

Generations of declining faith: Religion and secularization in Switzerland, 1930-2020

Jörg Stolz & Jeremy Senn
University of Lausanne

Social Change in Switzerland N° 27
November 2021

The **Social Change in Switzerland** series provides ongoing documentation of social developments in Switzerland. Published jointly by the Swiss Centre of Competence in the Social Sciences ([FORS](#)), the Centre for Research on Life Courses and Inequalities of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Lausanne ([LINES](#)), and the Swiss Centre of Competence [LIVES](#) – for Research on Overcoming Vulnerability in the Course of Life, the series aims to highlight changes in terms of work, family, income, mobility, voting rights, and gender relations. The contributions are based on scientific research and are aimed at a broader audience.

Summary

This article examines how far the phenomenon of cohort secularization that has been demonstrated in other Western countries also applies to Switzerland. According to this theory, secularization occurs because cohorts of more religious people are replaced by cohorts of less religious people – and not because the religiosity of individuals declines over the course of their lives. This article draws on several large social surveys to examine the development of Christian religiosity and holistic spirituality. We can confirm the thesis of cohort secularization for Christian religiosity: secularization largely occurs because each new generation is somewhat less religious, these being “generations of declining faith”. On the other hand, there is no evidence that many individuals only shed church membership while retaining their faith (“believing without belonging”), and nor has there been a holistic-spiritual revolution.

Introduction¹

The well-known sociologists of religion Alasdair Crockett and David Voas (2006) have claimed that secularization in Western societies is primarily generational, with problems in religious socialization leading each new generation to develop a somewhat less strong religiosity than the previous, while essentially retaining their once-adopted religiosity in later adult life. The declining religiosity of society as a whole results for Crockett and Voas not from the loss of faith on the part of individuals, but from the replacement of more religious by less religious generations.

The phenomenon described by Crockett and Voas has since been demonstrated in various Western countries, with well-documented cases being in particular Great Britain, France, Germany, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand.

This article examines whether and in what form the model of cohort secularization also applies to Switzerland and can thus explain the development of religiosity in whole or in part. It also examines whether we may be dealing not with a general decline in religiosity, but rather with a change in religious forms. Thus, a well-known thesis is that individuals relinquish their formal religious affiliation, but continue to have religious beliefs (“believing without belonging”). A third thesis is that church religiosity is declining, and is being replaced by holistic spirituality (“thesis of spiritual revolution”). Holistic spirituality refers to beliefs and practices of various origins that focus on the physical-mental-spiritual wholeness of the human being, and thus combine in the most diverse blends various practices such as yoga, meditation, channelling, healing through stones, belief in angels, and contact with secret masters (Höllinger & Tripold 2012).

Secularization, which is the decline of religion and religiosity over time, has already been well documented in the Swiss context. The decline in recent decades of religious affiliation, churchgoing, and belief in God has been demonstrated by the Federal Statistical Office in its censuses and structural surveys (Bovay 2004) and its surveys on language, religion, and culture (de Flaugergues 2016; Roth & Müller 2020), by the National Research Programme 58 (Bochinger 2012), and by research in the sociology of religion in the tradition of “special-case studies” (Campiche 2004b; Dubach & Campiche 1993; Stolz et al. 2014). The time series going back the longest in time concerns religious affiliation and churchgoing: for example, the proportion of people “without religion” was still below 1% in 1960; by 2018, this figure had risen to 29.5% (see Fig. 1).²

There has also been a clear decline over the decades in churchgoing. The ISSP surveys asked participants how often their parents and they themselves went to church “when they were a child”. Unfortunately, the question does not specify an exact age, but we can approximate that respondents answered for an age of around 12, and this allows us to calculate and illustrate in a graph the frequency of churchgoing at the age of 12 for the respondents in each birth cohort (see Fig. 2). This shows the secularization of society very clearly for men, women, and children. As late as 1930, about 45% of mothers and 40% of fathers went to church (almost) weekly, and the proportion was even higher for children (around 60%). The decline in churchgoing since the 1950s can be seen for mothers, fathers, and children.

¹ This text is a highly abridged version of a chapter that will be published in an anthology on religion in Switzerland in: Stolz et al. (2022): *Religious Trends in Switzerland: Religion, spirituality, and secularity in change* (working title). We thank Daniel Oesch, Ursina Kuhn, and Felix Bühlmann for their valuable comments. The text was translated by David West.

² <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bevoelkerung/sprachen-religions/religions.assetdetail.15384753.html>.

Fig. 1: Denominational affiliation in Switzerland

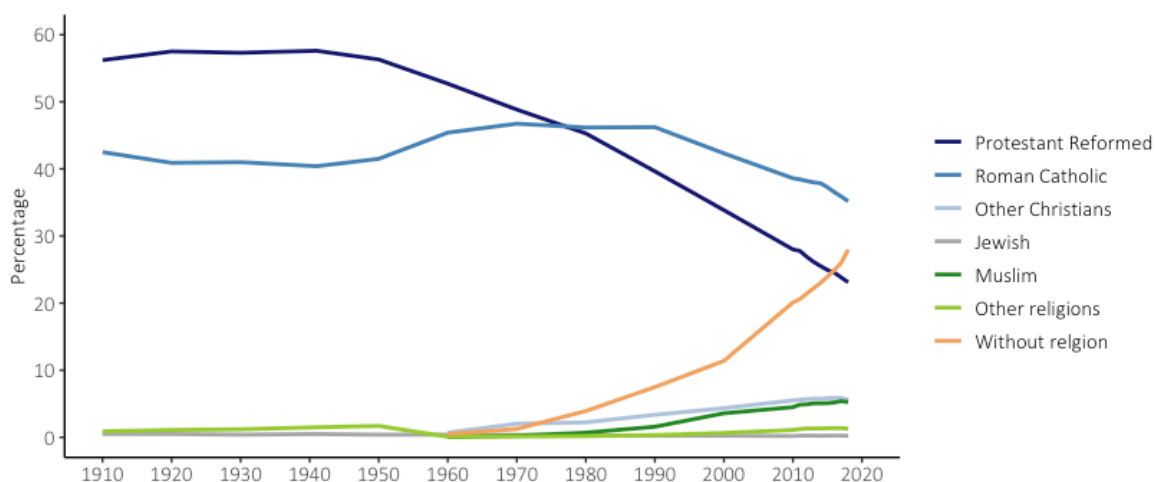
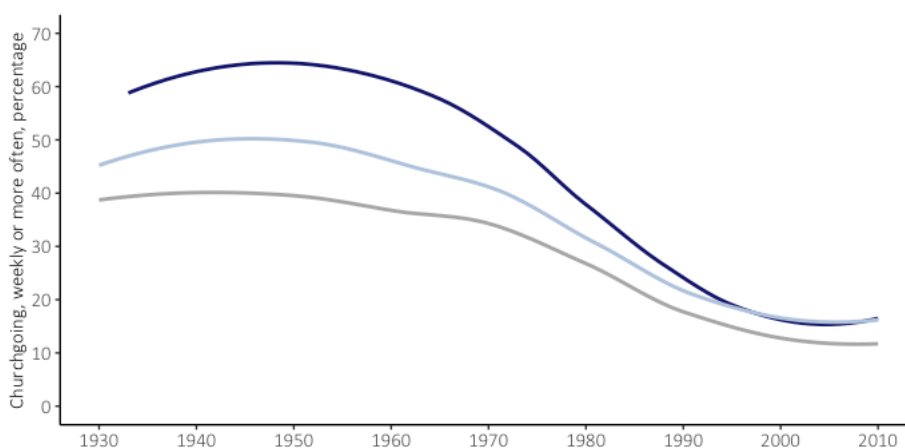


Fig. 2: Frequency of churchgoing among respondents and their parents when they were children (aged 12)



Building on this state of research, this article raises three central questions:

- (1) How have Christian religiosity and holistic spirituality changed in Switzerland over the last few decades?
- (2) How much of this change is due to cohort replacement?
- (3) What evidence is there for the theses of “believing without belonging”, “spiritual revolution”, and “religious crisis of the 1960s”?

We will use survey data collected from more than 35,000 individuals in Switzerland between 1988 and 2018 to examine these three questions.

Theories on the development of religiosity in Switzerland

Various theories have been put forward in recent decades with regard to what is happening to religion and spirituality in Western societies, and we select three prominent approaches that generate clear hypotheses and that we can therefore test with our data.

(1) *Cohort secularization*. What is perhaps at present the most plausible version of the secularization thesis claims that secularization in Western countries mainly takes the form of cohort replacement (Crockett & Voas 2006). The main reason for secularization is that various factors (pluralization, a higher level of education, secular alternatives) make religious socialization more difficult or apparently no longer important. If this is true, then we would observe that each new cohort is less religious than the previous, and that each cohort keeps its level of religiosity relatively constant over time.

(2) *Believing without belonging*. In often-cited work, Grace Davie (1990) has argued that, while people in Western countries are less and less likely to belong to organized religions, they do retain their religious beliefs. In other words, they “believe, but no longer belong”. If this is true, then we would expect the data to show on the one hand a decrease in affiliation to a formal religious denomination or religion, and on the other a continuation, for example, of belief in God, in an afterlife, and in miracles.

(3) *Spiritual revolution*. An influential book by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2004) has claimed that, while Christian religiosity is declining over time, it is being replaced by the spirituality of the so-called holistic milieu. If this is true for Switzerland, then indicators such as churchgoing, frequency of prayer, and baptism would decrease over time, while holistic spirituality, as measured by the success of practices such as yoga, meditation, healing with stones and crystals, palmistry, etc., would increase.

Datasets

Our study is based on three datasets.

(1) A survey of 1315 individuals conducted in 1988/89 by Roland Campiche and Alfred Dubach (1993), the results of which were published in the book *Every Person a Special Case? Religion in Switzerland* (often referred to as “Special-Case Study”).

(2) Three waves of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) focusing on religion in 1998, 2008 and 2018 (N = 5140). The first wave is further complemented by data from the survey *Religion et lien social* (Campiche 2004a).

(3) The CARPE dataset, which brings together data from five different surveys on churchgoing and religious affiliation in 45 countries (Biolcati et al. 2019). The surveys are Eurobarometer (EB), European Social Survey (ESS), International Social Survey Program (ISSP), European Value Survey (EVS), and World Value Survey (WVS). Our study uses only the CARPE data for Switzerland (N = 31,686).

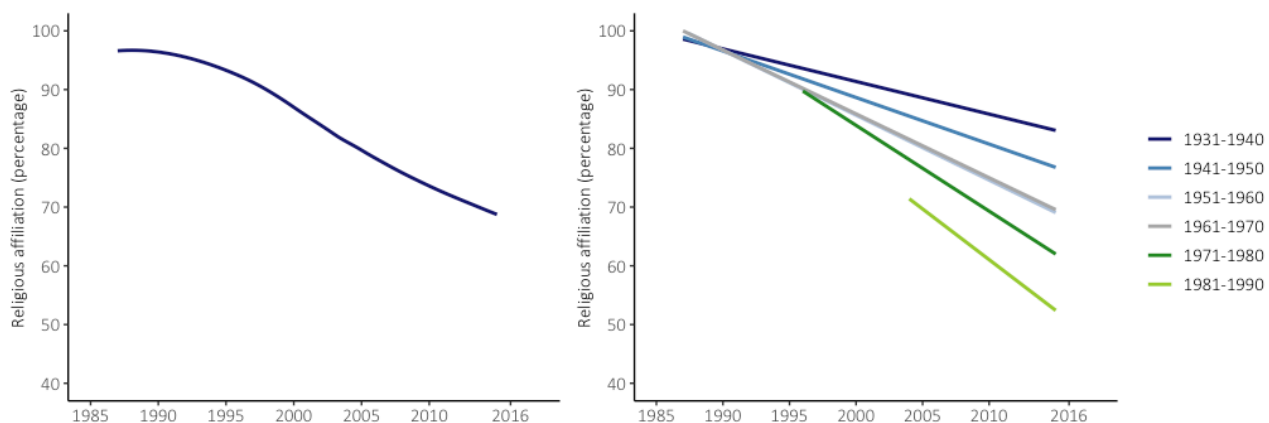
Table A.1 in the Appendix summarizes the period of time, the number of time points, the indicators, and the number of individuals surveyed for the different surveys or survey programmes. We have data points for religious affiliation and churchgoing from 1987 to 2015, and for mother’s and father’s churchgoing from 1988/89 to 2018. All other indicators are only available for shorter periods. In particular, the practice of holistic spirituality can only be considered for the period from 2008 to 2018. One of the limitations of our approach is the limited number of indicators of religiosity. For a much more comprehensive model of measurement, see Huber (2004).

We exclude members of non-Christian religions from our analysis, as examining the cohort mechanism in this very heterogeneous and comparatively small group would require a separate study. Our study also considers only individuals between the ages of 18 and 85.

Christian religiosity: Belonging and practice

When it comes to religious affiliation, there is some evidence that cohort secularization is also taking place in Switzerland, too (see Fig. 3).³ The left-hand graph in Fig. 3 shows the proportion of people with a religious affiliation over a certain period of time, and we can see that this proportion sank from more than 95% to less than 70%. The right-hand graph breaks religious affiliation down by cohort, and shows that there was a kind of fanning-out by cohort over time. While the 1987 cohorts are still very close in terms of their proportions of religious affiliation, they differ markedly by 2015, and this according to order of cohort: each new cohort has a lower level of religious affiliation than the previous. We should note nevertheless that the overall decline in the level of religious affiliation is due only to a limited extent to cohort replacement, and more to the fact that the religious affiliation of younger cohorts declines somewhat faster over the course of their lives than that of older cohorts.

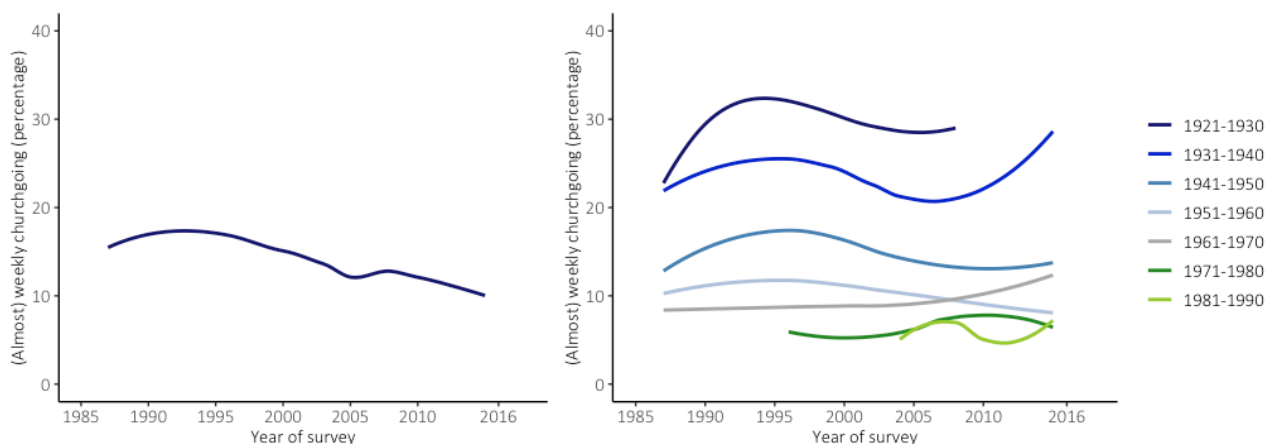
Fig. 3: Persons with a religion by year of survey and cohort (percentage)



Source: CARPE

Let us now analyze the variable *frequency of churchgoing*. Here we look at the percentage of people who state that they go to church weekly or almost weekly. The left-hand graph in Fig. 4 shows that, if we consider all respondents together, then (almost) weekly churchgoing has slowly but steadily decreased since 1987, but this graph does not yet reveal anything about whether this decline is due to individual changes or to cohort replacement. However, the right-hand graph shows very clearly that the latter is in fact the case: with surprising regularity, each new generation goes to church less often than the previous, while the frequency of churchgoing within each generation remains relatively stable over time.

Fig. 4: Weekly churchgoing by year of survey and cohort

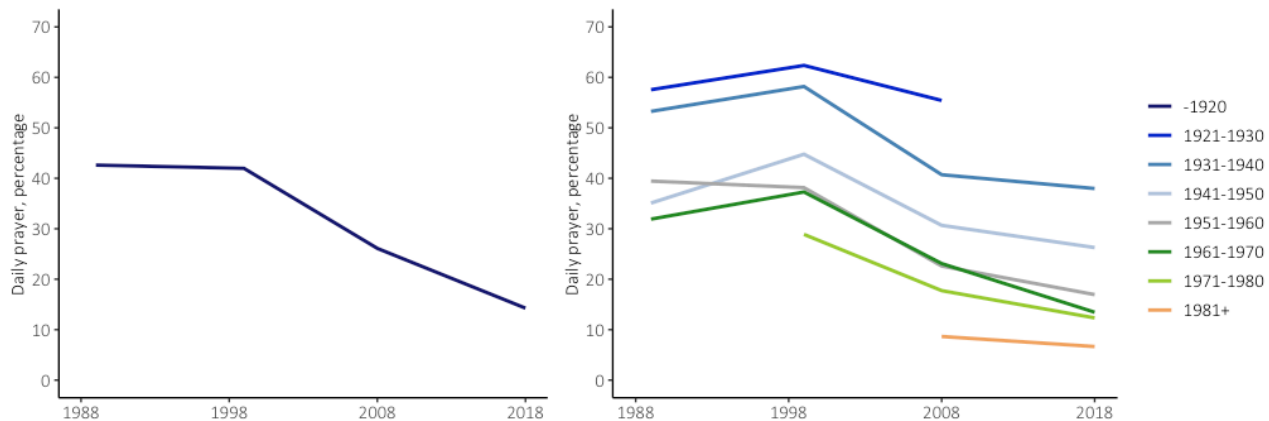


Source: CARPE

Besides churchgoing, individual prayer is perhaps the most important individual religious practice both in Christianity and in many other religions. Sociologists of religion still claimed in the 1990s that the practice of prayer in Switzerland had escaped secularization and had remained constant over time or possibly even increased (Campiche 2004: 184, 279). As we see today, this claim was false. Fig. 5 shows that frequency of prayer behaves in a strikingly similar way to churchgoing. Averaged across all respondents, frequency of prayer declined almost linearly from 43% praying daily in 1988 to 14% praying daily in 2018 (see left-hand graph in Fig. 5). When the cohorts are distinguished (see right-hand graph in Fig. 5), it is clear that much of the decline in praying is due to cohort replacement: each new cohort prays slightly less than the previous, and the practice of prayer is then “carried through life” with a slight downward trend.

³ For a discussion of religious affiliation and identity, see: Liedhegener et al. 2019, *How Religion Separates – and Connects – Us: Findings from a representative survey on the social role of religious and social identities*. Lucerne/Leipzig

Fig. 5: Daily prayer by survey year and cohort



Source: ISSP

The findings for other indicators, such as belief in God, in heaven and hell, in religious miracles, etc., show a completely consistent picture (graphs available from the authors on request). Again, each younger cohort is slightly less religious than the previous.

Holistic spirituality

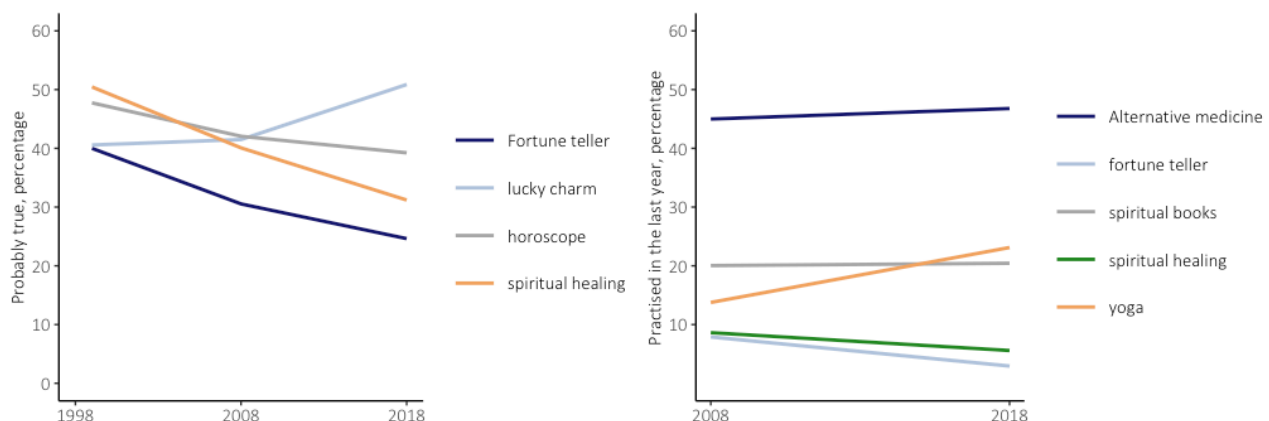
Could it be, then, that, while declining, Christian religiosity is simply being replaced by holistic spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead 2004)?

Our results show that this is not the case – at least for the period in question.⁴ The left-hand graph in Fig. 6 shows people's attitudes towards the effectiveness of four holistic methods (lucky charms, fortune tellers, horoscopes, and spiritual healing). The graph shows the percentage of respondents who consider it likely or very likely that "some fortune tellers can predict the future", that "some faith healers have supernatural powers", that "a person's zodiac sign or birth chart influences their life", and that "lucky charms do indeed sometimes bring luck". Overall, we find for all four methods that less than 50% of respondents believe these statements to be true or probably true. For three of the four methods, respondents become significantly more sceptical over time, with only lucky charms showing a slight but statistically insignificant increase.

The same applies to holistic practices (see right-hand graph in Fig. 6), where the very different prevalence of the five practices surveyed is striking. Around 45% of respondents said that they had tried alternative medicine (e.g. Bach flowers, homeopathy) in some form in the last year; 15% to 20% had practised yoga or read spiritual books; and less than 10% had undergone spiritual healing or visited a fortune teller at least once in the past year. However, we are most interested in the trends: two activities remain constant, two are decreasing, and one – yoga – is increasing (from 13% in 2008 to 22% in 2018).

All in all, we should bear in mind, and especially so in the case of alternative medicine and yoga, that the extent to which the respondents deem spirituality to be involved in these practices is unclear. In general, we can say that these data contradict the thesis of spiritual revolution: there has been no clear increase in holistic spirituality.

Fig. 6: Attitudes towards the effectiveness and practice of holistic methods



It should be noted that, whether in terms of beliefs or practices, holistic spirituality does not obey the logic of cohort replacement (for reasons of space, we cannot present the graphs separately). Cohorts are nevertheless important, though, with holistic spirituality being particularly prevalent in the 1951-1970 birth cohort. The only exception is yoga, which seems to have increased significantly in the last decade among the youngest cohort observed (1981+).

Conclusion

This article has explored how Christian religiosity and holistic spirituality have developed over time in Switzerland, how much of the change can be attributed to generational effects, and whether there is evidence that secularization experienced a surge in the 1960s.

Let us summarize the results in terms of our four initial theses.

(1) The cohort secularization thesis can be partially confirmed for Christian religiosity. The most important indicators of Christian religiosity – denominational affiliation, churchgoing, prayer, and belief in God – all have the same pattern: starting with the oldest cohort (-1920), each younger cohort is somewhat less religious than the previous. The cohort mechanism is particularly apparent when it comes to religious practice (churchgoing and prayer), which means that secularizing factors such as modernization, secular competition, pluralism, etc. primarily hinder religious socialization and thus influence children and young people. Nevertheless, it is not only the cohort mechanism that is responsible for the decline in religiosity; there is also a period effect for most indicators (and especially for formal affiliation), suggesting a decline in individual religiosity over the period of time. Holistic spirituality remains relatively stable and does not follow the logic of cohort secularization.

(2) We find little support in the data for the believing-without-belonging thesis. Belief in God, the Bible, and miracles is declining, as is religious affiliation (and religious practice). Overall, it is the case that “neither believing nor belonging” is increasing. Interestingly, the various indicators of Christian religiosity show different levels of persistence, with secularization manifesting itself first in a decline in churchgoing, then in responses to belief, and finally in a decline in denominational affiliation. Thus, people seem to relinquish time-intensive behaviour more quickly.

(3) The thesis of spiritual revolution fares no better. There is only a rather low level of approval among the population of indicators of holistic spirituality, be it in terms of statements of faith or practice, this level remaining relatively constant in the period of time observed. We can therefore not talk of an increase that would outweigh the losses in Christian religiosity.

If we look at the international literature, then we can conclude that in terms of religion Switzerland behaves very similarly to almost all other Western countries. Secularization arises chiefly from cohort replacement, and we are dealing with “generations of declining faith”. In religious terms, Switzerland is decidedly not a “special case”.

⁴ However, it could be the case that Christian religiosity is being replaced by other phenomena (e.g. secular alternatives); see: Stolz, J. 2013. “Towards a theory of religious-secular competition”. *Cologne Journal of Sociology and Social Psychology* 65 (special issue 1): 25-49.

Appendix

Table A.1: Period, time points, indicators used in the surveys

	Period	Time points	Indicators of Christian religiosity	Indicators of holistic spirituality	n
Special-case study (Dubach/Campiche 1993)	1988/89	1	Practice: - Religious affiliation - Churchgoing, respondent - Former churchgoing, mother - Former churchgoing, father		1315
RLS/ISSP (religion modules)	1998, 2008, 2018	3	Belief: - God - Life after death Practice: - Religious affiliation - Prayer - Churchgoing, respondent - Former churchgoing, mother - Former churchgoing, father - Former churchgoing, respondent	Consider effective: - Lucky charm - Fortune tellers - Horoscope - Spiritual healing Practice ⁽¹⁾ : - Fortune-telling, astrology - Yoga - Spiritual books - Spiritual healing - Alternative medicine	1561 (Year: 1998) 1229 (Year: 2008) 2350 (Year: 2018)
CARPE (EB, ESS, ISSP, EVS, WVS)	1987-2015	27	Practice: - Religious affiliation - Churchgoing		35,276

Note (1) Only available for 2008 and 2018.

Bibliography

- Biolcati, F., Molteni F., Quandt, M., & Vezzoni C. 2019. Church Attendance and Religious change Pooled European dataset (CARPE). A small-scale harmonization project. Unpublished manuscript.
- Bochinger, C. 2012. Religionen, Staat und Gesellschaft. Die Schweiz zwischen Säkularisierung und religiöser Vielfalt. Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung.
- Bovay, C. 2004. Le paysage religieux en Suisse. Neuchâtel: OFS.
- Campiche, R. J. 2004a. Die zwei Gesichter der Religion. Faszination und Entzauberung. Zürich: TVZ.
- Campiche, R. J. 2004b. Les deux visages de la religion. Fascination et désenchantement. Genève: Labor et Fides.
- Crockett, Alasdair, and David Voas. 2006. Generations of Decline: Religious Change in 20th-Century Britain. *Journal for the scientific study of religion* 45(4):567-84.
- de Flaugergues, A. 2016. Pratiques et croyances religieuses et spirituelles en Suisse. Premiers résultats de l'Enquête sur la langue, la religion et la culture 2014. Neuchâtel: Office fédéral de la statistique (OFS).
- Dubach, A., & Campiche, R. 1993. Jede/r ein Sonderfall? Religion in der Schweiz: Ergebnisse einer Repräsentativbefragung. Zürich: NZN Buchverlag AG.
- Höllinger, F., & Tripold, T. 2012. Ganzheitliches Leben. Das holistische Milieu zwischen neuer Spiritualität und postmoderner Wellness-Kultur. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Huber, S. 2004. Zentralität und multidimensionale Struktur der Religiosität: Eine Synthese der theoretischen Ansätze von Allport und Glock zur Messung der Religiosität. Pp. 79-104 in *Religiosität: Messverfahren und Studien zu Gesundheit und Lebensbewältigung*, edited by Christian Zwingmann and Helfried Moosbrugger. Münster: Waxmann.
- Liedhegener, A., Pickel, G., Odermatt, A., Yendell, A., & Jaeckel, Y. 2019. Wie Religion "uns" trennt - und verbindet. Befunde einer Repräsentativbefragung zur gesellschaftlichen Rolle von religiösen und sozialen Identitäten. Luzern/Leipzig.
- Roth, M., & Müller, F. 2020. Pratiques et croyances religieuses et spirituelles en Suisse. Premiers résultats de l'Enquête sur la langue, la religion et la culture 2019. Neuchâtel: Office fédéral de la statistique (OFS).
- Stolz, J. 2013. Entwurf einer Theorie religiös-säkularer Konkurrenz. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 65(Sonderheft 1): 25-49.
- Stolz, J., Könemann, J., Purdie, M. S., Englberger, T., & Krüggeler, M. 2014. Religion und Spiritualität in der Ich-Gesellschaft. Vier Gestalten des (Un-)Glaubens. Zürich: TVZ/NZN.

Série Social Change in Switzerland : précédents numéros

Transformation des élites en Suisse

Felix Bühlmann, Marion Beetschen, Thomas David, Stéphanie Ginalschi & André Mach

N°1, Juillet 2015

L'évolution des inégalités de revenus en Suisse

Ursina Kuhn & Christian Suter

N°2, Octobre 2015

Aspirations professionnelles des jeunes en Suisse : rôles sexués et conciliation travail/famille

Lavinia Gianettoni, Carolina Carvalho Arruda, Jacques-Antoine Gauthier, Dinah Gross & Dominique Joye

N°3, Novembre 2015

Le vote ouvrier en Suisse, 1971-2011

Line Rennwald & Adrian Zimmermann

N°4, Février 2016

Mobilité sociale au 20e siècle en Suisse : entre démocratisation de la formation et reproduction des inégalités de classe

Julie Falcon

N°5, Mai 2016

Quelles perspectives d'emploi et de salaire après un apprentissage ?

Mailys Korber & Daniel Oesch

N°6, Juin 2016

Les femmes à la tête des grandes entreprises suisses : une analyse historique des inégalités de genre

Stéphanie Ginalschi

N°7, Novembre 2016

Les inégalités scolaires en Suisse

Georges Felouzis & Samuel Charmillot

N°8, Avril 2017

Du boom de l'après-guerre au miracle de l'emploi – la forte diminution du temps de travail en Suisse depuis 1950

Michael Siegenthaler

N°9, Juin 2017

Le travail des mères en Suisse: évolution et déterminants individuels

Francesco Giudici & Reto Schumacher

N°10, Octobre 2017

Les hauts revenus en Suisse depuis 1980: répartition et mobilité

Isabel Martinez

N°11, Novembre 2017

La classe moyenne n'est pas en déclin, mais en croissance. L'évolution de la structure des emplois en Suisse depuis 1970

Daniel Oesch & Emily Murphy

N°12, Décembre 2017

De l'école à l'âge adulte : parcours de formation et d'emploi en Suisse

Thomas Meyer

N°13, Avril 2018

Devenir parents ré-activer les inégalités de genre : une analyse des parcours de vie des hommes et des femmes en Suisse

René Levy

N°14, Mai 2018

La pauvreté laborieuse en Suisse : étendue et mécanismes

Eric Crettaz

N°15, Septembre 2019

Une augmentation spectaculaire de la migration hautement qualifiée en Suisse

Philippe Wanner & Ilka Steiner

N°16, Octobre 2018

Les opposés ne s'attirent pas – le rôle de la formation et du revenu dans la mise en couple en Suisse

Laura Ravazzini, Ursina Kuhn & Christian Suter

N°17, Mars 2019

L'inégalité salariale entre hommes et femmes commence bien avant la fondation d'une famille

Benita Combet & Daniel Oesch

N°18, Juin 2019

Au fil du temps et des rencontres : une cartographie des réseaux personnels en Suisse

Gaëlle Aeby, Jacques-Antoine Gauthier & Eric D. Widmer

N°19, Septembre 2019

Les héritages en Suisse : évolution depuis 1911 et importance pour les impôts

Marius Brühlhart

N°20, Décembre 2019

Les intentions contradictoires des Suisses vis-à-vis de leur consommation d'énergie

Mehdi Farsi, Laurent Ott & Sylvain Weber

N°21, Mars 2020

La distribution spatiale de la population étrangère en Suisse

Jonathan Zufferey & Philippe Wanner

N°22, Juin 2020

Le développement des aspirations professionnelles des jeunes en Suisse

Irene Kriesi & Ariane Basler

N°23, Octobre 2020

La demande de compétences informatiques sur le marché du travail suisse 1990-2019

Marlis Buchmann, Helen Buchs & Ann-Sophie Gnehm

N°24, Novembre 2020

Les attitudes envers l'égalité des genres en Suisse entre 2000 et 2017

Christina Bornatici, Jacques-Antoine Gauthier, & Jean-Marie Le Goff

N°25, Février 2021

L'évolution du stress en Suisse – la première vague de la pandémie, une pause pour les personnes stressées

Hannah S. Klaas, Ursina Kuhn, Jan-Erik Refle, Marieke Voorpostel, Valérie-Anne Ryser, Nora Dasoki & Robin Tillmann

N°26, Juillet 2021