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Does disestablishment lead to religious vitality? The case of Switzerland[1]

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Abstract

Economists and sociologists of religion have claimed that religious establishment dampens religious vitality, leading to lower recruitment efforts, low attendance, declining membership within established congregations, and the 'crowding out' of non-established congregations. Conversely, these authors have told us, disestablishment will lead to more religious vitality. Remarkably, even though these claims rest on the connection between establishment and the organizational and membership behaviour of local religious congregations, no research has directly examined that connection. We use the 2008 Swiss National Congregations Study as well as historical data to assess the effect of different levels of religious establishment on both established and non-established congregations. We find that established congregations do indeed show less religious vitality than non-established congregations. Contrary to the claims of the economic literature, however, these covariations are *not* caused by differences in religious establishment on the cantonal level. Both our quantitative and historical analyses show that disestablishment has *not* led to religious vitality for either established or non-established congregations. The only clear effect of disestablishment is a dramatic decrease of income for established congregations. Based on quantitative and historical evidence, we suggest that differences between established and non-established congregations are produced by differences in religious tradition and immigration flows, not by differences in levels of establishment.

Keywords: Establishment of religion; regulation; rational choice; religious vitality; secularization

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'There must be an ecclesiastical order, and a public establishment of religion in every civilized community'.

David Hume

'... church establishment explains to a large extent the decline of church religion ...'

José Casanova

Introduction

The study of religious establishment and its consequences for religion and society is a vibrant area in the sociology of religion. Generally speaking, establishment refers to preferential treatment by the state of one or more religious groups, their members, or their institutions. This preferential treatment may take many forms, including paying clergy salaries, collecting church taxes, harassing religious competitors, or giving preferential access to positions in schools, hospitals, media or the military. Advances in conceptualizing and measuring the complex variations in religious establishment across societies and across time have allowed scholars to make significant progress in describing these variations and assessing their consequences (Chaves and Cann 1992; Fox 2011).

One of the most interesting and controversial ideas within this literature is the claim that establishment is bad for religion while disestablishment furthers religious vitality. The core idea goes back at least to Adam Smith (2008[1776]: 564), who believed that preachers whose subsistence depended on member donations would show much more 'exertion, zeal and industry' than preachers in established churches who depended on a state-administered church tax.

More recently, scholars advocating an economic approach to the study of religion popularized and extended the idea that establishment weakens religion while disestablishment strengthens it, claiming that the mechanisms identified by Smith explained major differences in religiosity across a wide range of past and present settings (Iannaccone 1991; Stark and Finke 2000; for a critical overview see De Graaf 2013). According to these scholars, a stronger state establishment should influence religious congregations in at least two ways. On the one hand, congregations that benefit from the establishment (the established) should make fewer recruitment efforts, become less concerned about drawing meaningful boundaries between themselves and 'the world', and not produce religion attuned to the preferences of the population. Congregations that are disadvantaged by a religious establishment (the non-established), on the other hand, should be 'crowded out' and either leave the market or produce religion

at a lower level of capacity than they could have without establishment. Both effects should, according to the theory, lead to fewer religious options, an overall less attractive supply of religion, and thus to a less religiously involved population. Disestablishment should have the opposite effects, leading overall to more religious vitality.

A key assumption made by these scholars is that religious demand is constant across all societies, so variation in the level of religious involvement is produced only by 'supply-side' variations in church-state relations that affect the behaviour of clergy, the organizational and membership behaviour of religious organizations, and the range of religious options available to the population. Stark and Iannaccone (1994) applied this theory to Europe by arguing that the disestablishment (or 'desacralization', as they called it) of European countries might in the short run look like secularization, but would in the long run lead to a general religious revival.

These claims have been criticized on both theoretical and empirical grounds (Bruce 1999; Chaves and Gorski 2001; Pollack and Rosta 2015; Voas, Olson and Crockett 2002; Stolz 2009), but the idea that establishment weakens established religious institutions and lowers religious involvement even outside the established religious institutions remains influential, as does the complementary idea that disestablishment will lead to a strengthening of formerly established groups and to increased religious vitality in the society as a whole (Fox and Tabory 2008). Remarkably, however, even though these claims rest on the organizational and membership behaviour of local religious congregations, no study has systematically examined that connection. The numerous studies that examine the relationship between establishment and religion all use individual-level data, and they assume that their individual-level results reflect differences between established and non-established congregations.

This combination of assuming but never empirically analysing the organizational and membership behaviour of established and non-established congregations under different levels of establishment can be found in the writings of scholars who see establishment as the most important factor explaining variation in religious vitality (Iannaccone 1991; Stark and Iannaccone 1994), but it also can be found in the work of those who present mixed results (Barro and McCleary 2003; Chaves and Cann 1992; Fox and Tabory 2008), and even in the writing of those who downright oppose the supply-side theory of religious markets (Bruce 1999). Even the new literature on 'varieties of establishment' (Sullivan and Beaman 2013), which goes beyond formal legal establishment to assess cultural, geographical and temporal variations in how establishment might be implemented, does not systematically examine how variations in establishment affect established and non-established groups.

One important reason that the connections between levels of establishment and congregational characteristics have remained an unopened black box has been the absence of appropriate data. The Swiss National Congregations Study

(NCS), conducted in the winter of 2008–9, allows us for the first time to assess key claims about the connections between different levels of establishment and congregations' organizational and membership characteristics.

Switzerland is an especially appropriate country in which to study these connections because its federalist history has produced substantial variation in church-state relationships across its 26 cantons, leading some cantons to very strong, others to intermediate, and still others to extremely weak state establishment of religion (Stolz et al. 2016). In all of the cantons the same two religious groups are advantaged – Reformed and Roman Catholic – but in some cantons this takes very strong forms whereas in others only very slight advantages can be found.[2] Throughout, we will use 'established congregations' as a shorthand for congregations that belong to one of these denominations with established status in a canton, which therefore receive preferential treatment by the state. We will use 'non-established congregation' as a shorthand for congregations that belong to other denominations that do not receive these benefits.

Cantons differ widely in their establishment regimes, with the most obvious and important differences involving the financing of religion. In cantons with strong establishments (Berne, Zurich, Vaud), churches in the established denominations are financially supported by the state. In Berne, the state pays the salaries of Reformed pastors, while in Vaud the Reformed and Catholic churches are financed through the state budget. In cantons with weak establishments, such as Geneva or Neuchâtel, the state still collects church contributions for the Reformed and Catholic churches, but these are not compulsory and most individuals ignore them (Streiff 2008). A compulsory church tax is levied on members of established churches in 21 cantons (SSK 2009), and most of these cantons also collect a church tax from businesses.

We could of course describe in much more detail the establishment variations across cantons, and will do so partly in our historical analysis below. The main point here is that the empirical variety of religious establishment regimes within Switzerland provides useful analytical leverage, and we take advantage of this variation to address our central question: does disestablishment lead to more religious vitality? We do this by answering three sub-questions.

- Do established religious congregations show less religious vitality than non-established congregations?
- Can vitality differences between established and non-established congregations be explained by differences in the strength of religious establishment within a canton?
- Have cantons that have shifted historically from establishment to disestablishment experienced increased religious vitality?

We test four hypotheses implied by the economics of religion argument.

(1) Established congregations show less religious vitality (recruitment efforts, attendance, growth, income) than non-established congregations.

(2) The stronger the level of establishment in a canton, the lower the religious vitality of established and non-established congregations.
(3) The stronger the level of establishment in a canton, the larger the *differences* in religious vitality (recruitment efforts, attendance, growth, income) between established and non-established congregations.
(4) Historically, congregations in cantons that have shifted from establishment to disestablishment have experienced increased religious vitality.

All in all, our central aim is to use the Swiss case to examine establishment's effects on both established and non-established congregations. If the economics of religion model is true, we should find that non-established congregations are stronger than established congregations (H1), both established and non-established congregations are weaker in cantons with stronger establishments (H2), the differences in vitality between established and non-established congregations are larger in cantons with stronger establishments (H3), and religious vitality increases in cantons that move from establishment to disestablishment (H4). Our primary contribution is to open the black box containing the links between establishment and congregational characteristics and behaviour.

Methods

The Swiss National Congregation Study was modelled on the National Congregations Studies conducted in the USA in 1997–8, 2006–7, and 2012.[3]

Sampling

In order to create the sampling frame, a census was conducted from September 2008 to September 2009, counting all local religious groups in Switzerland.[4] This was done by combining all available sources of information, including existing lists of local religious groups produced by churches and religious federations; existing lists (published or not) constructed by scholars; existing lists appearing on institutional websites, directories or databases; and interviews with informed individuals within the religious milieus. All this information was combined and reviewed to identify local religious congregations. A congregation was retained on the final list only if it appeared on two independent sources of information. From the resulting list of 5,734 congregations from all religions in Switzerland, a random sample of 1,040 religious congregations, stratified to over-represent religious minorities, was chosen.

Data collection

For every chosen congregation, one key informant (in most cases the spiritual leader) was interviewed by telephone in 2008–9 in one of the three national languages. The approximately 250 questions focused on concrete and verifiable

Table I: *Level of establishment in different cantons*

		Canton
Strong	8	BE, ZH
establishment	7	VD, JU
	6	FR, BL, VS
	5	TI, UR, SO, OW
	4	SG, SH, LU, TG, ZG, GR, GL, AI, SZ, BS
	3	AG, AR, NW
Weak	2	NE
establishment	1	GE

AG = Aargau; AR = Appenzell Innerrhoden; AI = Appenzell Innerrhoden; BE = Bern; BL = Basel Land; BS = Basel Stadt; FR = Fribourg; GE = Genève; GL = Glarus; GR = Graubünden; JU = Jura; LU = Luzern; NE = Neuchâtel; NW = Nidwalden; OW = Obwalden; SG = Sankt Gallen; SH = Schaffhausen; SO = Solothurn; SZ = Schwyz TG = Thurgau; TI = Ticino; UR = Uri; VD = Vaud; VS = Valais; ZG = Zug; ZH = Zurich

congregational practices as well as on the tangible characteristics of the organization for which the respondent could provide reliable information. The response rate was 71.8 per cent.[5]

Operationalization

Our central independent variable, the strength of *establishment* in the different cantons, was measured with a version of the scale described in Chaves and Cann (1992), adapted to capture as much of the cross-canton variation as possible.[6] (See the Appendix for scale details.) The scale ranged in principle from 0 to 10, though no canton received a score of 0, 9 or 10. Coders used information given in Frey (1999) and SSK (2009). Inter-coder reliability was .87, with discrepancies resolved by the first author. As shown in Table I, the coding procedure yielded a distribution of cantons across the establishment scale that seems qualitatively correct.

Established versus non-established congregation was measured with a recoding of a more detailed religious tradition variable into a three-category variable: established Christian (Reformed and Roman Catholic), non-established Christian (all other Christians), and non-established non-Christians. Again, since we excluded synagogues in the four cantons in which Jews are partly established, all of the non-Christian congregations in our analysis also are non-established. This variable is just a regrouping of the religious tradition variable, since some religious traditions are established and others are not.

Our key dependent variable, *religious vitality*, was measured with four sets of congregational variables:

Recruitment effort was operationalized with three dichotomous items asking if congregations encouraged members to invite a new person to the congregations' ritual (yes/no), if the congregation tried to invite new people to its activities (yes/no), and if the congregation recontacted first-time visitors by phone or

by visiting them (yes/no). A factor analysis shows these three items to lie on one common factor. A reliability analysis shows Alpha (in this case the KR20-coefficient) to be .65.

Membership structure and attendance was operationalized by asking the key informant how many persons were associated in any way with the religious life of the congregation, how many persons were participating regularly in the religious life of the congregation, and how many persons were present at the last regular religious celebration. These variables are logged (log 10) in our analyses.

Church growth was operationalized by an additive scale created from three items: (1) A 5-point scale indicated whether the number of regular participants, compared to 2 years earlier, had grown by more than 10 per cent, grown by 10 per cent or less, stayed stable, shrunk by 10 per cent or less, or shrunk by more than 10 per cent. (2) A similar 5-point scale, but indicating growth or decline compared to 10 years earlier. (3) A 3-point scale indicating whether the total amount of donations of all kinds increased, stayed the same, or decreased compared to 10 years earlier. The scale ranges from -5 to $+5$. A factor analysis shows that these items lie on one dimension. Cronbach's alpha is .7. While this way of measuring growth only relies on the subjective judgment of our key informant, it yields an overall picture of growth and decline that comports well both with census data and with accounts by the religious groups themselves (Bovay 2004).

Congregations' *income* was measured by asking the key informant to specify the total amount of congregational income from all sources during the past year. This variable was logged (log 10) in our analyses.

Finally, three control variables are included in our models. The *size of the community* where the congregation is located was measured within an 8-level variable, based on Swiss government data, ranging from 1 (fewer than 1,000 inhabitants) to 8 (100,000 or more).

The *traditional confession of the canton* is measured by two dummy variables where 1 denotes respectively the existence of a Catholic or Reformed tradition in the canton. If both dummies are zero, this means that the canton has a mixed traditional confession. The canton's confessional traditions were coded according to Pfister (1984).

The *language in which worship services are conducted* is measured by a dichotomous variable that is 1 if one of the three national languages is used, and zero otherwise. This is a proxy for the congregation being an immigration congregation.

NCS results

Our first step is to ask if established congregations show less religious vitality than non-established congregations (hypothesis 1). When we compare

Table II: *Differences between established Christian, non-established Christian, and not Christian congregations*

	Established Christian	Non-established Christian	Not Christian
Recruitment efforts			
Congregation tries to invite new persons	87.4%	94.8%	58.6%
Encourages members to invite a new person	68.4%	92.5%	50.3%
Follow-up visits with new visitors	65.0%	77.0%	30.5%
Membership/Attendance structure			
People with any link to congregation[a]	500	100	60
Regular participants[a]	100	75	30
Attendees last weekend[a]	50	70	25
Relative attendance (attendees/any link)	10.0%	70.0%	41.7%
Growth			
In the last 10 years congregation has			
Grown	20.6%	46.1%	51.9%
Remained stable	32.3%	23.9%	34.8%
Diminished	47.1%	30.0%	13.3%
Income			
Median congregation income (year)[b]	493,333	180,000	92,288
Median leader salary (year)[c]	100,000	73,772	44,305
Total	510	346	175

Notes: All differences are significant with $p < .001$.

[a]These numbers are medians

[b]Calculated only for congregations that included the salary of the spiritual leader in their budget.

[c]Calculated only for full-time clergy or spiritual leaders.

established Christian and non-established Christian congregations, the hypothesis can in general be confirmed (Table II). Established Christian congregations show significantly less recruiting effort. While absolute attendance is quite close between established and not established Christians (the former showing more regular participants but the latter more attendees last weekend), the main difference is relative attendance: only 10 per cent of members with any link to established congregations have attended at the last celebration against 70 per cent for non-established Christian churches. Clearly, non-established Christian churches have more religious vitality in the sense that they have a more active membership base. Another way of saying this is that established Christians are more church-like and non-established Christians more sect-like (in a Weberian sense). Concerning growth, established congregations are more often diminishing in size than they are growing. The reverse is true for non-established congregations. The results also show that established Christian congregations are much richer than non-established congregations – measured by the median congregation income per year and the median leader salary per year.

The picture becomes more complex, however, when we compare established Christian congregations to non-established non-Christian congregations. Again,

established Christian congregations show less (even negative) growth and higher income. But, interestingly, established Christians show *more* recruiting and *higher* absolute attendance (although lower relative attendance) than non-established non-Christians.

Summing up our results for hypothesis 1, we can say that it is in general confirmed – especially when comparing established Christian congregations to non-established Christian congregations. If one stopped here, one might interpret these results as support for the basic idea that establishment depresses religious vitality for the established groups. But, as we will see, the claim that these differences are caused and/or moderated by variations in the level of establishment (hypotheses 2, 3) does not withstand scrutiny.

Since the 26 Swiss cantons have varying levels of establishment, we can investigate establishment's effect on both established and non-established congregations. The economic theory would predict that both established and non-established congregations in cantons with weak establishment would show more religious vitality (hypothesis 2). It would also lead us to expect that differences between established and non-established congregations would be larger within cantons with stronger establishments (hypothesis 3). These effects should be sizeable since level of establishment is thought to be the central causal force behind variation in religious vitality.

We investigate these hypotheses with nested OLS multiple regression models. The results are in Table III. In model 1, we enter the three-category variable distinguishing established Christian, non-established Christian, non-Christian congregations, with the non-established Christians as reference category. Model 2 adds three control variables. Model 3 enters our central explanatory variable, the level of establishment within each canton. Model 4 adds the interaction between the level of establishment in each canton and our three-category variable indicating different types of congregations to see if the level of establishment within a canton has different consequences for our three subgroups of congregations, thus testing hypothesis 3. Since the models are nested, we can see if the addition of a certain variable (or a block of variables) adds significantly to the explained variance. We conducted extensive residual analysis to test model assumptions. We also did the analysis separately for our three establishment subgroups, controlling for a more detailed set of religious tradition subgroups. Our central findings are robust to these tests and alternative specifications.

The regression results reproduce the support for hypothesis 1 that we already have seen: compared with non-established Christian congregations, established congregations are less likely to engage in recruitment efforts, have lower attendance, and are less likely to have grown in recent years. But they have more income. This remains true when controls are added. Similar to what we saw above, matters are not so clear when comparing established Christian congregations to non-established non-Christian congregations. The latter show

Table III: *The influence of establishment on recruitment, attendance, growth, and income*

	Recruitment efforts				Attendance			
Model	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Establishment			–.022	.059			.015	.068
Establishment * Christian (establ.)				–.124				–.092
Establishment * NonChrist. (not establ.)				–.211*				–.126
Christian (establ.)	–.222 **	–.219**	–.220**	–.096	–.133 **	–.034	–.033	.058
Christian (not establ.) (reference)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Not Christian (not establ.)	–.476 **	–.475**	–.476**	–.279**	–.304**	–.373**	–.372**	–.253**
Trad. confession canton: Catholic		–.060	–.053	–.054		–.039	–.043	–.043
Trad. confession canton: Reformed		–.097*	–.081	–.088		.016	.005	.003
National language of ritual		.025	.026	.023		–.175**	–.176**	–.179**
Size of community		.059	.056	.063		.146**	.148**	.152**
R^2	18.2%	18.8%	18.9%	19.4%	7.4%	12.7%	12.8%	13.0%
ΔR^2	18.2%	0.7%	0.0%	0.5%	7.4%	5.3%	0.0%	0.2%
p (ΔF)	.000	.072	.518	.035	.000	.000	.673	.306
N	1020	1020	1020	1020	1012	1012	1012	1012

Table III: *(cont.) The influence of establishment on recruitment, attendance, growth, and income*

	Growth				Income			
Model	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Level of establishment			–.005	–.078			.130**	.181**
Level of establ. * Christian (establ.)				.211*				–.122
Level of establ.* NonChrist. (not establ.)				.079				–.091
Christian (establ.)	–.282**	–.260**	–.260**	–.461**	.295**	.366**	.371**	.486**
Christian (not establ.) (reference)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Non-Christian (not establ.)	.012	–.024	.024	–.102	–.397**	–.410**	–.408**	–.325**
Trad. confession canton: Catholic		–.095*	–.093*	–.104*		–.141**	–.184**	–.179**
Trad. confession canton: Reformed		–.090*	–.087	–.101		–.109**	–.201**	–.195**
National language of ritual		–.089*	–.088*	–.085*		.014	.004	.000
Size of community		.047	.046	.045		.178**	.202**	.203**
R^2	8.2%	9.7%	9.7%	10.1%	33.8%	37.2%	38.3%	38.5%
ΔR^2	8.2%	1.5%	0.0%	0.4%	33.8%	3.4%	1.2%	0.2%
p (ΔF)	.000	.008	.906	.130	.000	.000	.000	.375
N	854	854	854	854	676	676	676	676

more growth, but much less recruitment effort, attendance and income than established Christians.

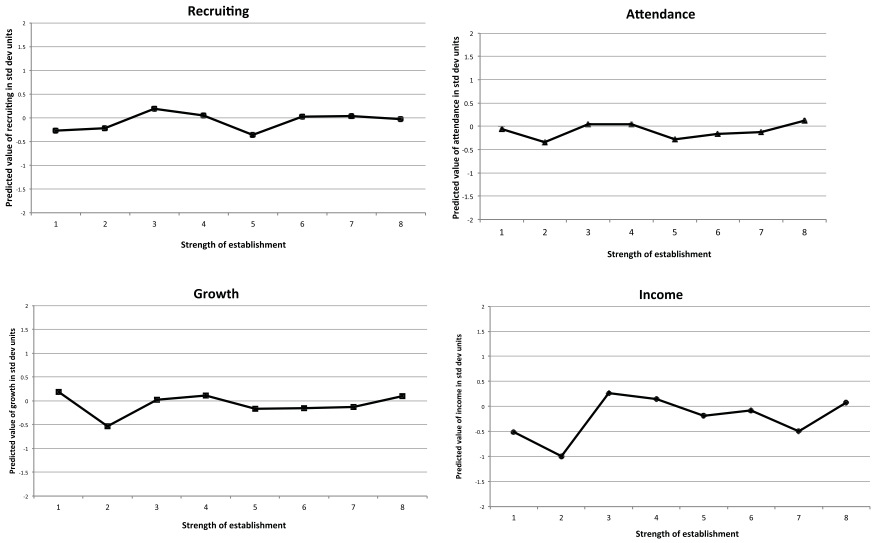
Hypothesis 2 states that with a higher level of religious establishment in a canton, religious vitality of established and non-established congregations should diminish. This hypothesis receives no support. In all models, with or without controls, the main establishment variable is not significantly related to three of our four indicators of religious vitality. Income is the one exception, but the relationship is opposite to what we would expect if the economic model is correct. Congregations in cantons with stronger establishments have *more* income. We unpack this finding below.

Hypothesis 3 envisions an interaction effect: the stronger the level of establishment in a canton, the larger the *differences* in religious vitality between established and non-established congregations. There is little evidence for such moderation effects. One interaction term that is statistically different from zero suggests a larger difference between non-established Christian and non-established, non-Christian congregations concerning recruitment efforts in cantons with stronger establishments. It is difficult to know what to make of this, since the economic model predicts differences between established and non-established congregations, not among different types of non-established congregations. We conclude that this is not a substantively important finding. A second (just) significant interaction effect suggests that there is more growth for established Christians than for non-established Christians with higher levels of establishment. Again, this is a small effect that we do not think is substantively important.

Our central – null – finding is displayed in the four graphs of Figure I, showing the relationship between levels of religious establishment and our measures of religious vitality, controlling for all other variables in our model. This figure shows the predicted value of each dependent variable (in standardized form) for each level of religious establishment from the model 4 regressions shown in Table III. The level of establishment across cantons has no relationship with congregations' recruiting efforts, attendance or growth. Figure I also makes clear that the positive relationship between the level of establishment in a canton and congregational income is mainly a difference between income levels in cantons with the very weakest establishments, on the one hand, and income levels in cantons with medium to strong establishments, on the other hand. We focus now on this surprising and important relationship between establishment level and congregational income.

It turns out that Christian congregations, and especially established Christian congregations, have significantly higher incomes in cantons with a particular feature of established religion: *having a church tax*. Figure II highlights just how striking this pattern is. The average income of established churches that can rely on a church tax is more than four times higher than that of established churches that are financed through the state budget

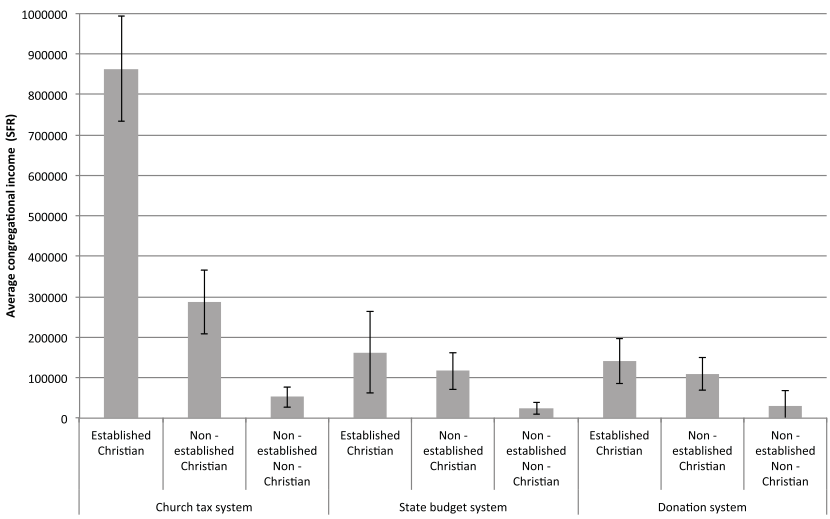
Figure I: *Recruitment efforts, attendance, growth, and income depending on strength of establishment in a canton*



Note: These graphs show predicted values generated by standardized versions of model 4 in Table 3.

(but without a tax) or by donations. Indeed, established churches financed via state budgets or donations are not significantly richer than non-established Christians. The reason for this financial difference between

Figure II: *Average congregational income, establishment, and financing regime*



church-tax systems and donation systems is easy to understand. In a church-tax system, members are faced with a sort of default setting of being a member of the national church and paying church tax together with general taxes. This situation will seem normal to people, so they rarely will reflect on it. Only at certain moments, such as receiving the first tax bill in one's life, a large tax increase, or an event causing disappointment with the church, will the issue of church taxes come to mind and be considered a situation that may require a decision. In these rare moments, the choice is one of remaining an official church member and paying (often rather high) church taxes, or leaving and not paying. Faced with this all-or-nothing decision, people often stay, pay the tax, and thus contribute to the high church income.[7] If established congregations switch to a donations system, they become poor. Their members can now pay as little as they like and still consider themselves members; they will very often pay nothing or only a small amount. Churches in state-budget systems are also much poorer than those in church tax systems because their budget is allotted by state officials and voted by representatives of the people who judge the effectiveness of the money for churches in comparison to other possible uses (education, security, welfare, etc.). In times of declining church membership and constant media coverage of 'empty pews', state budgets for churches are often reduced.

Interestingly, even non-established Christian churches have higher incomes where there is a church tax. The income difference is not as large as it is for established churches, but it is present. Further analysis shows that this difference mainly reflects the fact that most of the large and therefore higher-income evangelical congregations happen to be situated in cantons that have a church tax system. When we control for size of congregation, the difference diminishes by half. It may be that some of the remaining difference is because some non-established congregations profit financially from establishment in the form of grants from the wealthier established churches. All things considered, the basic conclusion we draw from these results is that disestablishment has little effect on religious vitality, but it does make previously established congregations less rich.

The obvious question arising from the results we have presented is this: if the establishment regime is not the main cause of differences between established and non-established congregations, what is?

The results in Table III show that our control variables 'explain away' only very little of the difference between established and non-established congregations. The only substantively important point is that when we control for whether or not a congregation is an immigrant congregation (proxied by not using a Swiss national language in their ritual), the difference between established and non-established Christian congregations' attendance vanishes. In other words: non-established Christians have higher absolute attendance

because they have more immigrant congregations, and immigrant congregations have higher attendance than non-immigrant congregations.

The fact that we can 'explain away' only relatively small amounts of the differences in religious vitality between established and non-established congregations points to the fact that *religious tradition* may in itself be an important factor. To give just one example that will be described in more detail in the historical section below: once the Reformed and Catholic churches had adopted a 'folk-church' theology (meaning they would be open to all rather than insist on assenting to a specific creed) and a religious dialogue perspective (instead of evangelism), these postures were extremely hard to change. Most church leaders and members would rather accept a shrinking and less vital congregation than change this theological commitment and would not be swayed by changes in the establishment regime (or other contextual factors). In our view, it is these theological commitments that led to less emphasis on membership recruitment, lower involvement levels, and less growth compared to the more evangelical non-established churches.

To sum up our general point: With or without controls, a canton's strength of establishment is unrelated to both established and non-established congregations' recruitment efforts, attendance and growth. There is a relationship between establishment and congregational income, but in the opposite direction of that predicted by economic theorizing about religion. Christian congregations, established or not, have higher incomes in cantons with *stronger* establishments.

The historical record

We have shown that, in cross-sectional data, religious establishment is not related to religious vitality in the ways that economic theorizing about religion predicts. Indeed, when it comes to income, religious disestablishment makes religious organizations worse off rather than better off. We would like to interpret this pattern causally. One limit on the confidence we might have in this interpretation, of course, is that we have examined only correlations in cross-sectional data. To further strengthen our case, we now turn to the historical record and our hypothesis 4. Historically, have congregations in cantons shifting from establishment to disestablishment experienced increased religious vitality? Besides describing the general trends in all cantons, we put a special emphasis on the two most dramatic cases of religious disestablishment in Switzerland – in Geneva and Neuchâtel – comparing them to cantons where state establishment of religion has remained stronger. If the historical developments shown are consistent with our cross-sectional findings, we will have considerably more confidence in a causal interpretation of our results.

Our historical overview relies mainly on the best secondary sources about the religious history of Swiss cantons from 1900 to the present, on case studies

we have conducted on developments in the cantons of Neuchâtel and Geneva, and on interviews with six church officials and two of the most knowledgeable historians of this subject. Since Switzerland is a federalist country and state-church relations are a cantonal matter, the overall situation is different in every canton, giving rise to great complexity. We nevertheless try to bring the most important developments into focus.

The most important general point to understand about the history of state-church relations in Switzerland is that the development since the nineteenth century has been one of an increasing liberalization in all 26 cantons. However, the cantons varied substantially in the speed and impact of their liberalization, leading to important contemporary variability in church-state relations among cantons.

Very schematically, we can say that in the eighteenth century, there was a strong state-church system (*Staatskirchentum*) in all the cantons. This regime was characterized by a lack of religious liberty: inhabitants were in principle obliged to adopt the confession of the canton[8]; religious celebrations of the 'other' confession were forbidden, as were mixed marriages. The symbiotic relationship between religion and politics was more pronounced in Protestant than in Catholic and mixed cantons, but even in the latter cantons it was fundamental (Vischer et al. 1994: 182 ff.).

In the nineteenth century, with the strong French influence during the Helvetik (1798–1803), the rise of liberalism and pietism, and especially with the foundation of the federal state in 1848, general freedom of religion was introduced and the strong state-church system (*Staatskirchentum*) was transformed into an intermediate state-church system (*Landeskirchentum*). In this regime, the churches were not part of the state anymore, but were recognized by the state to be separate – although still state-controlled – institutions of public law. They had to introduce democratic governance and were financed either directly by the state or via levying an obligatory church tax on their members. The political and the religious territorial community (Gemeinde) were most often completely identical. In most cantons only one (Reformed or Catholic) or two (Reformed and Catholic) churches were recognized.

The cases of Zurich and Lucerne

Some cantons proceeded down the liberalizing road only rather slowly. Take, for example, the traditionally Reformed canton of Zurich. Here, different revisions of the cantonal constitution led to a situation in which the Reformed Church, formerly a *Staatskirche*, was increasingly transformed into a church recognized by public law (*Landeskirche*). The Catholic Church, formerly not established, was given the same rights as the Reformed Church in 1963. All other religious groups were to be organized according to private law. In Zurich, *Landeskirchen* have a certain autonomy, but their functioning is nevertheless

controlled by the state; the pastors' salaries are to a large extent paid by the state and the state levies the church tax among individual members as well as among business enterprises for these churches (Winzeler 2005). Take, as another example, the traditionally Catholic canton of Lucerne. Here, it was traditionally the Catholic Church that was established, and the Reformed congregations were eventually allotted the same establishment status in 1969. Again, established congregations levy an obligatory church tax on both individuals and business. Compared to Zurich, there are fewer additional financial subsidies for Lucerne churches, and the law gives them more autonomy than in Zurich (Winzeler 2005).

Religious vitality in the sense of membership, religious practice, and belief have declined precipitously in both Zurich and Lucerne, especially since the 1960s (Bovay 2004). The established churches, however, have remained relatively rich (Marti, Kraft and Walter 2010: 31).

The cases of Geneva and Neuchâtel

Disestablishment has gone farthest in Geneva and Neuchâtel. Indeed, one can speak of an almost complete separation of church and state in Geneva and a partial separation in Neuchâtel. If the economic model is correct it is here that we should observe the positive effects of disestablishment on both established congregations and their competitors.

In Geneva, church and state were separated in 1907, largely because confessionally mixed Geneva could no longer accept a situation in which Protestants were publicly financed while Catholics were not. Rather than re-establishing Catholics (whose churches had been disestablished in Geneva in 1873), the government solved the problem by disestablishing all religious groups (Scholl and Grandjean 2010: 15). Interestingly, some pro-disestablishment Protestants believed that disestablishment would make Protestant churches stronger. They offered arguments astonishingly similar to what today's rational choice theorists say about the benefits of a 'free religious market'.

In Neuchâtel, church and state were partly separated in 1943, mainly as a political compromise allowing the established Protestant church to reunite with the Free Protestant church in a way that balanced the financial support the established church enjoyed with the organizational autonomy the Free Church insisted on (Beljean 2001). The solution was to declare the united church an 'institution of public interest', a recognition also extended to the Roman Catholic and the Christ Catholic Churches. Concretely, this meant that the three recognized churches together received a certain amount of money (200,000 SFR) per year, would be tax exempt, and would be able to offer religious instruction in public school buildings. Otherwise, the churches were to be financed only by an optional 'church contribution' that the state would collect, but that members could pay in full, pay only partly, or not at all. In sum, disestablishment did not

go as far in Neuchâtel as it did in Geneva, but religion in Neuchâtel is much less established than in all other cantons, as also is apparent by its value on our establishment scale.

What effect did disestablishment have on the congregations that were suddenly separated from the state? Did they increase their recruiting efforts in order to further growth and attendance as the economic theory would predict? The answer is a clear 'no' for the formerly established churches of both Geneva and Neuchâtel.

In Geneva, the state had forced the Protestant church to be very lax both in its membership definition and its enforcement of moral obligations on members through the introduction of liberalizing laws in 1874. But when the separation of church and state finally happened, the Protestant church went to great lengths to explain that it would do everything to keep its character of a 'folk-church' that was 'open to all' (Amsler 1986: 19). In a similar vein, the new church constitution did not include any declaration of faith that members would have to adhere to, and stipulated only a moral obligation to contribute financially. Interestingly, there have always been church leaders proposing reforms that would make for a more exclusive, evangelizing church. However, these propositions have always been defeated by church members in favour of the current folk-church model.

In Neuchâtel, the fusion of the national and the independent church in 1943 led to a church model that was a hybrid of the two former church models. Thus, this church did have a profession of faith (Perret 2006: 137), although in rather general terms. However, the new church clearly remained a folk-church. Again, this inclusive policy had no problem defeating proposals to be more exclusive concerning membership or moral demands that arose over the years.

Despite being much more self-reliant than before, disestablished churches in Geneva or Neuchâtel did not increase their *recruitment efforts* to a level higher than in other cantons (Amsler 1986; Bader 2008). Concerning *official membership*, the available data suggest very similar patterns in Geneva and the other Swiss cantons: We find a certain stability in the first half of the twentieth century and even a slight growth in the 1920s and 1950s, followed by a strong secularization from the 1960s.[9] We do not have data to judge the development of *church attendance* in different Geneva or Neuchâtel denominations all through the twentieth century. However, the data we do have suggests that in both cantons church attendance was not significantly higher in 1989 or 1999 than in other cantons.[10]

One might think that disestablishment might have helped religious competitors even if it did not help the newly disestablished churches. After all, the playing field had been levelled in Geneva and had been made more equal in Neuchâtel. The economic theory of religion would therefore lead us to expect growth among the religious competitors. We have systematically examined the most important religious competitors in the two cantons, assessing their

religious vitality over time. We have found no evidence that religious competitors, such as the Eglise évangélique libre de Genève (EELG), were boosted by the disestablishments (Kormann 2000). Rather, it appears that the religious competition is in much the same situation as that in the other cantons.

There was, however, one domain where disestablishment had very visible consequences and created a huge difference between the formerly established churches and their sister churches in other cantons: the *income and fund raising strategies* of the churches. The financial difficulties of the Reformed Church of Geneva that started immediately after disestablishment in 1907 are legendary and have been documented all through the twentieth century (Amsler 1986; Stolz and Ballif 2010). Since 1970, the Church has steadily reduced its full-time pastors from 106 in 1970 to 60 in 2014 – planning a reduction to 40 in 2020.[11] The Reformed Church of Geneva has also begun to sell church property,

Figure III: *Public ad of the Reformed Church of Neuchâtel 2011: Will we have to change for want of resources?*

including church buildings, to pay its debts. The financial situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Geneva is not more comfortable. We find very similar financial problems for the Protestant and Catholic Churches in the canton of Neuchâtel. The churches in both Geneva and Neuchâtel relied on various fund raising strategies that differ sharply from their sister churches in the other cantons, often emphasizing the dire financial situation the churches find themselves in and raising the spectre of their possible disappearance if money is not raised. An example from Neuchâtel, reproduced here as Figure III, depicted a robot in a pastoral robe and read: 'Will we have to change for want of resources?'

The situation in these two cantons is qualitatively similar to the situation in other cantons that have experienced some manner of disestablishment. Disestablishment has increased religious vitality neither among the formerly established churches nor among their religious competitors. It has, however, led to immense financial problems for formerly established churches. The historical record is consistent with our cross-sectional results.

Conclusion

We set out to examine an influential theoretical idea in the sociology of religion: that disestablishment leads to more religious vitality. We have given an empirical answer to this question, focusing for the first time on the groups whose organizational and membership behaviour is crucial to the story: congregations.

Descriptively, our results confirm well-known differences between established and non-established Christian congregations. Established Christian congregations engage in less recruitment, and they have lower (relative) attendance and more often declining membership than non-established Christian congregations. Our data also show, however, that the picture becomes more complex when also looking at non-established non-Christian congregations, which are growing without a lot of recruiting efforts.

The main point of our paper is that these sometimes impressive differences between established and non-established congregations concerning religious vitality *cannot be interpreted as the consequence of different levels of state establishment*. Much less can they be used for normative recommendations saying that one should abolish establishments in order to free religious markets, with the expectation that this would lead to religious revival. Both our quantitative analysis and our historical case studies show that, in Switzerland, disestablishing religion has *not* led to more religious vitality either for the established churches or for their non-established religious competitors.

Historically, we have described the relationship between religious establishment and religious vitality in Swiss cantons since 1900, focusing especially on the two cantons which have gone farthest with disestablishment (Geneva,

Neuchâtel). The analysis shows that the established churches lost important privileges when disestablishment set in. However, they never changed their basic 'business model'. From the start, they were clear that they wanted to remain 'folk churches', open to everybody, and that they would not enforce confessional statements or strict moral standards on their members. The historical analysis furthermore shows that disestablishment has not benefitted the religious competitors either. Neither the number nor health of upstart religious groups, nor the general level of religiosity, has risen in the cantons that pushed disestablishment farther than others. All in all, the established churches in all cantons remained over time remarkably similar when it came to religious vitality.

Adherents of the economics of religion approach may respond that disestablishment needs time to take effect and that the expected religious upswing is yet to come. But how long do we have to wait? In Geneva, it has been 100 years, in Neuchâtel 60 years, since disestablishment has taken place. One would expect to see some signs of the predicted upswing by now – signs that are not apparent. However, both the quantitative and the historical analyses show that disestablishment is not completely without effect: it leads to a dramatic decrease of income for formerly established churches.

One may wonder just why disestablishment has not had the vitalizing effects promised by the economic approach. Why haven't there been the positive effects of freeing the religious market that seem to work in much of the economic domain? In our view, the reason lies in the fact that demand for religion is not stable but has diminished over time. And this in turn has to do with the powerful rise of non-religious alternatives in several arenas for things that religion traditionally supplied, including welfare-state benefits, enhanced leisure options, and secular psychotherapy (Stolz et al. 2016).

Summing up, disestablishment in Switzerland has not led to religious vitality and most likely will not do so in the future. Future research should focus on comparing the effects of disestablishment on congregations in different countries to see whether the Swiss pattern obtains elsewhere.[12] We believe that similar findings could be produced in European countries in general, with Switzerland a variation on one common theme (Voas 2004). What is beyond doubt, however, is that, at least in this one important case, disestablishment has not freed new spaces for religious entrepreneurs that had somehow been 'held back' by a strong religious establishment. Rather, its main effect has been to throw the formerly established churches into financial distress, implying that disestablishment is perfectly compatible with secularization, and may even advance it.

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Appendix: Adapted Chaves–Cann scale for level of religious establishment

1. **Recognition by the state**
0 = little or no; public recognition of some but not other religious groups
1 = strong public recognition of some but not other religious groups
2. **Leader appointment by state**
0 = no
1 = weak; state gives symbolic recognition to appointment
2 = strong; state is employer
3. **Salaries of ecclesiastics paid by state**
0 = no
1 = yes; the state pays some or all of the salaries of pastors
4. **Ecclesiastical tax for individuals**
0 = no/payment optional
1 = mandatory
5. **Ecclesiastical tax for organizations**
0 = no/payment optional
1 = mandatory
6. **Church tax or donations are collected by the state**
0 = no
1 = yes
7. **Direct subsidies from the state**
0 = no; there are no direct financial subsidies
1 = weak; the state helps churches financially, especially concerning buildings
2 = strong; the state pays flat rates and/or per capita money per church member and/or offers pastoral houses
3 = very strong; recognized churches are financed by the state (state budget)

Notes

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2. There are other groups who enjoy some form of establishment in some cantons. Christ-Catholics enjoy a strong establishment comparable to Reformed and Roman Catholics, while Christengemeinde in Basel-Stadt and Jews in some cantons have a weak establishment giving very few benefits. These groups are small and for the sake of clarity we exclude Christ-Catholic and established Jewish congregations from our analysis. Non-established Jewish congregations are included. Our results are the same with or without this exclusion.

3. For more details about the US NCS, see http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong.

4. The American and Swiss NCSs used different sampling strategies. See Monnot (2013) for more sampling details of the Swiss case.

5. This is the RR1 response rate defined by AAPOR (2016).

6. See for a recent overview, comparison and evaluation of different scales of church-state relationships, including the one used in this paper: Traunmüller (2012). We chose an adapted Chaves–Cann scale since it allows us to conceptualize and measure the central church-state variation in Switzerland in a very straightforward way.

7. We thank Sidsel Kjems for suggesting the 'default setting' metaphor.

8. This means that in Switzerland – just as in the Holy Roman Empire – a form of the rule 'Whose realm, his religion' (*cuius regio, eius religio*) was used. This rule was made famous in the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 but was installed in Switzerland already in 1531 at the Second Peace of Kappel (Maissen 2010: 91).

9. Authors' analysis of census data collected from the State Bureau of Statistics from 1900 to 2000. See http://www.bfs.admin.ch.

10. Authors' reanalysis of church attendance data used in Stolz et al. (2015).

11. The information concerning number of pastors is from the Federal Office of Statistics – 'Erwerbstätige mit ausgewählten beruflichen Tätigkeiten (Berufsart 832.01 Ordinierte Geistliche, Pfarrer/innen) nach Zähljahr sowie Kantonen und Vollzeit/Teilzeit, 1970–2000'. The information concerning 2012 is from the Rapport d'activité of The information concerning 2012 is from EREN (2012:35).

12. Recent work by Kjems (2016) suggests that church financing differences like the ones we have examined in Switzerland also help to explain the large income differences between the rich national churches of Finland, Sweden and Denmark, on the one hand, and the much poorer national churches of Norway, Iceland, England and Scotland, on the other hand.

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