

Can We Explain the Generation Gap in Churchgoing?

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In western societies, secularization in the sense of declining individual religiosity is mainly caused by cohort replacement. Every cohort is somewhat less religious than its predecessor, indicating that religious transmission is incomplete. The puzzle is just what causes this incomplete transmission and whether there is one or a restricted number of factors that mainly explain the process. Our aim in this article is to establish, describe, and explain this lack of religious transmission in West Germany, comparing parents' and children's level of church attendance and their determinants over time. We use a data set of more than 8,000 parent-child pairs across four cohorts from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) and test whether indicators measuring parent attributes, family relations, or parental context influence the attendance gap. As expected, we find a substantial parent-child attendance gap. However, we do not find factors that mainly explain the process. Only family disruption and the percentage of nones in the state slightly increase the attendance gap, but effect sizes are small. Our surprising result is that secularization happens largely independently of attributes of the parents and their immediate surroundings. We discuss how this finding may give credibility to new theories of secular transition and present an agenda for future research on religious transmission.

Keywords: religious transmission, secularization, religious attendance, socialization.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, it has become increasingly clear that secularization in the sense of declining individual religiosity is produced by generational replacement. Most western societies are becoming less religious not because individuals are losing their religiosity in adult life, but rather because each new birth cohort is a little less religious than the one before (Crockett and Voas 2006; Stolz, Biolcati-Rinaldi, and Molteni 2021; Voas and Chaves 2016; Wolf 2008). This finding prompts the question of how and why religion is not completely transmitted from parents

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to children, thus producing a religiosity gap observed between cohorts. Here lies the obvious, but difficult, next step that research on secularization has to take to make progress.

More specifically, we might ask whether it is possible to identify some specific predictors that largely account for the incomplete transmission of religion. Do more highly educated parents refrain from inculcating faith? Does an increasingly liberal parenting style undermine the future religiosity of children? Or is religious transmission more difficult in urban areas? There are multiple theoretical possibilities; the problem is to test these ideas empirically.

We define transmission as a process by which religiosity (religious identity, practices, beliefs, values, or norms) is passed on from parents to their offspring, either intentionally or unintentionally. Transmission according to our definition “succeeds” if children as adults show a similar or even higher level of religiosity (practice, belief, identity) as their parents; it breaks down when children as adults show a markedly lower religiosity than their parents. No value judgment is implied by these terms.

Research on religious transmission has increased our knowledge in important ways (Bader and Desmond 2006; Bengtson et al. 2009; Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013; Bréchon 2018; Copen and Silverstein 2008; De Graaf, Need, and Ultee 2004; McPhail 2019; Need and De Graaf 1996; Pollack and Rosta 2017; Smith 2020; Smith and Adamczyk 2021; Voas 2003; Voas and Storm 2012),¹ but to the best of our knowledge, studies that explicitly measure the parent-child religiosity gap and relate it to possible predictors are lacking.

Our aim is to establish, describe, and explain the weakness of religious transmission in West Germany, comparing parents’ and children’s level of attendance and their determinants over time. Our primary research questions are as follows: (1) Is there an attendance gap between parents and children and, if so, is it persistent over cohorts? (2) Can various family and contextual variables predict the size of the attendance gap?

Tackling such questions is difficult because appropriate data are often lacking. We need linked data on parents and children for an extended period to avoid problems of reverse causation and possible life cycle and period effects. Furthermore, we need rich data at the parent level on possible predictors of religious socialization. The German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) is a high-quality resource that contains this kind of information. We focus on parents with children in the sample, restricting our analysis to West Germany as the observation period starts in 1984, prior to German reunification. We also focus our analysis on just one indicator of religious involvement—attendance at services—to allow for in-depth analysis.

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, by measuring religious transmission and the size and persistence of the attendance gap, we deepen our knowledge about secularization in West Germany. Second, and more importantly, we make progress in investigating the mechanisms underlying religious decline via cohort replacement, which potentially apply to all western countries. This is the first article using high-quality longitudinal data showing that secularization in the form of incomplete transmission of attendance happens largely independently of attributes of the parents and their immediate surroundings. This permits us to formulate an agenda for future research on religious transmission.

THEORY

Religious Transmission

Religious transmission happens in different ways (Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013; De Graaf 2013; Martin, White, and Perlman 2003; Müller, De Graaf, and Schmidt 2014). Parents

¹For a full review, see the online Appendix Table A1.

may actively socialize their children in religious matters, for example, by taking them to church and teaching them prayers. But even without overt attempts at training, parents may act as models, observed and imitated by their children. Furthermore, parents have an important influence on the environment, via choice of schools, activities, youth groups, media, and even friends and partners. Finally, there may also be some genetic component to transmission, with some genes facilitating or hindering the acceptance of religious belief and practice.² Religious socialization does not just depend on parents, of course; peers, institutions (church, school), and the wider social context influence whether children pick up religion or not.

Predictors of Religious Transmission

Various predictors of religious transmission have been suggested in the literature (Sherkat 2003; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017). We can broadly classify them into parental attributes, family structure, and parental residential context.

A first large group of mechanisms relates to *parental attributes*. Several scholars argue that *parents with a liberal religion* will have more difficulty retaining their children in the fold than parents with a conservative religion. On this view, liberal religions are inherently precarious because parents are not sure what message they should transmit to their children, and even if they do know, they tend to leave their children free to accept or reject the lessons (Bruce 2002; Stolz et al. 2016). By contrast, conservative religions are supposed to be better able to keep their offspring in the faith (Myers 1996; Smith 2020). Another parental attribute thought to be important is *value liberalism*. Since religion is part of the traditional social landscape, parents with liberal values can be expected to be less committed to inculcating religious beliefs and practices in their children. Parental value liberalism can also show up in inconsistency of religious beliefs and behavior or religious heterogamy (Bader and Desmond 2006; McPhail 2019). Religious socialization may also be impacted by *parental openness to secular alternatives*. According to this account, religious socialization is more difficult if churchgoing faces competition from attractive nonreligious activities. If children can play, shop, watch television, chat with friends on the phone, or engage in any number of other pursuits now available to young people, it is harder to push them to go to church (McAndrew and Richards 2020). Additionally, parental religious socialization may be influenced by *parental education and economic security*. Educated parents often want to instill critical thinking in their children and are more tolerant of religious doubt. Prioritizing intellectual independence therefore weakens transmission of religious commitment (Stolz 2020: 302). Similarly, economic security may lead parents to place less emphasis on religious solutions to life problems and to reduce their commitment to religious transmission accordingly (Müller, De Graaf, and Schmidt 2014).

A second large strand of the literature maintains that religious transmission is influenced not so much by parental attributes as by *family structure*. According to one account, religious transmission is hampered by *emotional distance* and *conflict* between parents and children. A closer relationship, a more trusting, accepting, and harmonious environment, according to this argument, leads children to see their parents as role models and to reproduce their level of religiosity (Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013). In the absence of such conditions, religious transmission suffers. Bao et al. (1999) find that perceived parental acceptance leads to higher religious transmission. Myers (1996) finds that “positive parent-child relationships foster continuity in religious behaviors between generations.” Another account argues that *nontraditional family structures and divorce* might weaken religious transmission. Here, the evidence is mixed. While some studies suggest that religious transmission is most successful in families with two biological parents (Myers 1996; Petts 2015), other studies do not find such an effect (Denton 2012; Uecker and

²See footnote 8.

Ellison 2012). The impact of divorce is equally disputed (Copen and Silverstein 2008; Denton 2012).

A third strand of the literature holds that religious transmission is mainly influenced by the *parental residential context*. The main attributes mentioned are whether parents live in *urban or rural, diverse, or homogeneous, and religious or secular residential areas*. In contrast to rural areas, large towns and cities offer a wide array of secular options and worldviews, which makes it difficult for parents to steer their children into religion (McLeod 2007). Religious diversity is thought to erode religiosity, since it undermines the plausibility of belief and the norms prescribing practice (Berger 1990 (1967)). And secular thinking and practice may be the norm in unreligious areas, making it difficult for parents to keep their children in the fold. Kelley and De Graaf (1997) claimed that religious parents are especially influential in more secular societies, perhaps because they have to work harder to socialize their children religiously. Voas and Storm (2020) criticized this conclusion and argued that parental and environmental influences are largely independent of each other.

To recap, there is a large literature suggesting various variables that might influence religious transmission, involving parental attributes, family structure, and parental residential context.

Note, however, that some of the factors that have received most attention in the literature do not seem helpful in explaining the religious decline. Liberal denominations, inconsistency, and heterogamy may have a negative impact on religious transmission, but these characteristics may themselves be products of secularization. Parent-child closeness might boost religious transmission, but as closeness is highly unlikely to have declined, we need to look elsewhere for drivers of the aggregate attendance gap. The other predictors mentioned seem more promising: family disruption, liberal values, leisure culture, education, urbanism, diversity, and secular environment may well be among the primary suspects creating the generation gap in church attendance.

Hypotheses

This background discussion can be synthesized in the following hypotheses.

H1: There is a significant parent-child attendance gap.

H2: The parent-child attendance gap is larger if:

- (a) the following *parental attributes* are higher: denomination liberalism, value liberalism, leisure mindedness, education, and economic security;
- (b) the following *family attributes* are present: parent-child distance and conflict between parents, family disruption;
- (c) the following *parental residential context variables* are higher: urbanism, diversity, and secularity.

METHOD

Data

We use the core data set from the German SOEP, available at the Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (DIW).³ Our data set includes 35 waves (1984–2018) for West Germany, which includes the states (“Länder”) that belonged to the Federal Republic of Germany prior to reunification with the former German Democratic Republic in 1990.⁴ For our analysis of religious

³<https://www.diw.de/de>

⁴We have excluded Berlin to avoid a strong influence from formerly socialist East Berlin on individuals in West Berlin.

transmission, we select all parent-child pairs in the data set in the age range 16–75 and exclude immigrants from other countries, as well as east-west migrants within Germany. The resulting data set contains 8213 children-parent pairs from 8,403 households. The church attendance of children and parents is observed at different points in time. In every one of the following analyses, we select only one point in time for parents and one point in time for children. We vary the time points chosen for robustness checks.

Dependent Variable

Our main dependent variable is the parent-child attendance difference. Child church attendance is a four-category variable with values of weekly (or more) = 4, once a month = 3, less often = 2, never = 1. Child attendance is taken from the first year in which it was recorded unless otherwise indicated. This is normally at age 17 (with around 90 percent between 17 and 24).

Parental attendance is measured as the mean of the mother's and the father's church attendance at the first available survey year. If the value for one parent was missing, we used the value of the other parent. Attendance has four categories as described above, so the mean of maternal and paternal attendance can take seven values, from 1 to 4 in steps of .5. The Spearman correlation of maternal and paternal attendance is .696. The parent-child attendance difference is simply Child attendance – Parent attendance, ranging from 3 to –3.

Limiting our analysis to attendance and the attendance gap facilitates the presentation and permits focusing on many possible predictors. We acknowledge that focusing on only one indicator potentially limits the generalizability of our results.⁵ However, research on religiosity in Germany shows that service attendance is an indicator that lies on the same dimension as various other indicators of “institutional religiosity” (Pollack and Rosta 2017: 114). In any case, future studies should try to replicate our findings with other religiosity indicators as their dependent variables.

Independent Variables

Our independent variables are potential predictors of the parent-child attendance gap. Four variables measure attributes of the parents: denomination, education, value liberalism, and secular leisure-mindedness. Two variables capture family relations: family disruption and closeness of the child to the parent. Three variables measure the social context in which the child grew up: urbanism, religious diversity, and secularity. The operationalizations of independent variables can be found in Table 1.

Unless otherwise indicated, these measures come from the first wave in which the variables were recorded for a parent. If there was information on both (grand)parents, we took the mean, if there was only one parent, we took the information of that (grand)parent. In the case of categorical variables, we created different parental types (e.g., including Catholic, Protestant, and denominationally mixed couples).

⁵The SOEP data only permit conducting such an analysis for attendance and affiliation. Substantive results for affiliation are very similar.

Table 1: Operationalizations of independent variables and controls

Independent Variables	
<i>Parent attributes</i>	
Parental denomination	Categories: “Both Catholic,” “Both Protestant,” “Both other Christian,” “Both other religion,” “Mixed Christian,” “Mixed other religions,” “One no religion,” “Both no religion.”
Parental education	1 = lower; 2 = secondary general; 3 = intermediate; 4 = technical high school; 5 = higher. The Spearman correlation between father and mother is .62.
Parental value liberalism	Scale measure based on importance of (a) being dutiful; (b) being secure; (c) being successful; (d) being industrious and ambitious; (e) law and order, first three items from 1 = not at all important to 10 = very important; other items 1 = not at all important to 7 very important. Variables were standardized before creating a summative index. Parental value liberalism is the reverse of finding the five items very important. The original scales available in the SOEP include more items; we only use these five that are highly correlated.
Parental leisure culture	Cronbach’s alpha = .7. Spearman correlation between father and mother: .482. Scale measure derived from six items on how often the respondents would: (1) go to cinema, (2) attend jazz or pop concerts, (3) go out to eat and drink, (4) do sports, (5) go out to visit friends, (6) visit sporting events, where the options were 5 = daily, 4 = every week, 3 = every month, 2 = more rarely, 1 = never. Ordinal alpha = .71. Spearman correlation between father and mother: .633.
<i>Family attributes</i>	
Family closeness	Closeness of child to mother and/or father (reported by the child). 5 = very close, 4 = close, 3 = average, 2 = fleetingly, 1 = none. Spearman correlation between father and mother: .632
Family disruption	1 = there has been a divorce or separation of the parents, 0 otherwise
<i>Parent context</i>	
Parent context urbanism	Number of inhabitants of the town on a seven-point scale: 1 = less than 2,000; 2 = 2,000 to 5,000; 3 = 5,000 to 20,000; 4 = 20,000 to 50,000; 5 = 50,000 to 100,000; 6 = 100,000 to 500,000; 7 = 500,000 or more. Spearman correlation between father and mother: .985.

(Continued)

Table 1: (Continued)

Independent Variables	
Parent context religious diversity	Herfindahl Index (HFI) at Bundesland (state) level, using proportion of population = mainstream Protestant, Evangelical, Catholic, Other, No religion.
Parent context secularity	Proportion of individuals without religious affiliation in the state (Bundesland)
Controls—child	
Sex of child	0 = female; 1 = male
Birthyear	Birthyear
Birth cohort	Four levels: 1961–70, 1971–80, 1981–90, 1991–2000
Controls—parents, grandparents	
Parental birthyear	Mean of the parents' birthyears
Parental household income	Mean household gross income of parents when the respondent was a child
Grandparents' education	1 = lower, 2 = secondary general, 3 = intermediate, 4 = technical high school, 5 = higher

Control Variables

At the child level, we control for sex and birthyear.⁶ At the parent level, we control for birthyear, education, and household income. Furthermore, we control for grandparents' education. Parental education is routinely used as a control except in the analysis of predictors, where it is explicitly introduced along with an interaction. For control variables on the parent level, we again took the mean where possible. The operationalizations of the control variables can be found in Table 1.

Table 2 gives some descriptive statistics. Note that child attendance is lower than parent attendance; it is this gap that we wish to explain.

Analytical Strategy

Our analytical strategy consists of the specification of two different multilevel models following our two research questions.

Our first question asks whether there is an attendance gap between parents and children and, if so, whether it persists or changes over cohorts. We specify a linear multilevel (or mixed effects) model in which children are nested in parents (households). The dependent variable is child attendance minus parental attendance. We control for parental attendance, as well as child and parent characteristics. Child and parent characteristics are measured for the first observed data points.

$$ATT_{cp} - ATT_p = (\beta_{00} + \beta_{01}ATT_p + \beta_{10}CONT_p') + (u_{0p} + e_{cp}), \quad (1)$$

where c stands for child and p for parent. ATT_{cp} denotes attendance of child c (in the first observed year) of parent p , ATT_p is parental attendance, and $CONT_p'$ are controls relating to parents.⁷ u_{0p} represents variation around the parent intercept and e_{cp} is the remaining error. β_{01} is the intergenerational attendance correlation of interest.

Our second research question asks whether various family and contextual variables can moderate the size of the attendance gap. We model the intergenerational attendance difference as a function of the variables in (1), but now add several parent predictors $PRED_p'$.

$$ATT_{cp} - ATT_p = (\beta_{00} + \beta_{01}ATT_p + \beta_{10}PRED_p' + \beta_{20}CONT_p') + (u_{0p} + e_{cp}). \quad (2)$$

This is the central step of our analysis. We investigate whether one or several family or contextual variables are able to predict the parent-child attendance gap.

Independent variables are standardized. We use weighted effect coding for categorical variables (Nieuwenhuis, te Grotenhuis, and Pelzer 2017). This allows us to interpret the intercept of models (3) and (4) as the mean attendance difference when all independent variables are set to their mean.

Regarding the estimation of Equations (1) and (2), scholars have discussed the advantages and shortcomings of using difference scores as the dependent variable, while controlling for the prescore. A particular concern is that, in the case of measurement error, results may be directionally biased: The values for the group with the higher baseline mean are found to increase more (Jamieson 2004). In our case, most of the expected variables have no or very small effects. Interactions are significant in only one case. In other words, we do not find effects that might have been created by bias. Note that this approach is interchangeable with specifying child attendance as the dependent variable explained by parental attendance and introducing the predictors as possible

⁶We do not control for birth order since parental religion might influence family size and therefore the probability of having a large birth order value.

⁷For simplicity, we have omitted the child controls in all the formulas.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

	Mean	s.d.
Child		
Child attendance	1.657	.774
Child gender (male)	.532	.499
Child birthyear	1983.737	11.435
Parents		
<i>Parent attributes</i>		
Parent attendance	2.064	.983
Parent denomination		
Both Catholic	.381	.009
Both Protestant	.296	.009
Both other Christian	.012	.011
Mixed Christian	.135	.010
One no religion	.099	.010
Both no religion	.077	.011
Parental education	2.907	.975
Parental value liberalism	-.055	.816
Parental leisure culture	3.845	.612
Family structure		
Family closeness	4.108	.610
Family disruption	.145	.352
Parental context		
Parent context urbanism	3.959	1.701
Parent context religious diversity	.663	.056
Parent context secularity	.086	.088
(Grand)parent controls		
Parental birthyear	1954.340	11.910
Parental household income	38,049.742	28,753.112
Grandparents' education	2.313	.593
Having at least one sibling in dataset	.780	.414
<i>n</i> (Households)	8,403	
<i>n</i> (Children)	8,213	

Note: In this sample, parents are “weighted” according to the number of the children. The *n* (households) can be larger than *n* (Children), since individuals can be members of different households at different points in time. Conversely, households can include multiple children. Family closeness is reported by the child.

moderators of this relationship (which means observing the interactions between moderators and parental attendance). These analyses give substantively very similar results and can be found in the Online Appendix (Table A6).

Imputation of Missing Variables, Use of Weights, Robustness Checks

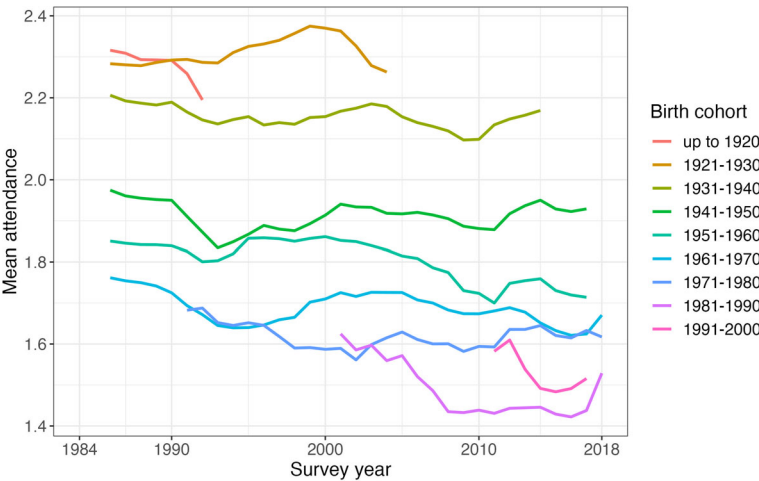
We imputed missing values for both dependent and independent variables. Missing values for dependent variables were imputed using a carryover procedure with the individual's own data at earlier time points (Lipps and Kuhn 2023; Watson and Starick 2011). Cases with remaining missing values in dependent variables were dropped. Missing values for independent variables were also imputed with a carryover method. The remaining missing values in these independent variables were imputed with linear models, using age, gender, household income, and urbanity

Figure 1

Attendance by cohort in West Germany 1985–2018

Note: Dependent variable: Attendance, ranging from 1 = “never” to 4 = “weekly or more often.” Individuals living in West Germany, aged 20–75; international migrants and east-west migrants are excluded. Only data points based on $n \geq 100$ observations are used. Lines show a simple moving average spanning three survey years.

[Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]



as predictors, and adding a residual. When there still remained some missing values in independent variables, we imputed the median. Many variables were not asked in all years. We therefore have to supply values for the “missing years.” For such years, a carryover method from earlier years is in our view a useful method and preferable to imputation from other cases. Imputing with linear models with an added residual is preferable to an imputation of the median. We did not use multiple imputation methods so as not to increase the complexity of the calculations. Missing values amounted to 7 percent or less (meaning that at least one value existed for every individual and variable) for most variables except for closeness to parents (58.9 percent), parental religion (21.8 percent), father’s education (9.4 percent), and mother’s education (7.7 percent)

We use unweighted data except for the analysis underlying Figure 1 (that shows cohort replacement), where the full SOEP data set is used and we apply the weights provided by SOEP.⁸ We do not use the weights since we are working only on selected dyads, which are a subset of the SOEP data. In robustness tests, we found that applying the weights did not change the outcome of our analysis. The variance inflation factor (VIF) for all independent variables in all models is <3, except for child age and parental age where the VIF is between 5 and 6, which we still regard as acceptable. Our results are robust to using logistic instead of linear models (Online Appendix Table A5), using a moderator approach instead of difference scores (Online Appendix Table A6), including or excluding the weights, and including or excluding missing values. The analysis looking at predictors of the attendance gap is robust to running it only for mother-daughter or father-son pairs or for different cohorts separately (Online Appendix Table A7). Models were estimated with R, version 4.1.1. R scripts are available upon request from the authors and will be made available at the Open Science Framework (OSF) website: (<https://osf.io>).

⁸These variables are called crossweight and longweight.

RESULTS

Establishing the Premise: Cohort Replacement

As mentioned above, many studies in western countries have found that every cohort shows somewhat lower attendance than the previous one and that, therefore, cohort replacement reduces aggregate attendance over time. Since our motivation is to explain this observation, we first check graphically whether cohort replacement is operating as expected in the SOEP data set.

As Figure 1 shows, it is, and almost perfectly. Each successive birth cohort attends church slightly less often on average than the previous one, while average attendance remains very stable for every cohort over time. Elderly churchgoers die out and are replaced in the population by younger people who attend less often, thus producing an overall decline. The youngest cohort, born 1991–2000, seems to be an exception in that its attendance is higher than that for the previous cohort. But these individuals were young when their churchgoing was recorded, and it has often been observed that religious identity and practice only stabilize around age 25.

Previous literature also consistently shows a strong correlation between parent and child attendance. We can reproduce this finding with our data. Without any restrictions or controls, the correlation between parent and child attendance is .488 (Online Appendix Table A2). This correlation remains very stable across cohorts (Online Appendix Table A3).

The strength of this correlation tells us something about the predictability of child attendance, but it provides no information about intergenerational declines in attendance.

The Size and Persistence of the Attendance Gap

In a next step, we measure the attendance gap. As Table 3 shows, this gap is clearly observable: Children go to church significantly less often than their parents. The intercept in each model represents the mean difference between child and parental attendance. In the first year of observation, it is $-.351$ on the 1–4 scale and highly significant (Model 1). In terms of churchgoing monthly or more often, the figure for parents is 20.5 percentage points higher than for children, which seems substantial. Controlling for the child's sex and year of birth (Model 2) or for parental characteristics (education, birthyear, household income, grandparents' education) (Model 3) makes no significant difference.

To see whether transmission is gendered, we performed the analysis for father-son and mother-daughter pairs. The attendance gap is somewhat smaller for fathers-sons ($-.303$) than for mothers-daughters ($-.359$). This can be explained by the fact that fathers in general show somewhat less attendance.

It is worth reflecting on when to measure the attendance gap of parents and children. If we do it at the same time, parental attendance might have changed since the period of religious socialization. Moreover, reverse causality could be a problem if children influence their parents' churchgoing. We can measure the gap just for parent-child pairs where attendance was recorded at a relatively similar age in each generation (less than 11 years difference). The mean ages of parents and children when attendance was recorded become 43.0 and 31.0, respectively. This reduces our sample size considerably, but the size of the attendance gap is not strongly affected ($-.368$). We can also try the reverse strategy to see what happens if we look at parent and child attendance when they are recorded in the same year. Here, we find a somewhat decreased intercept ($-.308$).

The latter two models are important, because an attendance gap when churchgoing is measured early for parents and later for children might result from a period effect. In fact, though, the attendance gap is very robust to all model specifications.

We can visualize the size of the parent-child attendance gap for the four observed cohorts without including controls (Figure 2). It is somewhat larger for the two earlier cohorts than for

Table 3: Attendance gap between parents and children

Dependent variable: Child attendance – Parental attendance							
Sample	Model 1 All	Model 2 All	Model 3 All	Model 4 Father-Son	Model 5 Mother-Daughter	Model 6 Similar age	Model 7 Same year
Intercept (Gap)	–.351*** (.009)	–.350*** (.009)	–.350*** (.009)	–.303*** (.014)	–.359*** (.015)	–.368*** (.025)	–.308*** (.010)
Observations (Pairs)	8,213	8,213	8,213	3,561	3,088	1,113	6,716
Par. attendance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Child dem.		✓	✓			✓	✓
Par. dem.			✓			✓	✓

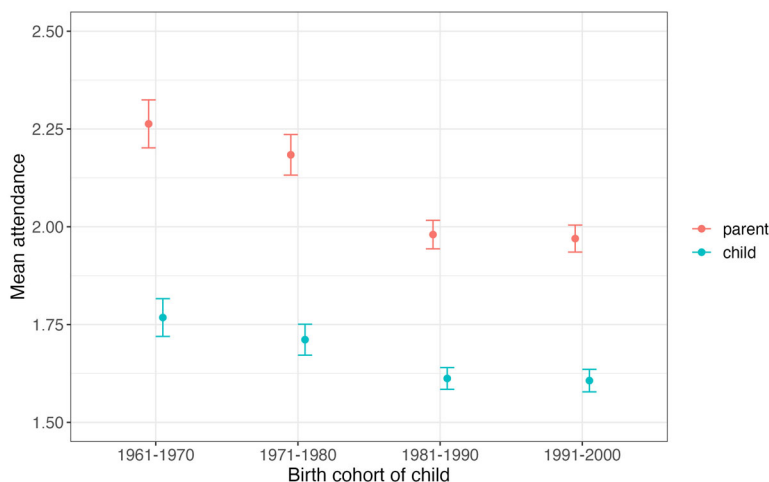
Note: Estimates from Equation (2). Each column is a different multilevel linear model. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is child attendance – parent attendance (values: –3 to 3).

Figure 2

Attendance gap by birth cohort

Note: Attendance, ranging from 1 = “never” to 4 = “weekly or more often,” for parent-child pairs in West Germany; immigrants and east-west migrants are excluded. Parental attendance is the mean of mother’s and father’s attendance. Bars represent the 95% confidence interval for the mean.

[Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



the two later cohorts. Of course, as churchgoing approaches a floor with secularization, some tightening of the gap is to be expected.

The overall message is that the attendance gap between parents and children is relatively large, highly significant, and robust to all kinds of model specifications. It seems to slightly decrease over time.

Parental and Contextual Moderators of the Attendance Gap

In a next step, we ask how religious transmission varies according to a number of predictors, starting with parental denomination.⁹ In Figure 3, we plot the attendance gap against parental denomination without adjusting for any controls. The attendance gap is present and statistically significant in all categories except where both parents have no religion. It is highest where both parents are Catholic, though as Catholics have relatively high attendance, they are less subject to the floor effect that compresses the gap for other groups. Protestants, “Other Christians” (mostly evangelicals) and the mixed group have child-parent gaps of similar size, though the confidence interval for Other Christians is wider because of a smaller number of cases and so caution is needed in this case.

Has the influence of denomination on transmission changed across birth cohorts? Judging from Table A4 in the Online Appendix, the answer appears to be “no.” There is a slight decline in the intergenerational attendance gap for Catholics, but overall, the estimates are fairly consistent across the four cohorts.

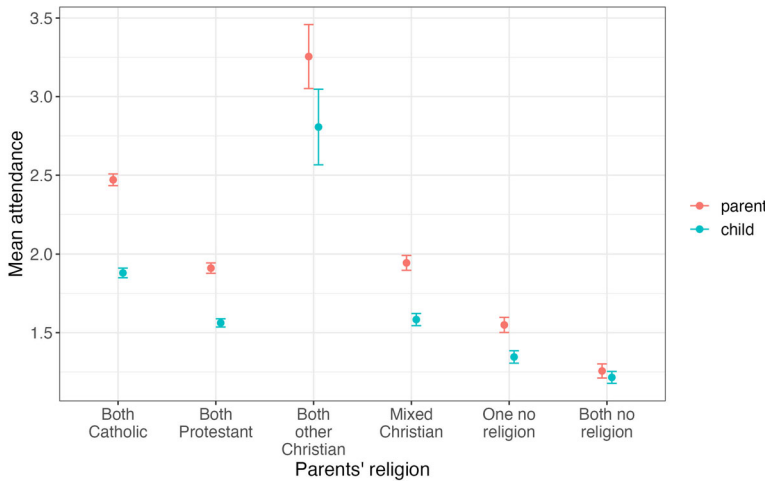
⁹We do not present a model where denomination is seen as a predictor of the influence of parental attendance on child attendance. This is because parental denomination as presented here can be both a predictor and an effect of parental attendance (and thus a mediator between parental attendance and child attendance). If it is the latter, we should not condition on it. We therefore use a separate model where we show the influence of parental denomination on child attendance, without also conditioning on parental attendance.

Figure 3

Attendance gap by parental religion

Note: Attendance, ranging from 1 = “never” to 4 = “weekly or more often,” for parent-child pairs in West Germany; immigrants and east-west migrants are excluded. Parental attendance is the mean of mother’s and father’s attendance. Bars represent the 95% confidence interval for the mean.

[Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Having seen that there is an attendance gap in all denominational groups, we come to the question that interests us most. Might there be one or several nonreligious predictors that are mainly responsible for the attendance gap? As before, our dependent variable is the difference in churchgoing frequency between children and their parents (while controlling for parental attendance). We here investigate the effect of parental education, value liberalism, leisure mindedness, family disruption (whether parents have ever been divorced or separated), and the degree to which the context of upbringing was urban, diverse, or secular.

The results are presented in Table 4 and visualized in Figure 4. The intercept of the model represents the difference in churchgoing between parents and children, controlling for other variables. We are primarily interested in the main effects of these variables, but we also test interaction effects. The basic child-parent attendance gap appears in Model 1. In Model 2, we look at the effects of parental education, value liberalism, and leisure-mindedness. Education does have a significant effect, but in a direction that is contrary to our hypothesis: When parents have more education, their children are more similar in church attendance. Perhaps educated parents push their children to participate in more activities generally. Similarly, parental leisure activities have a significant effect, but in an unexpected direction: More leisure activities are associated with a smaller attendance gap. Perhaps parents who are engaged in secular ways encourage social activity of all kinds, including churchgoing, thus enhancing religious socialization. Parental value liberalism has no significant effect. Religious parents may have more conservative values, but those values do not have an independent effect on the size of the attendance gap.

We add the family interaction variables in Model 3. Of all the predictors tested, family disruption has the largest effect. Parental separation or divorce increases the attendance gap. Furthermore, the only significant interaction is between family disruption and parental attendance: Disruption increases the attendance gap most when parental attendance is high. Even so, the effect of this variable is only moderate, and its inclusion leaves the intercept almost unchanged. Closeness of respondents to their parents has no significant effect on transmission. Earlier studies

Table 4: Attendance gap and various predictors

	Dependent Variable: Difference: Child – Parent attendance			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Baseline attendance gap	–.350*** (.009)	–.349*** (.009)	–.356*** (.009)	–.355*** (.009)
Parental education		.041*** (.011)	.041*** (.011)	.044*** (.012)
Parental value liberalism		–.010 (.009)	–.011 (.009)	–.010 (.009)
Parental leisure culture		.025* (.011)	.022* (.011)	.021* (.011)
Family disruption			–.059*** (.010)	–.056*** (.010)
Family disruption * Parental attendance			–.043*** (.010)	–.043*** (.010)
Family closeness			.007 (.008)	.007 (.008)
Parent context urbanism				–.015 (.010)
Parent context religious diversity				.013 (.010)
Parent context secularity				–.026* (.010)
R^2 (marg.)	.324	.325	.328	.329
R^2 (condit.)	.544	.543	.542	.543
N (Pairs)	8,213	8,213	8,213	8,213
Sample	All	All	All	All
Parental attendance	✓	✓	✓	✓
Child demographics	✓	✓	✓	✓
Parent demographics	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Estimates from Equation (3). Every column is a different linear multilevel model. The dependent variable is child attendance – parent attendance (values: –3 to 3). * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Standard errors are shown in parentheses.

have emphasized the importance of the emotional quality of the parent-child relationship for the transmission of religiosity, so this finding is surprising.

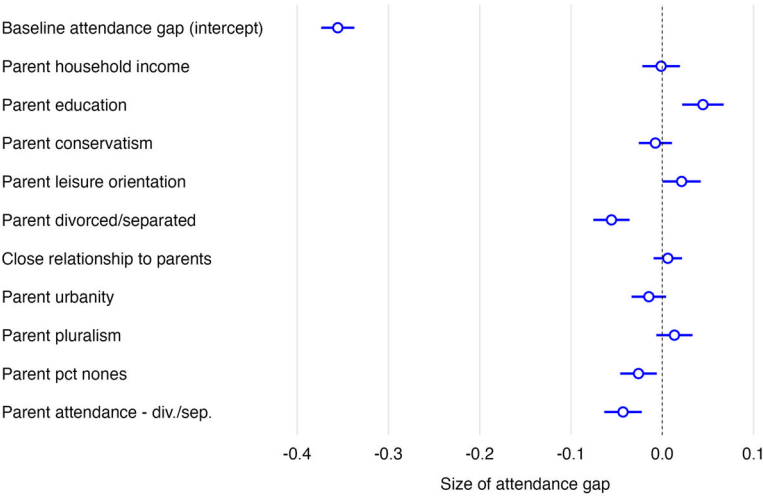
Model 4 adds contextual variables.¹⁰ There is no significant effect of parents being in more urban or pluralistic areas. Secularity (measured as the percentage of nones in the state) has a small effect; again, one might have expected these variables to have more influence on religious transmission.

The most important point about this analysis is that all the predictors have very little effect.

To see this, we can focus on the intercept, which shows the size of the attendance gap when all the predictors are set to zero. This interpretation of the intercept is possible since we use weighted effect coding for categorical variables (see the “Methods” section). The gap has size –.35 on a scale from 1 to 4 when no other variables are introduced in the model. Comparing the different

¹⁰See for the calculation and interpretation of these coefficients: Nakagawa et al. (2017). The marginal R^2 can be interpreted as the proportion of the total variance explained by the fixed effects. The conditional R^2 can be interpreted as the proportion of total variance explained through both fixed and random effects.

Figure 4
Size of coefficients
Note: This figure visualizes the coefficients of model 4 in Table 4.
[Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



models, we see that adding the different predictors to the model makes virtually no difference to the attendance gap. In other words, even including the predictors, the attendance gap stays at a very similar size. The same phenomenon can be observed when comparing the marginal R^2 across the models. Marginal R^2 remains almost unchanged even when introducing all our predictors (only about half of a percentage point). Looking at the coefficients of the different predictors, we do find significant effects of some predictors—but only family disruption and secularity of the social environment go in the expected direction, and their effects are modest.

In Figure 4, we visualize model 4 of Table 4. The importance of the attendance gap that cannot be accounted for is striking.

What does the size of the gap substantially mean? Assuming a constant gap of magnitude .35 and a generation interval of 29 years,¹¹ we can calculate that a completely religious society in which everybody always attends would turn into a never attending society in 249 years, *with or without considering our explanatory variables*.¹² This is compatible with what is expected in the theory of the secular transition (see below).

This analysis therefore gives us the surprising result that the intergenerational decline of attendance happens largely independently of attributes of the parents and their immediate surroundings.

DISCUSSION

We set out to tackle a puzzle in the current sociology of religion. In all western countries, secularization happens mainly by cohort replacement, pointing to a lack of religious transmission between parents and their offspring. It has remained unclear, however, whether attributes of the parents and their immediate surroundings are driving this process. We focused on parent-child

¹¹The mean age of mothers at birth is in general in their late 20s. To arrive at the number 29, we have taken the difference of mean age of parents and children in our sample.

¹²Calculated as $((4-1)/(0.35)) \times 29 = 248.57$

pairs to investigate the size of the church attendance gap and whether attributes of parents or their immediate context significantly moderate the church attendance gap.

As expected, we find that there is a substantial parent-child attendance gap, confirming H1. This gap is robust to multiple controls and present in all four cohorts, though it is slightly larger in the older than the younger cohorts.

Contrary to our expectations, secularization seems to happen largely independently of attributes of the parents or their immediate surroundings (tests of H2a,b,c). In fact, we find no specific predictors mainly responsible for incomplete transmission of church attendance. Of the nonreligious predictors, family disruption and the percentage of nones in the state are the only factors that increase the attendance gap. The other independent variables had coefficients that were either not significant or not in the expected direction. Parent-child closeness, parental value liberalism, and the context with respect to urbanism and diversity have no significant influence on the parent-child attendance gap. Parental education and leisure mindedness have significant moderating effects, but they seem to lead to smaller gaps. Regarding denomination, there are significant attendance gaps for all groups, the largest being in families where both parents are Catholic. Despite their high attendance, Evangelicals (the major component of the “Other Christians” category) do not appear to have a large gap, but results are inconclusive.¹³

The independence of secularization from attributes of the parents or their immediate surroundings is all the more remarkable as we have excellent data on parents and their children, collected longitudinally on contemporaneous activities and characteristics. Of, course, it may be that the inclusion of still other variables measuring values or structural attributes of the parents would have led to substantively significant explanations of the attendance gap, but we consider this very unlikely.

Why then is parental religiosity the most important predictor of child religiosity, but no attributes of the parents or the immediate context seem able to explain the fact that children are consistently less religious than their parents—and this over an observed period of three decades? The explanation must lie in changes influencing all parents and children in a society in a relatively similar manner.

One possible account is as follows: Parents teach children techniques, knowledge, and values they take for granted. They do this whether or not they currently use or are affected by these techniques, knowledge, and values. In the 1950s, parents taught children that obedience to authority was more important than independence, in 2020, they normally accept the opposite (Smith and Lundquist Denton 2005: 160). They do this independently of how much they have to respect authority or enjoy independence in their workplace. In the 1950s, most parents taught children that homosexuality was deviant behavior, in 2020, most regard it as acceptable—independently of whether they are themselves homosexuals or know a homosexual person. The *change* in the transmission of such techniques, knowledge, and values is not significantly moderated by additional attributes of the parents, since all parents realize and take for granted that *society has changed*.

Similarly, general societal changes may cause a weakening (or strengthening) of religious transmission, regardless of parental characteristics. Changes in the overall society include increases in leisure opportunities, the effectiveness of biomedicine, the scope of the welfare state and social insurance, and the authority of science, at the same time as decreases in formal religious education and the power of religion in public life. These shifts do not influence religious socialization directly, but they do influence the importance of religion in society.

If this account is correct, we can sketch an agenda for future research: What we need are the following: (1) Panel studies that replicate our finding for transmission in other western countries. If our new theoretical account is correct, the same results should be found in other western countries because they experienced a similar modernization trajectory as West Germany. (2) Panel

¹³Evangelicals in West Germany are a very small minority of around 2 percent (Pollack and Rosta 2017).

studies that replicate our findings for transmission in nonwestern countries. If our theorizing is correct, we should find that major changes in the speed of modernization significantly change the transmission of religiosity. (3) Studies that combine a large number of panel studies and where it could be shown with a multilevel approach that societal variables influence transmission independently of parental moderators. Currently, the data seem to be available only for (1), but panels in various countries are being set up and are growing. In the future, tests of (2) and (3) also seem perfectly possible.

Our results may be important for our understanding of the secularization process in general. Researchers initially believed that the social environment directly secularized individuals during their adult life; subsequently it was thought that societal conditions affected only religious transmission. We may now be entering a third phase in which we understand that modernization operates *indirectly* on the religious transmission process, through socially dominant values, ideologies, and worldviews, rather than directly through attributes of the parents and their immediate context.

Such a theory is compatible with relatively recent new accounts that see secularization as a “secular transition” comparable to the “demographic transition.” Voas (2008, 2009) and Brauer (2018) have suggested seeing secularization not as a process that different individuals, groups, or regions undergo depending directly on their level of “modernization” (economic development, rationalization, differentiation), but rather as a transition from an equilibrium in a highly religious state to a new equilibrium in a highly secular state. This secular transition is thought to operate similarly to the “demographic transition” in that whole countries or regions start the transition at a certain point in time and then continue until they find themselves in the new equilibrium. Most importantly, just as in the demographic transition, the probability of reducing religiosity is not thought to be dependent on individual characteristics. In fact, research on the demographic transition finds that cultural and structural attributes of women do not satisfactorily explain their probability of reducing fertility (Bongaarts and Watkins 1996; Casterline 2001; Johnson-Hanks 2008). Rather, it seems that the diffusion of ideas and norms, through personal networks, the workplace, or mass media changes the probability of having fewer children.¹⁴

This study has obvious limits. West Germany might be atypical¹⁵; churchgoing might not be transmitted in the same way as other dimensions of religiosity; we have only studied cohorts born since the 1960s. We suspect that similar results will be found in other western countries for recent decades, but it remains to be seen whether our results are replicated by studies of other countries, cohorts, and indicators of religiosity. We should also be wary about causality, as parental attendance and the predictors are not entirely exogenous.¹⁶

These limits notwithstanding, our article has used high-quality longitudinal data to show that the attendance gap in West Germany is persistent and pervasive. Contrary to the expectations in the literature, it is not influenced in any substantively significant way by attributes of the parents, by family structure, or by parental residential context. Secularization happens independently of attributes of the parents and their immediate surroundings

¹⁴Thus Canning (2011: 355) writes: “Changes in a population’s fertility behavior are more like a change in a social norm than a reflection of decisions to change made independently by individuals, and are probably the outcome of common, community-wide factors.”

¹⁵On the German case in comparison to other countries, see, for example, Pollack and Rosta (2017) and Pollack and Pickel (2007). For an application of the secular transition model to Germany, see Stolz et al (2020).

¹⁶For example, our coefficients for divorced/separated cannot be said to give the “causal effect” on the attendance gap, since religious values by the parents may influence both the probability of divorce and the attendance gap. While these causality issues have to be acknowledged, they do not invalidate the central insight of our article, namely that parents’ attributes and their immediate context cannot predict the attendance gap.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data underlying this article (core data set from the German SOEP) are available at the Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (DIW) at <https://www.diw.de/soep>. The direct use of SOEP data is subject to the provisions of German data protection law and requires signing a data distribution contract. The data distribution contract can be requested with a form, available at: <http://www.diw.de/soepforms>.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Supporting Information