At most a Scottish verdict of "not proven" on American exceptionalism is called for.

Polish exceptionalism? It has long been known that Poles, like Americans, are relatively devout. This was still true in 2008 even taking social composition into account, by .21 on the 0 to 1 scale—much like Americans (Table 4, row 2, column 1). But much of that difference was because Poles come from unusually devout families—that

lingering consequence of history matters greatly, leaving them only a (not statistically significant) .11 on the 0 to 1 scale more devout than expected (row 2, column 2). And taking national differences into account explains all the rest: Poles are either .03 less devout (row 2, column 3, not significantly different from zero) or .04 *less* devout in the slightly better-fitting model of column 4 (significant at $p < .05$).

So it is clear that Poland is at present not exceptional: Poles are devout to be sure, but no more than would be usual given their history within the family and within the nation. Whatever has happened in the past seems now to be almost fully encapsulated in Poland's current circumstances, influencing current belief only indirectly through its effects on parents' religiosity and on the religious climate of the nation.

Communist exceptionalism? Communism's long standing campaign against religion seems to have shaped people's beliefs, the effect lingering even in the first few years after its fall. In our earlier analysis we found that people living in formerly Communist nations in 1991 acquired religious beliefs .20 less devout on the 0 to 1 scale than otherwise similar people living in nations that were never Communist, a large and statistically significant difference.

But by 2008 all that had faded away, at most mattering only indirectly through its impact on parents and on the nation's overall religious context (Table 4, row 3). Taking social composition and parents' religion into account (columns 1 and 2), there was no statistically significant difference between those living in formerly Communist nations and their peers elsewhere in the world. Indeed, taking national context into account (columns 3 and 4), it might even be that those in ex-Communist nations are fractionally, by .02 on the 0 to 1 scale, *more* devout than their peers elsewhere—just like Americans. The difference is tiny and hardly worth making any particular fuss about, but it is statistically significant ($p < .01$).

The disappearance of national exceptionalism in religious belief? Putting all this together—the virtual disappearance of US exceptionalism, and the disappearance or even reversal of Polish and Communist exceptionalism—it is tempting to conclude that national differences in religious belief are with us no longer, or at least have become so small as to be negligible. Moreover, the multi-level analysis finds vanishingly few nation-to-nation differences remaining after the common patterns are abstracted away—see the tiny Rho coefficients (fraction of variance due to country differences) in the last two columns of Table 4.

This is an uncertain conclusion because there are still statistically significant differences, albeit tiny ones and in no clear pattern. And, if true, the vanishing of national exceptionalism applies only to Western nations, which are well represented in our dataset, and not necessarily more widely. We have too few Muslim nations to reach any conclusion about them (just Turkey—although it is not actually distinctive after taking parental and national effects into account, nor in some other analyses with many Muslim nations (Breznau et al. 2011)). Eastern religions are not well represented either.

In all we are inclined to suggest that in matters of religious faith, national exceptionalism has faded away, leaving national context and parental socialization to shape children's religious beliefs in much the same way throughout the Western world. Future research will need to assess whether this holds more widely.

Conclusion

The religious environment of a nation has a major impact on the beliefs of its citizens: People living in religious nations acquire, in proportion to the orthodoxy of their fellow citizens, more orthodox beliefs than those living in secular nations. This is not because they come from more devout families (although most do), nor because religious nations differ from secular nations in modernization or exposure to Communism (although they do), nor because of differences in an individual's denomination, education, age, or sex (although such differences exist). Rather, the religious character of the nation itself matters above and beyond the influence of these other factors. In some circumstances, national context is more important even than family background in shaping people's beliefs. A nation's culture and the policies of its churches and government are part of the explanation. But especially important, we argue, is the potential social network—the pool of potential friends, teachers, work colleagues, and marriage-partners: In a religious nation this pool is mostly devout, and in a secular nation this pool is mostly secular-and these differences matter greatly.

Our results also clearly confirm earlier research showing that a nation's religious environment shapes the way in which religious beliefs are passed on from parent to child (Kelley and de Graaf 1997). In relatively secular nations, the religious views of secular families are reinforced. However, devout families in these societies are usually able to insulate their children from secular pressures. Hence in relatively secular nations, the effect of family religiosity on children's religiosity is strong, and the effect of national religious context is small. By contrast, in relatively religious societies, devout families' views are reinforced. But secular families in such societies generally do not insulate their children from religious pressures, so many acquire the beliefs of their fellow citizens. Hence, in relatively religious nations, family religiosity is less important for children's religious views than it is in secular societies.

This strong interaction between a nation's religious environment and the way in which family background influences religious belief has important consequences for future research. Studies on religious socialization usually do not take national context into account. Our results clearly show that studies that neglect the religious context of the nation can be misleading with respect to the importance of parental socialization. In devout societies like the United States, Poland, or Ireland, family religiosity effects will not be as strong. But in secular societies like much of northern Europe, the effect of family religiosity can be expected to be strong. If our arguments are correct, these apparent differences do not reflect differences in how families function in these societies, but instead reflect differences in the religious environments of the nations themselves.

Modernization theory and related arguments by many (mainly European) sociologists of religion predict that religious belief declines as nations become more modern. They contend that this has happened in many European nations in recent decades. But many other (mainly American) scholars disagree, citing the high levels of religious belief in the United States. Our results suggest that this may have been true in the past but is no longer true in the present, at least to any important extent. Instead our results suggest that religious beliefs endure in large part because the

religious environment of a nation shapes the beliefs of its citizens. Most residents of European nations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries-and the European immigrants who populated the New World-believed in a supernatural, at least vaguely anthropomorphic God who was personally concerned with individual humans. They agreed on these fundamental points, while often differing on denominational loyalty and specific points of doctrine. Devout parents raised mostly devout children, helped by the prevailing religious atmosphere of the nation. Crucially, even when parental socialization failed, the religious atmosphere of the nation and the devout beliefs of the overwhelming majority of potential friends, teachers, colleagues, and marriage partners inculcated belief.

Not until external forces like modernization, the Enlightenment, the growth of education, or the rise of science bring the average levels of belief in the nation down appreciably do things begin to change. Our results suggest that religiosity then changes rapidly-not declining slowly and gradually, but dropping precipitously. The offspring of devout families mostly remain devout, but the offspring of more secular families now strongly tend to be secular. A self-reinforcing spiral of secularization then sets in, shifting the nation's average religiosity ever further away from orthodoxy. So after generations of stability, religious belief declines abruptly in the course of a few generations to the modest levels seen in many Western European nations today.

Earlier evidence found important variations among nations in how all this worked: The USA was probably exceptional and formerly Communist nations were certainly exceptional. But these path-dependent distinctions seem to have faded away with the passage of time, leaving national context and parental socialization to shape children's religious beliefs in much the same way throughout the Western world.

Appendix

Table A

Effect of parents' religious attendance on their child's religious belief: Metric regression coefficients from ordinary least squares regressions for each country separately, controlling for child's age, gender, and education. 38 nations, circa 2008. Also mean level of religious belief in the nation, mean parental church attendance in the nation, and national GDP per capita at parity purchasing power

Country (from most devout to least devout)		Parents' attendance b coefficient	Religious belief mean	Parent's attendance mean	GDP at PPP ratio to US	Cases
792	Turkey	0.0005	0.95	52	0.19	1453
710	South Africa	0.0011	0.85	27	0.31	3292
214	Dominican Rep.	0.0005	0.84	33	0.16	2086
862	Venezuela	0.0006	0.83	26	0.20	1077
152	Chile	0.0006	0.83	19	0.27	1505
840	USA	0.0016	0.81	23	1.00	1365
484	Mexico	0.0019	0.77	29	0.25	1471
616	Poland	0.0034	0.76	30	0.27	1263
372	Ireland	0.0038	0.76	31	0.64	2049
376	Israel	0.0036	0.74	20	0.70	1193
380	Italy	0.0038	0.71	22	0.77	1078
191	Croatia	0.0041	0.71	19	0.25	1201
620	Portugal	0.0017	0.71	17	0.50	1000
858	Uruguay	0.0032	0.68	10	0.27	1010
804	Ukraine	0.0050	0.68	10	0.14	2036
703	Slovakia	0.0066	0.65	25	0.31	1138
158	Taiwan	0.0016	0.65	16	0.43	1927
643	Russia	0.0053	0.62	4	0.21	1015
724	Spain	0.0032	0.59	17	0.60	2373
826	United Kingdom	0.0041	0.59	15	0.77	3075
756	Switzerland	0.0031	0.57	12	0.97	1229
554	New Zealand	0.0047	0.55	12	0.60	1027
246	Finland	0.0070	0.53	5	0.70	1136
36	Australia	0.0047	0.52	9	0.75	1718
410	South Korea	0.0033	0.50	21	0.45	1508
40	Austria	0.0020	0.50	11	0.84	1020
705	Slovenia	0.0052	0.50	13	0.45	1065
428	Latvia	0.0057	0.50	7	0.19	1069
348	Hungary	0.0056	0.48	6	0.34	1010
392	Japan	0.0035	0.47	5	0.83	1200
528	Netherlands	0.0037	0.47	12	0.81	1951
578	Norway	0.0067	0.46	4	0.98	1072
276	Germany	0.0059	0.46	8	0.77	1706
208	Denmark	0.0052	0.44	5	0.85	2004
250	France	0.0052	0.43	6	0.76	2454
56	Belgium	0.0039	0.42	7	0.80	1263
752	Sweden	0.0059	0.40	4	0.75	1235
203	Czech Republic	0.0097	0.33	6	0.46	1512

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Biographical Note: Jonathan Kelley directs the World Inequality Study (43 nations; 134 surveys; N = 800,000; www.international-survey.org) and is Adjunct Professor of Sociology and the Interdisciplinary PhD Program in Social Psychology, University of Nevada. He was educated at Cambridge (BA) and Berkeley (PhD) and was previously Senior Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies, the Australian National University, and Professorial Fellow at the Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, the University of Melbourne. He works mainly on quantitative, cross-national analyses of inequality, social stratification, politics, and religion. With M.D.R. Evans he founded the International Social Science Survey/Australia, chaired the Drafting Committee for first three rounds of the International Social Survey Programme's Ideology of Inequality surveys (30+ nations), and continues cross-national studies of scholarly culture (books, reading), inequality, and subjective well-being, as well as a participant observation study of twins. He has published four books, 19 data sets, and more than 100 major articles.

E-mail: kelley@international-survey.org