

# The Stable Third: Non-religiosity in Germany

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## In the shadow of the “return of religion”

Over the last few years, the media and other interested parties have broadly disseminated catchphrase titles such as the “Return of the Gods” (Graf 2007) and the “Return of the Sacred” (Bell 1977). The expectation that religion would inevitably lose significance in modern societies—an expectation held by many sociologists of modernization—seems to have expired. In fact, the exact opposite appears to be the case. It seems that religion is gaining ground across the world and experiencing newfound attention even in those societies in which organized religion had suffered significant losses. Indeed, there are several signs supporting this assessment:

- Religiosity is growing significantly among particularly the youngest inhabitants of many countries in the world. The commonly held assumption that younger individuals show increasingly less interest in religion no longer seems to hold.
- Immigrants, and especially Muslims, are bringing a publicly conspicuous religion into the collective consciousness of countries that have been either considered thoroughly secularized or at least presumed to have undergone a transformation whereby religion had become primarily a private affair, with its public role more or less reduced to a ceremonial or charitable one.
- Islamist, fundamentalist Christian and Jewish Orthodox currents are increasingly taking center stage and thereby reviving old fears about the irrationality of religiosity.

Empirical studies as well as media exaggeration have reinforced the impression that religion is once again on the rise. This, in turn, has veiled over two other, and at the very least equally meaningful, phenomena that are manifest in very different ways in cross-national comparison: non-confessionalism and—more

importantly—non-religiosity. To some extent, the two discourses—on the return of religion on the one hand and on non-religiosity on the other hand—even reinforce each other. By emphasizing the return of religion, the former discourse often tends to exaggerate the deflation of religion in the recent past. However, the latter discourse, by focusing on the profound secularity of modern societies—in which religion plays a marginal role at best—often facilitates the assumption that new religious trends may signal a “relapse” to pre-Enlightenment thought.

### Is non-religiosity even possible?

Some anthropological theories have treated non-religiosity as an impossibility. Scholars using such approaches ask themselves: Is there such a thing as human existence without some kind of religiosity? Could it be that, when we speak of non-religiosity, we are confusing decline of the churches with the renunciation of religion as such? Aren't those who leave the churches still religious in a private Christian way or perhaps at least “spiritual” in a general, indefinite and non-institutional manner? Could it be that religion, after being “invisible” and latent for many years (Luckmann 1991), has begun to grow increasingly present in the consciousness of many?

These hypotheses raise questions about empirical measurements of religiosity and non-religiosity that elicit different answers, depending on which instrument of analysis is employed. In every case, however, if we want the indicators not to focus exclusively on the area of ecclesiastical religiosity, these forms of measurement must be capable of differentiating between churchliness and religiosity. Thomas Luckmann pointed out this problem long ago (cf. 1960).

In the sociology of religion, there are ultimately two conceivable methodological possibilities for measuring these phenomena.<sup>1</sup> The Religion Monitor employs a methodology oriented toward a content-based—or “substantive”—understanding of religiosity. This substantive approach aims to expand the concept of religion enough so that it may include non-institutional forms of religiosity (e.g., pantheism) in its assessment. This approach is empirically practicable and immediately comprehensible because it documents religiosity on the basis of phenomena that will be perceived as forms of religious expression in lay terms as well. This approach allows one to operationalize ideas and categories from extant knowledge about religious communities and (sometimes critical) religious and ideological debates.

The second approach treats religion in more abstract terms, that is, as “subjective systems of ultimate significance.” In his 1967 treatise on religion in modern societies, Thomas Luckmann proposed the theoretical possibilities of such an approach but did not operationalize it for research. For this very reason in particular, it has been easy to use Luckmann’s definition of religion as a “cudgel” against all attempts to empirically account for secularization. In other—perhaps blunter—words, using Luckmann’s definition, religion could always simply purport to be that which cannot be measured. As a result, many researchers have found Luckmann’s term unsuitable for use in empirical analysis.

In the Evangelical Church in Germany’s (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, or EKD) fourth investigation of church membership (Friedrich, Huber and Steinacker 2006), the researchers attempted to operationalize this more abstract understanding of religion by using a “worldviews” factor analysis (Wohlrab-Sahr and Benthaus-Apel 2006). In order to narrow the study’s focus, the researchers concentrated on the following dichotomies characteristic of religion: immanence versus transcendence, order versus disorder, internal versus external accountability. These dichotomies were captured in a variety of manifest contents, which gave expression to the blurred boundaries between religious and non-religious forms of worldviews as well as to the differences between them.

This differentiation is relevant for our purposes here insofar as it helps us assess the Religion Monitor’s findings on non-religiosity. The results refer to substantive forms of religiosity in the dimensions of ideology (or belief), public and private religious practice, experience and intellect (or knowledge). The findings do not, however, address the question of whether we can reconstruct a subjective system of ultimate significance among those identified as “non-religious.” In its orientation toward an order that is perceived to be fateful, for example, or in its strong sense of responsibility felt toward an external, but not divine “greatness” (e.g., a community of those with a shared worldview or a “contract” for one’s own life), such a system shows clear parallels to a religious worldview.

Unlike this approach, the Religion Monitor refers to strictly substantive aspects. Religiosity is understood according to the various ways in which institutional *and* extra-institutional forms of religiosity are operationalized (e.g., prayer and meditation, the experience of being spoken to by God and of being at one with all). Non-religious attitudes—which the following discussion refers to using the term “non-religiosity”—are explored as the absence or limited intensity of religious belief.

## Non-confessionalism and non-religiosity

The Religion Monitor's approach allows the systematic correlation of religious-confessional (non-)affiliation as well as the various dimensions and intensities of religiosity. Non-religiosity—or a “non-religious” attitude—is defined according to the lowest overall degree of “religious centrality” and the lowest degree of “intensity” in the dimensions of individual religiosity. Using this approach allows for a systematic analysis of whether individuals without a confessional affiliation are nurturing a form of private substantive religiosity or whether their experience shows a spiritual dimension through, for example, a certain quality of feeling.

The Religion Monitor draws a very clear picture of the state of affairs in Germany. Almost a third of the German population is non-confessional, with the population in eastern Germany constituting a larger proportion of this group than the population in western Germany. Two-thirds of non-confessional Germans are unambiguously categorized as “non-religious,” as religiosity has no central significance in their lives. This proportion is even greater in other dimensions.

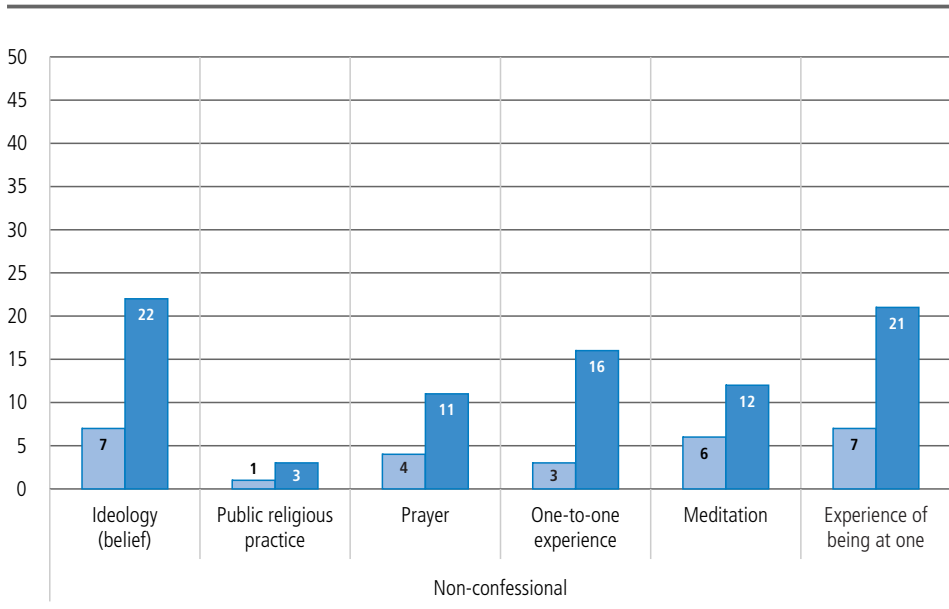
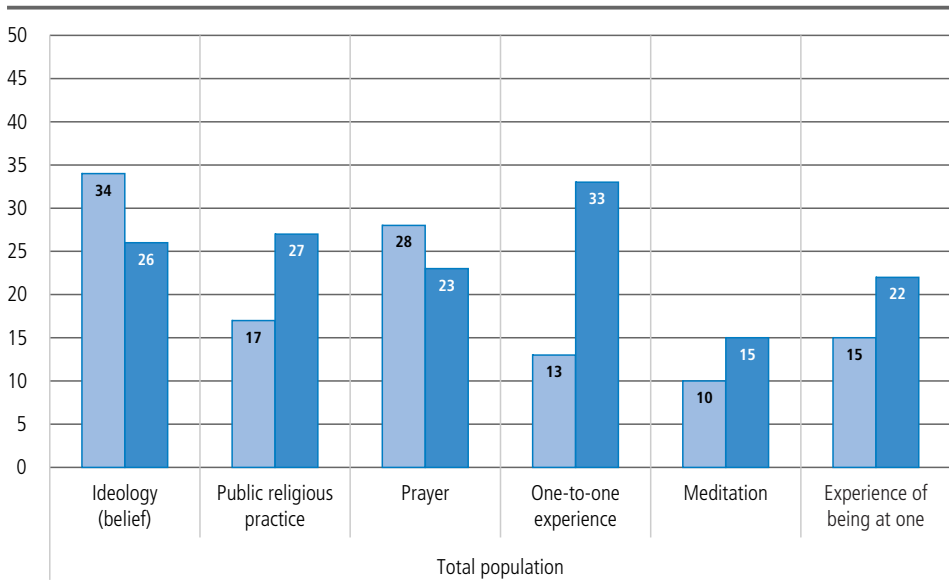
According to these findings, 70 percent of those without confessional affiliation do not have any religious beliefs (e.g., a belief in God or life after death), 96 percent do not engage in public religious practice (e.g., attending religious services), 85 percent do not engage in private religious practice (e.g., prayer or meditation), and 81 percent have never had religious or spiritual experiences (e.g., being spoken to by God or feeling at one with all).

The intellectual dimension plays a somewhat more important role. Almost half of the non-confessional respondents expressed at least an interest in learning more about religious issues and claimed to think about religion. Moreover, the older the respondent, the greater the interest in engaging intellectually with these issues.

Using these findings, it is difficult to determine what lies behind this intellectual interest. Indeed, we can hardly interpret it as an indication of subjective religiosity (or even as residual religiosity in an anthropological sense). In many cases, it just might simply be indicative of an interest in religion as a “social fact” that feeds as much off secularist fervor or cool indifference as it does off a curiosity about the unknown or an openness to engaging in religious exploration.

Nevertheless, data collected by the regularly conducted German Social Survey (ALLBUS) suggest that eastern Germans harbor a certain openness toward religious themes. In the thoroughly secular part of the country that once belonged

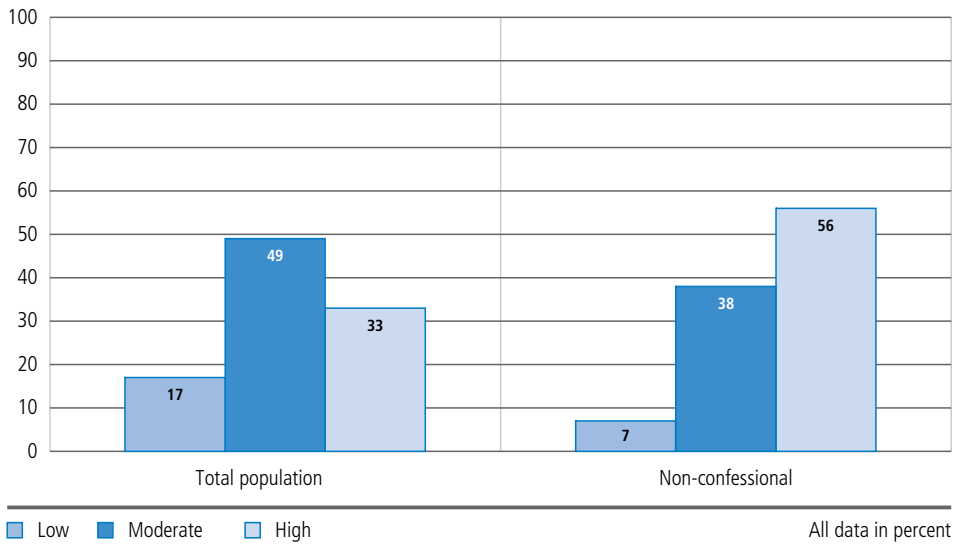
**Figure 1: Dimensions of religiosity**



■ Individuals with high intensity  
■ Individuals with moderate intensity

All data in percent

Figure 2: Intellectual interest in religion

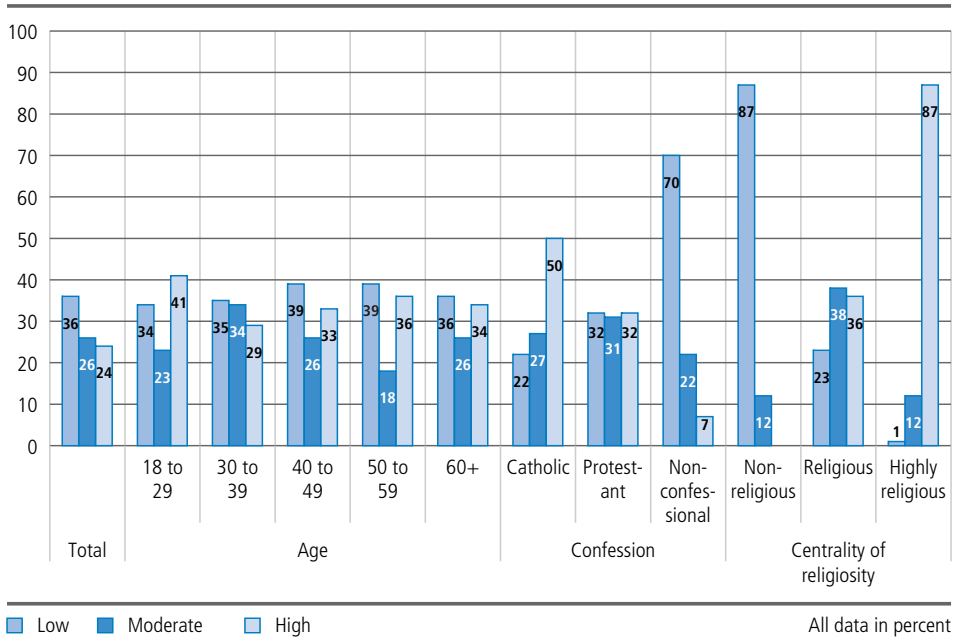


to the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), young people in particular increasingly claim to believe in life after death, though not necessarily in God. In contrast to 1991, the 2002 survey indicates that individuals from eastern Germany between 18- and 20-years-old are significantly more inclined to agree with certain statements traditionally associated with religious concepts. In this age group, one striking result is what could be interpreted as a relatively general accounting of transcendence—in both its positive (e.g., life after death) and negative (e.g., occultism) variants.

According to this survey, the greatest shift is to be found in a belief in life after death, which more than doubled within the 10-year period from 15 percent to 34 percent without there being a corresponding increase in a belief in God. The next highest level of agreement is found at 26 percent among the 75- to 89-year-old respondents (ALLBUS 2002, 117; author's calculations). A similar result was found with responses to the question about the relevance of magic, spiritualism and occultism. While an average of 80 percent of respondents answered in the negative, the youngest age group did so at the significantly lower rate of 68 percent (ALLBUS 2002, 107; author's calculations). Moreover, there were also comparable differences in the responses about whether one should primarily rely on what can be rationally perceived (ALLBUS 2002, 95). In fact, the youngest respondents proved to be the group least likely to rely exclusively on rationality.

Qualitative studies of the secularization process in eastern Germany show that what might be described as attempts toward “transcendental exploration” among these young adults often have little to do with actual religious experience (Wohlrab-Sahr, Karstein and Schaumburg 2005). Media reports of near-death experiences, science-fiction films, information about foreign religions and a philosophical-intellectual inclination toward such questions serve as the foundation of this more experimental approach to what the Religion Monitor identifies as the “dimension of ideology.”

**Figure 3: Ideological interest in religion**



In fact, the Religion Monitor’s findings confirm that 18- to 29-year-old respondents have the highest rate of agreement (41%) in the dimension of religious ideology (e.g., a belief in God or life after death), while in all of the other dimensions religious intensity seems to increase with age. From this, it would appear that—in Germany and other countries—young people have begun to invigorate the religious field.

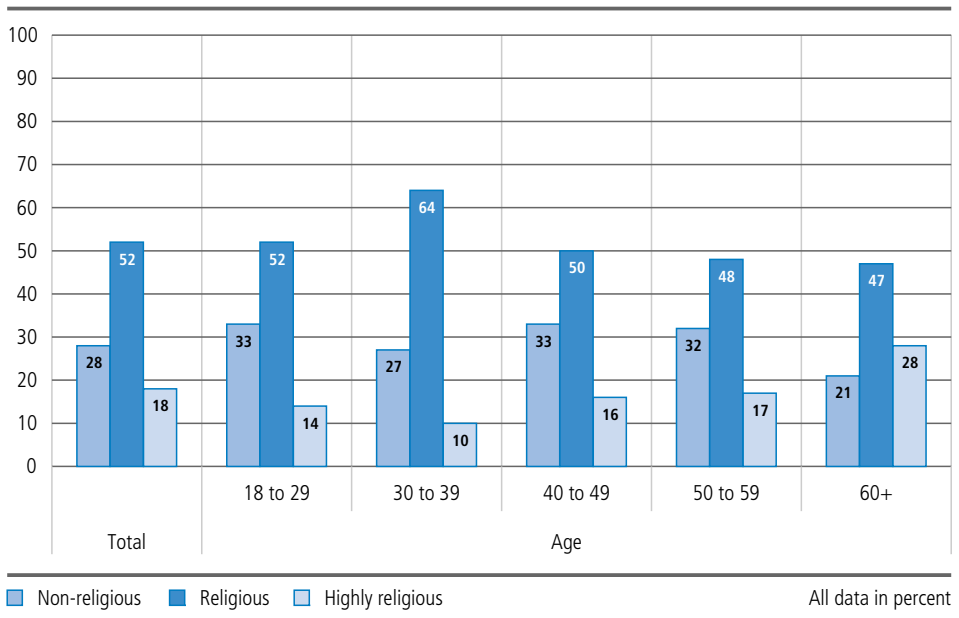
### Who are the “non-religious”?

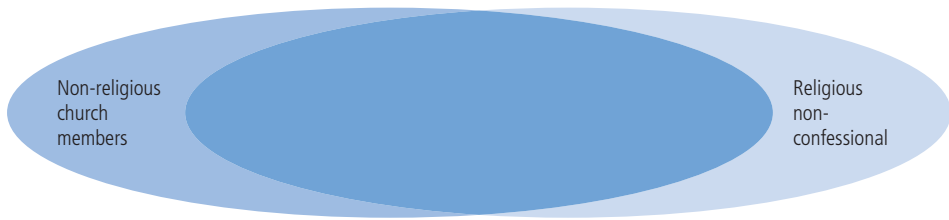
Although there is a large degree of overlap between non-religiosity and the lack of confessional affiliation, both phenomena demand a closer look. With the aid of the Religion Monitor’s results, individuals from both western and eastern Germany can be described in more detail. For example, 63 percent of the population in eastern Germany—as opposed to only 19 percent in western Germany—is classified as “non-religious,” which suggests the persistence of very different religious landscapes.

There is also a certain gender difference when it comes to attitudes toward religion. The Religion Monitor classified a somewhat larger proportion of men (34 %) as being “non-religious” than it did women (23 %). From other studies, however, we also know that the proportion of non-religious women increases as women participate more in professional life (Ahrens 2000).

Among respondents older than 60, there is a much more limited proportion of non-religious individuals than there is among younger respondents. The exception to this general situation involves 30- to 39-year-olds, which may indicate that people tend to change their attitudes about religion—and attain a middle level of religiosity—when they live with very young children.

Figure 4: Non-religiosity by age group



**Figure 5: Overlap of the non-religious and the non-confessional**

Source: Own compilation

Although a lack of confessional affiliation overlaps with non-religiosity among a broad majority of respondents, there are also interesting exceptions to this general rule that involve minorities made up of non-religious church members and religious people who do not belong to a particular confession. For this reason, the Religion Monitor classified a minority of those who belong to a Protestant church (15 %) or the Catholic Church (17 %) as being “non-religious.” The exact opposite turns out to be the case among the non-confessional, of whom there is a significant minority that believes there is a “God or something divine.” In fact, 29 percent of the non-confessional expressed medium to high levels of agreement with this statement, and even 12 percent of those classified as “non-religious” expressed moderate agreement with it.

Private religious practice also shows a similar trend, although in a more limited manner. Fifteen percent to 18 percent of those without confessional affiliation exhibit middle to high values regarding prayer or meditation. As has been shown by other studies on subgroups within the population residing in Germany (Pittkowsky 2006; Höhmann und Krech 2006), there are still specific zones of ambiguity among both church members and those without confessional affiliation.

The fourth EKD study on church membership (Friedrich, Huber and Steinacker 2006) shows that we are usually talking about individuals from western Germany when we speak about the religious among the “non-confessional.” These people may be individuals who, for example, in protest, have withdrawn their membership in the church, without simultaneously abandoning their religion. In eastern Germany, on the other hand, a lack of confessional affiliation rarely results from a personal decision. Instead, it is much more a matter of socialization, as two-thirds of eastern Germans have in fact never been members of a church (Pittkowsky 2006; cf. also Pickel 2000).

It comes as no surprise that the non-confessional express greater agreement with religious-spiritual issues as the questions posed in the Religion Monitor

grow increasingly less religious in their tone. In fact, 28 percent of those without confessional affiliation claim to have experienced the feeling of “being at one with all” to either a moderate or high degree. Among the non-religious, on the other hand, the values for this relatively vague, mystical statement are much lower at 11 percent.

We can interpret this discrepancy in two ways. First, we could describe the non-religious as being more strongly oriented toward an objective rationality and more skeptical toward not only explicit expressions of religion but also experiences tinged by mysticism. This group also has had such experiences much less frequently.

Another possibility might be that the phrase “to be at one with all” itself is so strongly and recognizably religious in nature that the non-religious reject it categorically—even if they have had experiences that could justifiably fall into this domain. The EKD church membership survey found non-confessional individuals from western Germany to be much more open to semantics influenced by religion than their counterparts in eastern Germany are (Wohlrab-Sahr and Benthous-Apel 2006).

Nevertheless, in order to validate such an interpretation empirically, one would have to ask questions about types of mystical experiences other than just that about “being at one with all.” Doing so could include, for example, questions about the sexual-erotic experience of merging with a lover, the feeling of becoming part of a group or community, or the sense of sharing a close bond with the people of the world. The questions would also need to be phrased in such a way as to avoid explicitly identifying the targeted experience as being religious in nature—but, rather, as an experience of the dissolution of boundaries that evokes both religious and non-religious contexts. In his recent writings on the sociology of religion, Thomas Luckmann discussed “the shrinking transcendence” and described shifts in experience from great transcendences (e.g., the great “beyond,” life after death) to moderate and small transcendences (Luckmann 2002).

### **Is non-religiosity a renunciation of a certain habitual figuration?**

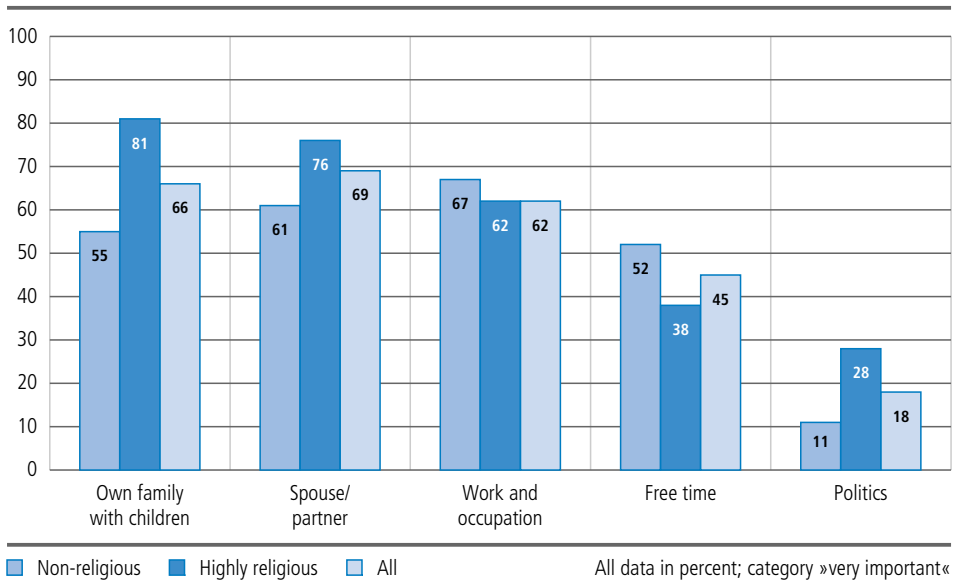
The Religion Monitor’s data clearly show that religiosity and non-religiosity are not one-dimensional phenomena but, rather, complex bundles of affinities or habitual figurations. Whether an individual is religious or not correlates with how much significance he or she assigns to family or spouse, professional life or

leisure time (or “free time,” in the questionnaire), education or politics. We have to take into account, however, that the survey’s data do not allow us to see how this significance is actualized in practical life, especially when different desires conflict with each other. Indeed, these findings generally capture forms of self-description rather than forms of practice.

From other studies, like the EKD membership survey, we know that when different sections of a survey ask about forms of (imagined) practice (i.e., forms that are immediately relevant to the respondent’s own life), striking differences come into view between normative ideas (i.e., about what is *in principle* considered important and right) and the priorities that come into play with reference to one’s practical life (Höhmman and Krech 2006).

One example of this is the striking contradiction between the profound appreciation for the Christian commandment to care for strangers on the one hand, and the strong preference for religious homogeneity in one’s immediate surroundings, or a basic aversion to the construction of mosques on the other (Höhmman and Krech 2006: 173 ff.). This discrepancy surfaced among 25 percent of the Protestants surveyed, and it was even more marked as church affiliation and religiosity increased. From this, it would seem that profound religiosity is accompanied by a powerful ideological drive toward disambiguation, which does not necessarily have anything to do with the preferences of everyday life.

**Figure 6: Importance of areas of life**



If we take a closer look at the Religion Monitor's results regarding what is important in one's own life, both the non-religious and the highly religious are clearly differentiated from the average of all respondents.

The differences between these two groups are very clearly expressed in the family orientation respondents claim to have. When asked about the importance of having a family with children, most respondents' answers indicated broad agreement: On a scale of 1 to 5, the average value was 4.4. While the highly religious exceeded this average with a value of 4.7, and 81 percent of them answered the question with "very important," the non-religious were far below the average, with an average score of 4.2 and 55-percent agreement with the highest value. The scatter of answers in this group was also broader, which indicates that the issues of family and children are to a lesser degree ideologically assigned. Apparently, there is less pressure felt here to position oneself unequivocally.

The findings on the valuation of leisure time reveal an inverted and even more well-defined result. While the non-religious clearly exceed the average value of 45 percent with 52 percent, the highly religious are clearly below the average at 38 percent. Indeed, in this case, the differences are expressed much more strongly than they are with the question about the importance of work and occupation. Although the non-religious also had higher values in this area, this was only barely perceptible in the average of all responses, while the responses of the highly religious match the average exactly. This suggests that the evaluation of leisure time is not primarily derived from its binary opposite—work—in the sense that the highly religious are supposed to have a stronger work ethic. If this were the case, then we would expect the appraisal of work to reveal similarly different preferences. Nevertheless, the valuation of leisure time seems less self-evident (and perhaps also less legitimate) for the highly religious than one would expect to be the case in what is supposed to be a "leisure society."

At the same time, it is also conceivable to consider leisure time as equivalent to an individual's available consumable time. As a result of this mindset, it could be interpreted that the highly religious—who generally place a stronger emphasis on family and community values—are suspicious of leisure time. Answers about one's own preferences might therefore reflect less the opposition of leisure time and work than they do a dichotomy between leisure time and (meaningfully) utilized time. This interpretation, of course, extends beyond what the standardized data can tell us. In order to substantiate these claims, open interview materials would have to ascertain which horizons and contrastive horizons play a role in the high or low degree of esteem assigned to certain values. Leisure time can be highly valued in contrast to work, but also as its earned, equally val-

uable counterpart. Moreover, leisure time can also be held in low esteem as time spent irresponsibly against the horizon of performance, but also as “disengaged” time (with the connotation of “idleness”) in contrast to meaningfully utilized, “engaged” time.

A clear difference in attitudes toward politics also corresponds to these differences between the non-religious and the highly religious. While only 11 percent of the non-religious view this area as being “very important,” the highly religious express the strongest possible agreement (at 28 percent and with an average value of 3.5) and are far above the average.

These data suggest that strongly expressed religiosity is not an isolated characteristic. Instead, it is bound to a habitus and accompanied by an attitude toward family relationships and public responsibility in addition to an ideal regarding the utilization of time. Indeed, non-religiosity may not be just a rejection of a single behavioral characteristic but, rather, something more like a departure from this habitus. The data from the Religion Monitor suggest that, at the level of habitus, non-religiosity is closely connected with stronger individualization, leisure time orientation and—evidently—increased indifference toward politics. In this case, individualization does not—as is often assumed—indicate a lack of social relationships or responsibilities but, rather, the privileging of individual life planning over marriage and family.

It should nevertheless be pointed out here that the impression of political indifference among the non-religious becomes somewhat more relative when one takes into consideration the fact that the population in eastern Germany is strongly overrepresented in the data on non-religiosity. As a result, this population’s specific experience with politics after German reunification may result in the imbalance regarding this issue on the relevancy scale.

### **Causes and effects of profound non-religiosity**

Non-religiosity is the result of long-term societal processes. The comparison between eastern and western Germany, as well as other cross-national comparisons, make this clear. Moreover, there continue to be differences in Germany that are both persistent and massive. Citizens in the GDR were not only dechurched, they were broadly and consistently non-religious (Wohlrab-Sahr et al. 2006). Indeed, historical studies have shown that even in the 19th century, the area which later became the GDR was already characterized by having less church affiliation and a stronger presence of secularist movements and associa-

tions (Hölscher 1995, 2000; McLeod 2000; Kaiser 2003). The totality of these developments has begun to show its influence on a national level since the reunification of Germany.

If one considers the temporal dimension and how it is expressed in generational differences, it becomes clear that this strong east-west dichotomy should dissipate in the near future. In the same way that the lack of confessional affiliation and non-religiosity were “inherited” in eastern Germany, the absence of religious socialization in western Germany will result in similar developments.

A synchronic observation alone yields the expected dichotomic results: 60 percent of individuals living in eastern Germany and 28 percent of individuals in western Germany report that they were not raised religiously. When comparing different age groups, however, it becomes clear that a religious upbringing is soon to be a thing of the past for most people. When asked whether they had a religious upbringing, only 21 percent of the age group over 60 responded in the negative, whereas 52 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds did so.

**Table 1: Religious upbringing and age**

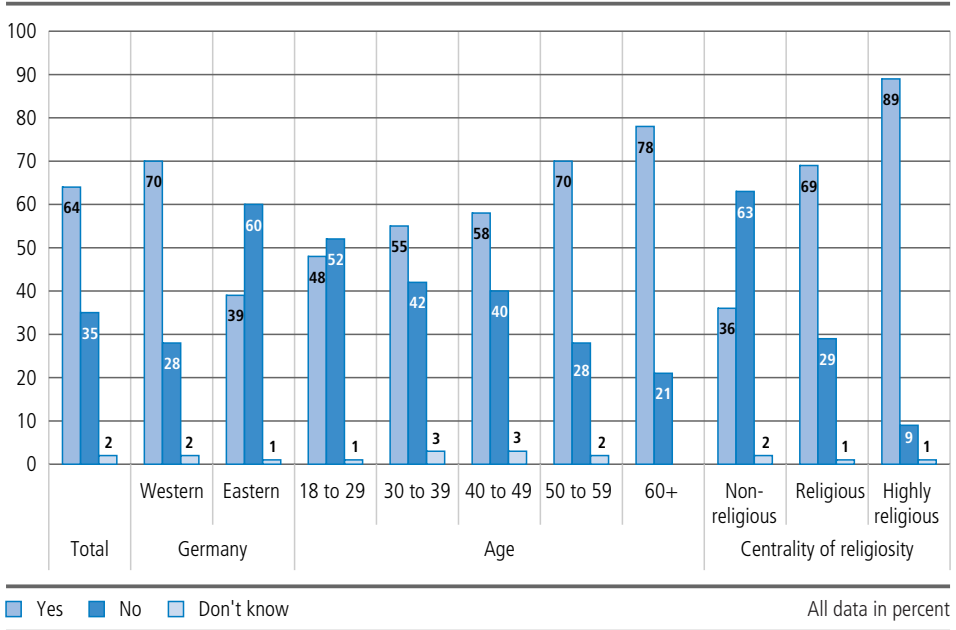
Has religion been part of your upbringing?	Total	Age				
		18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+
Yes	64	48	55	58	70	78
No	35	52	42	40	28	21

All data in percent

Even if the growing belief in life after death among the younger generation indicates that the social “legacy” of religiosity and non-religiosity is not inevitable, it remains the dominant pattern.

The increase in certain religious beliefs can only partially mitigate this influence: Almost two-thirds of those who are non-religious today did not have a religious upbringing, as did less than a third of those who are religious today. Even if there are paths into religiosity or non-religiosity independent of one’s upbringing, the dominant model continues to be the transmission of religious or non-religious attitudes during the process of socialization. If religion constitutes a decreasingly significant element in the classical repertoire of family or educational upbringing, the number of the non-religious can be expected to increase in the future. Consequently, the distinct east-west difference is ostensibly only a transitory phenomenon. It can be assumed, however, that the greater openness

**Figure 7: The social legacy of religiosity and non-religiosity**



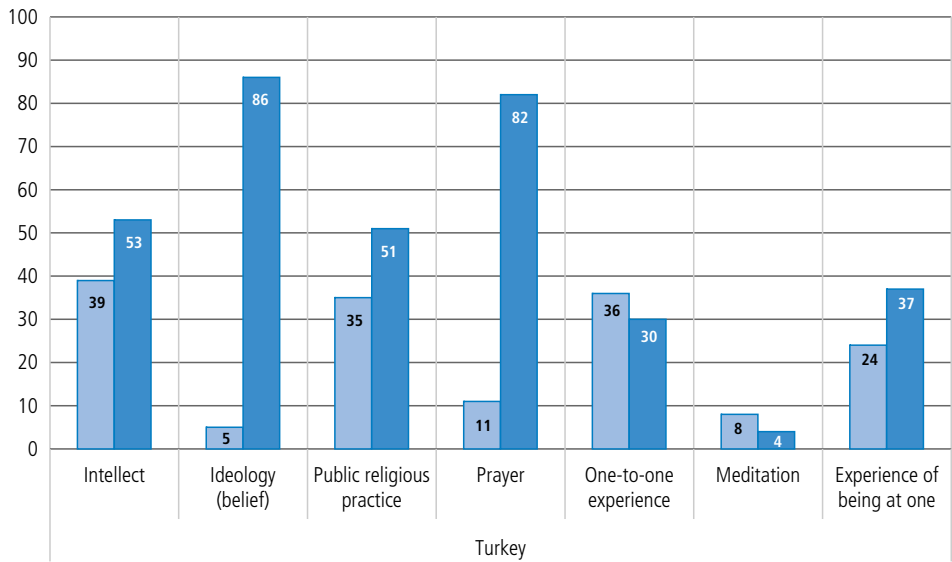
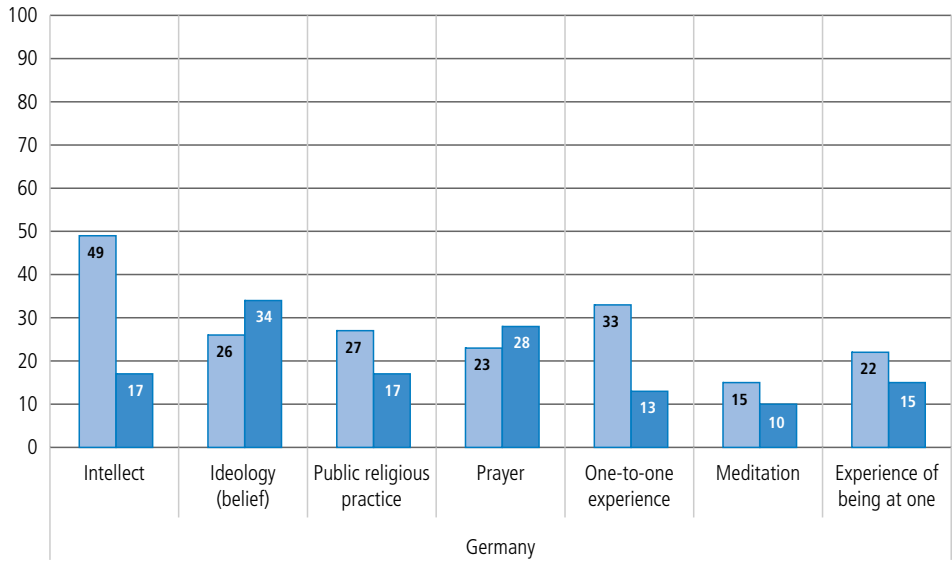
toward different worldviews that currently exists in the Federal Republic of Germany allows for a weaker insistence upon ideological “camps” than was the case in the GDR. Although this may diminish the influence of religious-ideological socialization, it in no way completely abolishes it.

**Lack of confessional affiliation, privatized Christianity and public Islam?**

It is unfortunate that the Religion Monitor included only a few members of religious minorities in Germany, such as adherents to Islam or Buddhism. As a result, it is impossible to make substantive observations on such groups in Germany.

At the same time, however, cross-national data permit a few preliminary conclusions to be drawn with regard to the country’s various religious and non-religious groups. The data confirm that there are massive differences, which many other studies have also pointed out. Nevertheless, at this point, I would like to single out one issue that is rarely considered: the comparison between Germany and Turkey (see also Gerhards 2005). The respondents from Turkey reported much higher degrees of religious intensity than their German counterparts in the dimensions relevant to them.

Figure 8: Religious intensity—Germany and Turkey



■ Individuals with high intensity  
■ Individuals with moderate intensity

All data in percent

When we consider that Turks constitute the largest group of immigrants in Germany, the high number of non-confessional and non-religious Germans becomes particularly significant. The cross-national data permit the supposition that the increasingly frequent public conflicts in Germany about Islam are not just about a Christian-influenced culture war being waged under the banner of “crucifix vs. headscarf,” but that they also have something to do with defending a certain model of secularity and private religiosity. Among the many voices that clamor for an audience, there is also a profound secularism that regards public religion with suspicion (see Wohlrab-Sahr and Benthaus-Apel 2006). In this respect, non-religiosity has long been admitted into the culture of debate. Indeed, several voices energize the struggle over the role of religion, even if media representations present these voices in such a way that they seem unanimous.

## Endnote

- 1 I deviate here from the common differentiation made in sociology between substantive and functional concepts of religion; I prefer instead to distinguish substantive from formal concepts of religion.

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