

Does religious practice influence family behaviours?

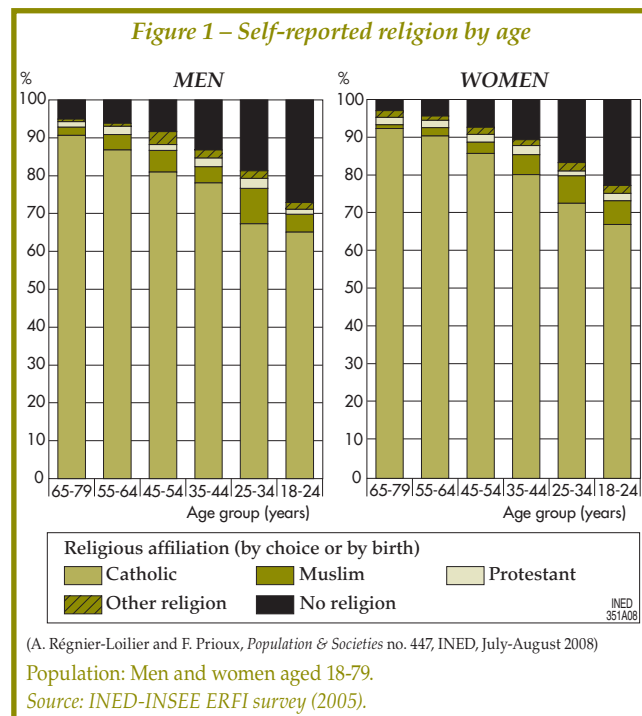
Arnaud Régnier-Loilier* and France Prioux*

In France, Catholics traditionally have larger families than non-Catholics. Now that religious practice is much less widespread, does this difference still exist? Other religions, Islam in particular, are gaining ground due to immigration. Do practising members of these other faiths also have more children than the average? After an overview of religious practice in France today, Arnaud Régnier-Loilier and France Prioux explain the relationships between religiosity, marriage and the family.

The religious landscape of France is changing rapidly. Although Catholicism remains dominant, people who report being Catholics (either by choice or by birth) attend Mass less and less often, and a growing proportion of the population claims to have no religious affiliation. In parallel, immigration has led to a diversification of religious groups. Using data from the *Étude des relations familiales et intergénérationnelles* survey (the French version of the European Generation and Gender Survey) conducted in 2005 by INED and INSEE (Box 1), we can draw an overall picture of religiosity in France today and examine whether family behaviours are affected by religious practice.

Declining religiosity and fewer Catholics in France

Religious affiliation varies by age. While only 5% of men and 3% of women aged 65-79 report no religious affiliation at the time of survey, the proportion rises to 27% and 23% respectively among the 18-24 age group (Figure 1). This decline in religiosity is accompanied by a diversification of religious groups. Among persons reporting a religious affiliation, 95% of the 65-79 age group report being Catholic, versus 88% of the 18-24 age group, while the proportion of Muslims is higher among the younger generations (under 2% of the 65-79



age group, versus 7% of the 18-24 age group).

In 2005, around 35 million people in the 18-79 age group (80%) report being Catholic, slightly more than 2 million (5%) are Muslims, 900,000 (2%) are Protestants and 800,000 (2%) belong to another faith. Five million (11%) report no religious affiliation.

* Institut national d'études démographiques

Alongside a declining sense of religiosity, religious practice among those who report a religious affiliation is less frequent among young people than among older generations: at ages 65-79, 68% of men and 55% of women with a religious affiliation say that they never “attend a religious service” (apart from weddings, baptisms and funerals) compared with 85% and 80% respectively at ages 18-24. And frequency of attendance among those who practice is decreasing: at ages 65-79, 12% of men and 20% of women attend a place of worship more than twice a month, versus 3% and 4%, respectively, of the 18-24 age group.

The decline in religious practice among the young cohorts reflects the fact that religious commitment is an increasingly individual choice, less governed by social norms, and requiring less outward expression of conformity (1). This is compounded by an age effect, since practice tends to increase slightly with age [2]. Yet the growing strength of Islam and other religions is changing the picture somewhat. The probability of attending religious services is higher for these religions: 34% of men who consider themselves Muslim attend a place of worship more than twice a month, compared with only 4% of Catholics. Among women the difference is smaller: 14% of Muslim women versus 8% of Catholic women (Figure 2).

Has this new context affected the relationship between religious practice and family behaviours?

◆ More frequent attenders remain attached to marriage

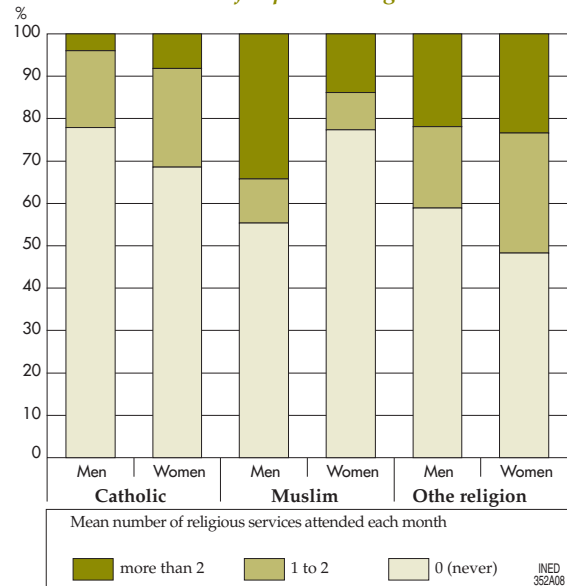
While it was rare forty years ago for married couples to live together before their wedding day (only one married couple in ten), it is now the norm (nine couples in ten). Religious commitment is closely associated with less frequent premarital cohabitation (Figure 3), but cohabitation has become so common that by 2000, only more frequent attenders (see definition in Box 2) stood out, with just six couples in ten living together before marriage. Premarital cohabitation is less common among persons who practise a religion other than Catholicism, Muslims especially: among the more frequently attending Catholics, 75% lived together before marriage.

The proportion of cohabiting couples who do not marry is also increasing [3]. Among persons aged 65-79 ever in a union in 2005, only 2% have never married, compared with 18% of men and 15% of women aged 45-49 (2). These proportions vary considerably by degree of religious commitment (Table 1): among more frequent attenders, only 6% of men and 7% of women are never-married, compared with one fifth of the least religious categories (no religion or non-practising).

(1) A large proportion of people report a religious affiliation because they were baptized, and religion sometimes continues to influence marital behaviour among those who do not practise (a church wedding is chosen “by tradition” or “to please the parents or grandparents”) [1].

(2) Some may marry after age 45 or 50, but although marriages at these ages are increasing in number, they are nonetheless rare.

Figure 2 – Frequency of religious practice by sex and self-reported religion



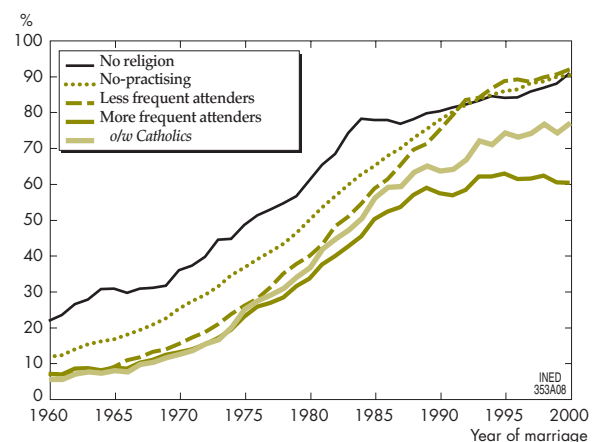
Population: Men and women aged 18-79 who report a religious affiliation (by choice or by birth).

Note: Here, Protestants are included in the “other religion” category, first, because their numbers are too small to form a separate category and second, because their profile is more similar to persons of “other religions” than to Catholics.

(A. Régnier-Loilier and F. Prioux, *Population & Societies* no. 447, INED, July-August 2008)

Source: INED-INSEE ERFI survey (2005).

Figure 3 – Percentage of marriages preceded by pre-marital cohabitation, by religious practice



Population: Marriages reported by men and women aged 18-79.

(A. Régnier-Loilier and F. Prioux, *Population & Societies* no. 447, INED, July-August 2008)

Source: INED-INSEE ERFI survey (2005).

◆ An increase in non-marital births, even among more frequent attenders

The spread of pre-marital cohabitation and non-marital unions is associated with an increase in births outside marriage, first births especially. In around 1970, fewer than one first child in five (18%) was born to unmarried parents, compared with one in two in 2000 (Table 2). The proportion is above two in three for persons with no religion, one in two for those who have a religion but do not practise, one in three for less frequent attenders and below one in three for more frequent

attenders. But even among this latter category, the proportion has risen sharply since the 1970s: the period of premarital cohabitation is growing longer and marriage most often occurs after the first child is born.

◆ More frequent attenders have more children

Until the 1970s, because medical contraception was difficult to obtain and married couples faced strong social pressure to start a family, childlessness was rare. Only 7-8% of persons aged 65-79 ever in a union are childless, whatever their degree of religious commitment. In the 45-49 age group, on the other hand, the proportion ranges from 5% for more frequent attenders to 9% for less frequent attenders, 10% for non-attenders and 12% for persons with no religion.

High fertility among more frequent attenders is not a new phenomenon (Figure 4). Among men ever in a union, more frequent attenders have 0.3 to 0.4 more children on average than the others. This primarily reflects the influence of religions other than Catholicism, since the completed fertility of Catholic more frequent attenders is similar to that of less frequent attenders in general.

This is not the case for women however, among whom more frequent attenders clearly overtake the others in the more recent cohorts. From the cohorts born in the 1950s, their family size has even increased, including among Catholic women. Surveys conducted around twenty years ago showed that contraceptive behaviour was not closely linked to religiosity [4]. This is not the case for fertility, for women at least: with the decline in religious practice over time, family values appear to carry more weight among the minority of women who still attend religious services.

◆ More frequent repartnering among those with no religion

In the past, marriage was terminated more often by the death of the spouse than by divorce or separation. Most marriages ended in widowhood after many years and second unions were rare. For example, among persons ever in union aged 65-79 in 2005, only one in ten (11% of men and 9% of women) report a second union, compared with one in four in the 45-49 age group (Table 1), a proportion which is probably underestimated, since repartnering

Table 1 – Percentages of never-married and of persons who have experienced at least two unions, by religious practice

	No religious affiliation (by choice or by birth)	Religious affiliation (by choice or by birth)			Overall
		Non-practising	Less frequent attenders*	More frequent attenders*	
Percentage never married					
Men	19	21	10	6	18
Women	23	16	16	7	15
Percentage having experienced at least two unions** (%)					
Men	34	26	18	16	25
Women	40	25	22	11	24

Population: Men and women ever in a union aged 45-49 at time of survey (born in 1956-1960).

* Upper (lower) half of their birth cohort in terms of frequency of attendance.

** Definition of a union: having lived under the same roof for at least 3 consecutive months.

(A. Régnier-Loilier and F. Prioux, *Population & Societies* no. 447, INED, July-August 2008)

Source: INED-INSEE ERFI survey (2005).

Table 2 – Percentage of first births outside marriage by religious practice

Year of first birth	No religious affiliation (by choice or by birth)	Religious affiliation (by choice or by birth)			Overall
		Non-practising	Less frequent attenders*	More frequent attenders*	
1965-1974	27	18	19	12	18
1975-1984	41	23	21	18	23
1985-1994	55	39	32	24	38
1995-2004	67	53	36	31	51

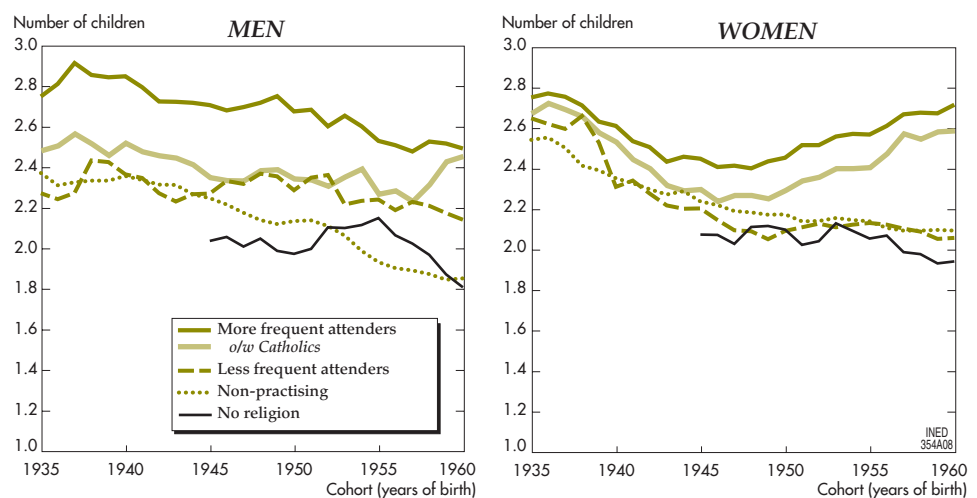
Population: First births in years 1965-2004.

* Upper (lower) half of their birth cohort in terms of frequency of attendance.

(A. Régnier-Loilier and F. Prioux, *Population & Societies* no. 447, INED, July-August 2008)

Source: INED-INSEE ERFI survey (2005).

Figure 4 – Completed fertility (mean number of children) by cohort and religious practice



(A. Régnier-Loilier and F. Prioux, *Population & Societies* no. 447, INED, July-August 2008)

Population: Men and women ever in a union born between 1935 and 1960.

Source: INED-INSEE ERFI survey (2005).

is still possible beyond this age. Among people with no religion, one man in three, and four women in ten have experienced a second union, compared with one man in six (16%) and one woman in ten (10%) among more frequent attenders. Separations are less frequent in this latter group, and less often followed by repartnering.

In a context of sharply declining religiosity, the relationships between religious practice and marriage, fertility and the family are becoming more marked, for women especially. For more frequent attenders, whose numbers are dwindling, marriage remains the norm, and often represents a life-long commitment. Family formation is still seen as a necessary corollary of marriage, and childless unions are rare. Family size, larger than the average, has even increased in recent cohorts. Conversely, people with no religion reject marriage more frequently than the others and have more complex conjugal trajectories; childlessness is increasing in this group and family size is often smaller. The behaviour of persons who report a religious affiliation, but do not practise – the largest category – lies between these two extremes.

Box 1

Questions on religion in public statistics

In France, surveys by the public statistical office generally do not include questions on religious affiliation*, contrary to other countries** and to French custom up to the census of 1872 [5]. Considered to be of a private nature, the question was removed from the census under the Third Republic, and is now qualified as “sensitive” under the law of 1978.

Surveys by INED and INSEE include questions about the importance of religion, the frequency of attendance at religious services, or the sense of religious affiliation, but without asking which faith is concerned. In 2005, however, INED obtained permission from the French data protection agency (CNIL) to ask the question “What is your religious affiliation (or your religion by birth)?” in the ERFI survey. ERFI being the French version of the international Generations and Gender survey (www-erfi.ined.fr), this question was justified in the context of the survey and its comparative objectives. Moreover, respondents could refuse to answer the question if they wished. They could select the “prefer not to answer” item and, for the answer to be recorded, each respondent was required to sign an “express consent” form explaining the “sensitive” nature of the question.

All in all, out of 10,079 respondents, 570 refused to sign the document and 198 chose not to answer the question (making a total of 7.6% missing data).

On the other hand, the question “How often, if at all, do you attend religious services (apart from weddings, funerals, baptisms and the like)” was asked systematically, with no particular restriction.

* Questions on religious affiliation have been asked in surveys by private institutes or research centres, using the quota method for sample construction.

** For example, the question is included in the census in Switzerland, Austria, Portugal, etc.

Box 2

Measuring religious practice

Religious practice has declined over the years. In the past, regular attendance, in terms of the average or median for each cohort, corresponded to weekly attendance, while today average attendance is closer to monthly.

To observe the link between religious practice and the family behaviours of the different cohorts, four sub-populations are compared:

- persons with “no religion” who report no religious affiliation;
- “non-practising” individuals, who do not practise, but who report a religious affiliation, either by choice or by birth;
- “less frequent attenders” who report a religious affiliation and whose attendance of religious services is below the median frequency of their cohort (taking account of sex);
- “more frequent attenders” who report a religious affiliation and whose attendance of religious services is at or above the median frequency of their cohort (taking account of sex).

Given the relatively small numbers of individuals reporting non-Catholic affiliations, the other religions could not be treated separately.

REFERENCES

- [1] Arnaud RÉGNIER-LOILIER – 2007, *Avoir des enfants en France. Désirs et réalités*, Les Cahiers de l'INED, 159, INED, 268 pages.
- [2] Xavier NIEL – 1981, “L'état de la pratique religieuse en France”, *INSEE Première*, INSEE, 570, 4 pages.
- [3] France PRIoux – 2005, “Mariage, vie en couple et rupture d'union”, *Informations sociales*, 122, pp. 38-50.
- [4] Laurent TOULEMON and Henri LERIDON – 1992, “Maîtrise de la fécondité et appartenance sociale: contraception, grossesses accidentelles et avortements”, *Population*, 47, (1), pp. 1-45.
- [5] Zohor DJIDER and Maryse MARPSAT – 1990, “La vie religieuse: chiffres et enquêtes”, *Données Sociales*, INSEE, pp. 376-384.

ABSTRACT

According to the *Étude des relations familiales et intergénérationnelles* survey conducted in 2005 by INED and INSEE, 80% of people in France aged 18-79 report being Catholic (by choice or by birth), 5% Muslim, 2% Protestant, 2% a different religion and 11% say they have no religion. But this distribution varies considerably by age: the youngest cohorts less often report a religious affiliation, and when they do, they attend religious services less regularly than their elders.

The more frequent attenders, now a small minority, remain more strongly attached to marriage and less often experience several successive unions. They also have more children: among women ever in union born in 1960, more frequent attenders have 0.6 children more than the others. Women practising a religion other than Catholicism, notably Muslim women, are not responsible for the whole of this difference, since the more frequently practising Catholics have 0.5 more children than the others.