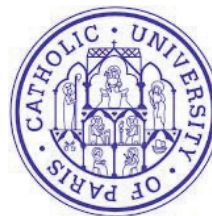




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Europe's Young Adults and Religion

Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-16)
to inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops

Stephen Bullivant

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Five key findings

1. The proportion of young adults (16-29) with no religious affiliation ('nones') is as high as 91% in the Czech Republic, 80% in Estonia, and 75% in Sweden. These compare to only 1% in Israel, 17% in Poland, and 25% in Lithuania. In the UK and France, the proportions are 70% and 64% respectively. [Fig. 1.1]
2. 70% of Czech young adults – and c. 60% of Spanish, Dutch, British, and Belgian ones – 'never' attend religious services. Meanwhile, 80% of Czech young adults – and c. 70% of Swedish, Danish, Estonian, Dutch, French and Norwegian ones – 'never' pray. [Fig. 1.5]
3. Catholics make up 82% of Polish, 71% of Lithuanian, 55% of Slovenian, and 54% of Irish 16-29 year-olds. In France, it is 23%; in the UK, 10%. [Fig. 2.1]
4. Only 2% of Catholic young adults in Belgium, 3% in Hungary and Austria, 5% in Lithuania, and 6% in Germany say they attend Mass weekly. This contrasts sharply with their peers in Poland (47%), Portugal (27%), the Czech Republic (24%), and Ireland (24%). Weekly Mass attendance is 7% among French, and 17% among British, Catholic young adults. [Figs 2.2, 3.4]
5. Only 26% of French young adults, and 21% British ones, identify as Christians. Only 7% of young adults in the UK identify as Anglicans, compared to 6% as Muslims. In France, 2% identify as Protestants, and 10% as Muslims. [Fig. 3.1]

Acknowledgements

This report is among the first fruits – with many more to come – of collaboration between St Mary's University and the Institut Catholique de Paris. I am grateful to all those at both institutions, and especially Revd Prof Philippe Bordeyne and Prof Francis Campbell, who have worked to create the context in which such enjoyable cooperative endeavours can flourish.

Special thanks are due to Prof Jacques Arènes, Prof François Moog, and Dr Maureen Glackin for their assistance, advice, encouragement, and comments on all aspects of the research.

About the author

Stephen Bullivant is Professor of Theology and the Sociology of Religion at St Mary's University, where he also directs the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society. He has held visiting positions at the Universities of Oxford, Manchester, and University College London.

As an author and editor, Prof Bullivant has published nine books in theology and social sciences. Forthcoming volumes include *Why Catholics Leave, What They Miss, and How They Might Return* (Paulist Press, 2018; co-authored with C. Knowles, H. Vaughan-Spruce, and B. Durcan), *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II* (Oxford University Press, 2019), and *The Cambridge History of Atheism* (Cambridge University Press, 2020; two volumes, co-edited with M. Ruse).

Prof Bullivant's research has received extensive media coverage, including from the BBC, Sky News, *The New York Times*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Economist*, and *Der Spiegel*. He has been interviewed on BBC Radio, LBC, Vatican Radio, and EWTN. His own writings have been published by outlets including *The Guardian*, *New Scientist*, *The Spectator*, *First Things*, *America*, and *The Catholic Herald*.

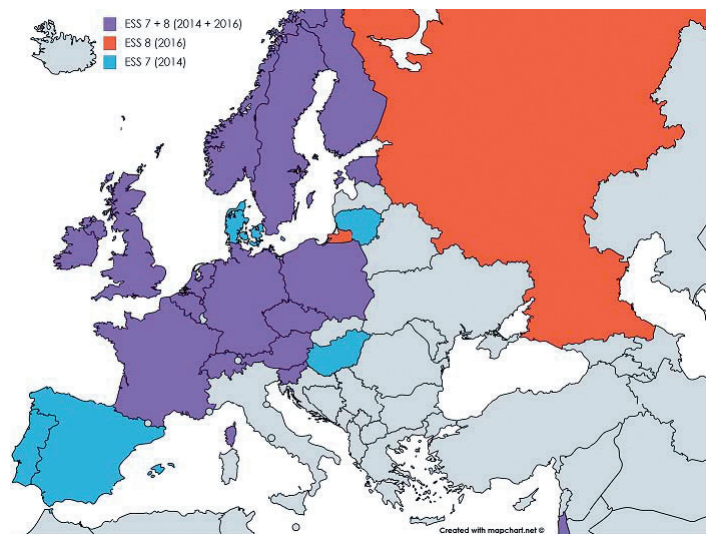
About the Centre

The **Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society** was launched at St Mary's University, Twickenham, in 2016. It was named in honour of the Pope Emeritus' role, over many years, as a leading contributor to public and academic debates concerning the relationship of religion and the social sciences. St Mary's was proud to host Pope Benedict during his 2010 Papal Visit to the United Kingdom.

The Centre is founded upon the conviction that interdisciplinary research, in which the sciences are brought into direct engagement with theology and ethics, is central to the life of a Catholic university (cf. Pope St John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 46). Accordingly, through publications, media activity, events, and attracting research students, we seek to make a major contribution to academic, ecclesial, and public debates concerning the place of religion (and non-religion) within contemporary societies.

Organisations interested in commissioning research from, or qualified individuals interested in pursuing a PhD with, the Centre should contact its administrator, Kit Penny, in the first instance: BenedictXVI.Centre@stmarys.ac.uk.

Introduction



Map showing countries covered in the report

This report explores religious affiliation and practice among young adults, aged 16-29, in contemporary Europe. Chapter one presents data on key indicators of religiosity for twenty-two European countries. Chapter two provides more specific data on specifically Catholic affiliation and practice across Europe. Finally, chapter three explores the religiosity of young adults in France and the UK in more detail.

This research, and the wider programme of studies, publications and events of which it is part, is the fruit of collaboration between two of Europe's Catholic universities: St Mary's University, Twickenham in London, and the Institut Catholique de Paris. Its primary intention is to help inform the work of the 2018 Synod of Bishops, due to be held in Rome in October 2018. The theme for the Synod is 'Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment'. As the French theologian, and later cardinal, Yves Congar, once said: 'The Church learns from contact with facts... Truth remains unaltered, but it is grasped in a new and undoubtedly more adequate way when men and the world are known as they are.'¹ We therefore hope that the statistical 'facts' presented here will prove useful both to the Synod's deliberations, and to the wider thinking and action of the Church as a whole.

Secondarily, we hope that the data presented here, and the light they shed on the religiosity of Europe's rising generations, will be of much wider interest to the media and general public, as well as to other researchers, and religious and secular groups, across the continent and far beyond. Please note that the graphs and charts in the following pages are offered with only a minimal amount of commentary. Our intention here is simply to present the relevant statistics in as clear and interesting way as possible, without venturing to hypothesize as to why they are as they are.

Note on data

All data used in this report are taken from the European Social Survey (www.europeansocialsurvey.org). Every two years, beginning in 2002, the ESS administers a detailed set of demographic and attitudinal questions to randomly selected, nationally representative population samples in a significant number of European countries. (For full methodological details of the ESS, please see the link in this footnote.²)

The analyses presented here all use data taken from the two most recent waves: 7 (2014) and 8 (2016). For 16 out of our 22 countries, including France and the UK, we have used combined data from both 2014 and 2016, in order to boost the overall sample size. For five of our countries – Denmark, Hungary, Spain, Portugal and Lithuania – only data from 2014 have been made available. For a sixth – Russia – there are only 2016 data. The accompanying map shows which countries are included, with different colours used to show which ESS waves we have used for each one. In addition, in the graphs which follow, those countries with data from only 2014 or 2016 are identified with a “*” or “^” respectively.

The ESS itself surveys a cross-section of those aged 15 and over in each country. However, all analyses in this report focus only on those respondents who were aged between 16 and 29 years of age, inclusive, at the time of their completing the survey. This is based upon the definition used in the Synod's Preparatory Document: i.e., 'the word "youth" refers to persons who are roughly 16 to 29 years old'.³ It is worth noting that, accordingly, all references in this report to 'young adults' or 'Europe's youth' are to those within this age bracket.

Across all of our twenty-two countries, the mean *N*-value of our 16-29 subsample is 629, and ranges between 1307 (Israel) and 198 (Hungary). All data have been weighted, using the provided 'dweight'.

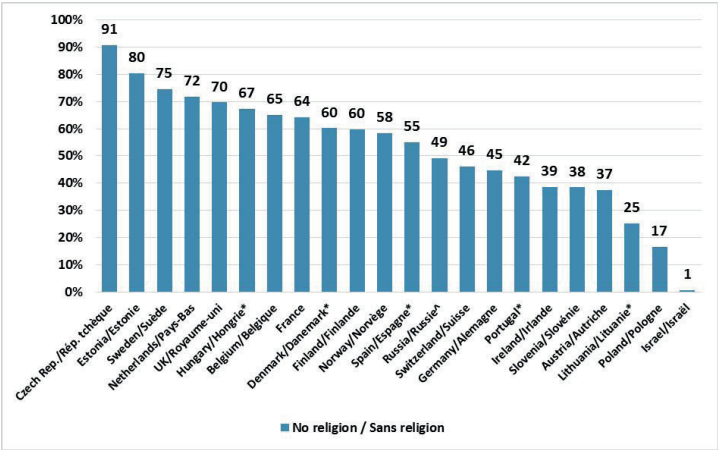
Needless to say, we are immensely grateful to all those involved in planning, funding, executing, and making available the European Social Survey.

Footnotes

- ¹ Yves Congar, *The Wide World My Parish*, trans. Donald Attwater (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), 98.
- ² See www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology (last accessed on 23rd February 2018).
- ³ See www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20170113_documento-preparatorio-xv_en.html (last accessed on 23rd February 2018).

1. Young adults' religiosity across Europe

1.1 Proportion of 16-29 year-olds identifying with no religion in 22 European countries (ESS 2014-16)

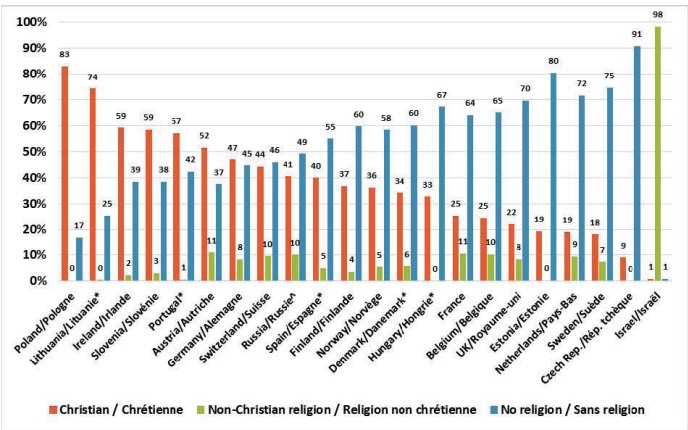


The ESS probes religious affiliation with a two-stage question. It asks respondents, first of all: ‘Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?’. For those who answer ‘yes’, there then follows a list of various options.

The above graph, however, shows the proportion of young adults in each country who answered ‘no’ to that question (i.e., ‘nones’). Admittedly, it may seem odd to begin a study on European youths’ religiosity on this note. On the contrary, the high percentage of young adults affirming no religion in many countries, as may readily be seen above, is arguably the most significant fact here of all. The data are arranged by highest to lowest. Excluding Israel (very much an outlier at the extreme low end of the scale), it is interesting to note that both the two highest (Czech Republic and Estonia) and two lowest (Lithuania and Poland) are post-communist countries.

Overall, in twelve out of our twenty-two countries, over half of young adults claim not to identify with any particular religion or denomination. In nineteen of them, over a third do.

1.2 Proportions of 16-29 year-olds identifying with Christianity, a non-Christian religion, or no religion in 22 European countries (ESS 2014-16)

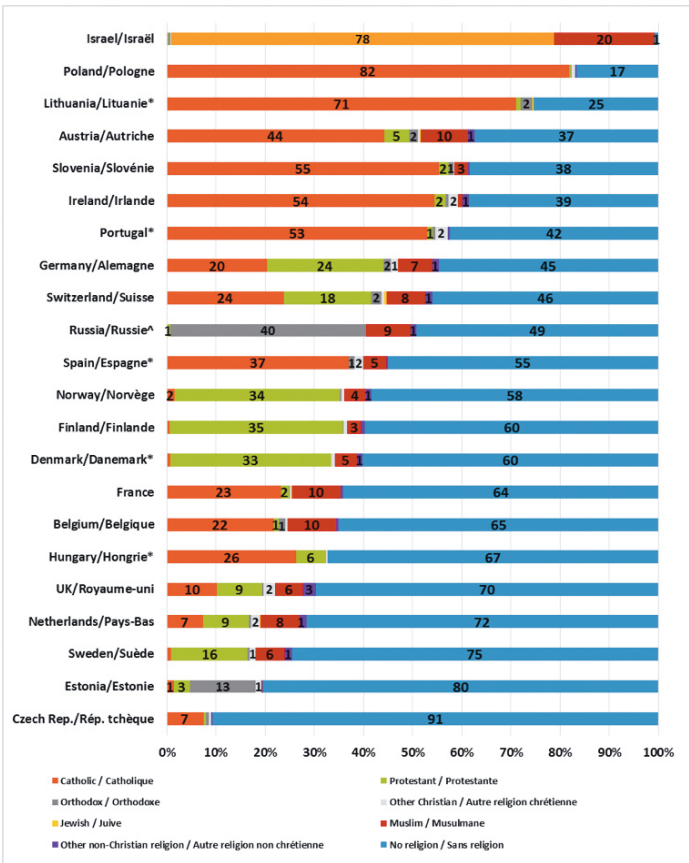


The above chart shows the relative proportions of Christians (all denominations), non-Christian religious, and the nonreligious in each of our twenty-two countries. The data are arranged by the proportion of Christians, highest to lowest.

It is notable, especially given the overarching purpose of this report, that the six ‘most Christian’ nations are all historically Catholic-majority countries, and include representatives from both western (Ireland, Portugal, and Austria) and central Europe (Poland, Lithuania, and Slovenia).

The similarities between France and the UK are, in light of chapter three, worth remarking upon. Both countries’ young adults comprise roughly comparable proportions of Christians (25% and 22% respectively), affiliates of non-Christian religions (11% and 8%), and the nonreligious (64%, 70%).

1.3 Detailed breakdown of 16-29 year-olds’ religious affiliation in 22 European countries (ESS 2014-16)



We see here a much more detailed breakdown of young adults’ religious affiliation than that given in fig. 1.2. (Of course, some of our categories – especially ‘Other non-Christian religion’ – conceal an even richer religious landscape, though even the combined numbers of these are small.) Please note that, as on several other graphs in this report, individual categories representing fewer than 1.0% in a given country do not receive a data label.

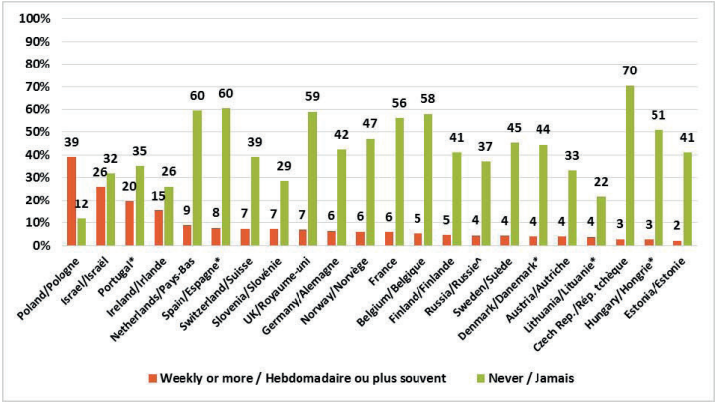
Far more so than did fig. 1.2, this graph illustrates the diversity of European countries’ religious make-up. Israel is, once again, the most obvious outlier here. While Jewish young adults do not account for even 1% in any of our other twenty-one countries, in Israel they account for 78%. Israel has, moreover, by far the highest percentage of Muslim youths in our sample at 20%.

This is precisely double the proportions present in Austria, France, or Belgium, which rank joint-second for proportion of Muslims.

Even among the relative proportions of different Christians, however, there is a high-degree of variation. All but 1% of Poland's 83% of Christians are Catholic, for example. Yet elsewhere, Catholics make up 2% or less in seven of our twenty-two nations. Equally, Orthodox Christians account for no more than 2% of young adults in the great majority of our countries. In Russia and Estonia, however, the figures are 40% and 13% respectively.

For reasons of simplicity, this graph includes members of Protestant denominations under a single category. In the case of the UK, a slightly more nuanced breakdown (i.e., with 'Anglican' as a separate category) will be offered in chapter three. Here though, let us simply note that the countries with the highest proportions of (combined) 16-29 year-old Protestants are Finland, Norway, Denmark, and – somewhat further behind – Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden.

1.4 Frequency of attendance at religious services, outside of special occasions, of all 16-29 year-olds in 22 European countries (ESS 2014-16)

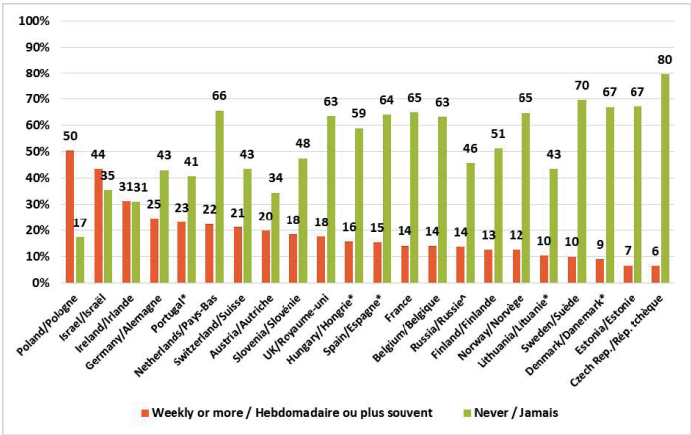


Religious identity is one thing; it actually having some (social-scientifically) measurable effect on a person's life is, needless to say, very often quite another. Fortunately, the ESS asks all respondents, regardless of their expressed religious identity: 'Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?' For ease of meaningful comparison, the above graph combines those giving the three 'most-frequent' options (i.e., 'every day', 'more than once a week', 'once a week' into a single 'weekly or more' category. This is given alongside the proportion who say that they 'never' attend such services.

In only four countries do more than one-in-ten 16-29 year-olds claim to attend religious services on at least a weekly basis: Poland, Israel, Portugal, and Ireland. Our other eighteen countries are distinctive, despite significant variability in their numbers of religious affiliates, by their relative uniformity of (non) practice. All rank in the single digits, within a narrow range between 2 and 9%. This is most striking with regard to Lithuania, Austria, and Slovenia, all three of which rank in our sample's Top Five in terms of religious affiliates (see fig. 2.2).

There is a much greater degree of variation in the proportions of those 'never' attending services (outside of weddings, funerals, etc.). In the Czech Republic, for example, this applies to 80% of young adults. Although, given its very high levels of nonreligiosity (see fig. 1.1) in terms of affiliation, this is not in itself surprising. Also relatively unsurprising are the low levels of 'never attenders' in Poland, Ireland, Slovenia, and Lithuania – all countries with high levels of religious affiliations, and accordingly few 'nones'. More noteworthy, perhaps, are the uniformly high levels of 'nevers', around three out of every ten, in a cluster of northwestern European countries – France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the UK – plus Spain. Meanwhile in Estonia, despite its very low levels of religious affiliation, only four-in-ten young adults say that they never attend religious services.

1.5 Frequency of prayer, outside of religious services, of all 16-29 year-olds in 22 European countries (ESS 2014-16)



Alongside frequency of attendance at religious services, the ESS also asks all respondents: 'Apart from when you are at religious services, how often, if at all, do you pray?' As in fig. 1.4, the above graph combines the answers to 'every day', 'more than once a week', and 'once a week' into a single 'weekly or more' category. For comparison, the percentage of young adults who say they 'never' pray is also given for each country.

Poland, Israel, and Ireland are, once again, among the more prayerful nations. Half of Polish 16-29 year-olds say they pray at least once a week, and only 17% that they never do. At the graph's other extreme, Estonia, the Czech Republic, and the four Scandinavian countries also feature once more.

Lithuania's very low levels of both religious attendance (fig. 1.4) and prayer – only 10% on a weekly-or-more basis, though some 57% pray at least some of the time (i.e., not never) – deserve comment. As seen earlier, the country has the third lowest proportion of nonreligiously identifying young adults out of our twenty-two countries, behind Israel and Poland, at just 25%. It also has the second highest proportion of Christians, after Poland, at 74% (with 71% Catholics). By the measure of identity and affiliation, that is to say, Lithuanian young adults are among Europe's very most religious. By the measures of church attendance and prayer frequency, however, they rank among the least religious. More will be said about this in chapter two.

2. Young Catholic adults in Europe

2.1 Proportion of 16-29 year-olds identifying as Catholic in 22 European countries (ESS 2014-16)

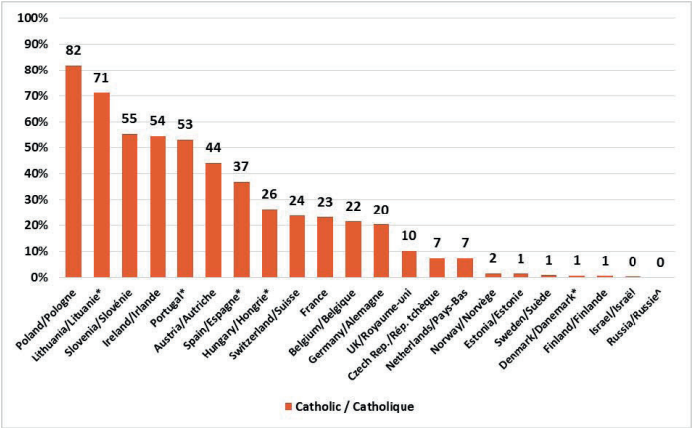
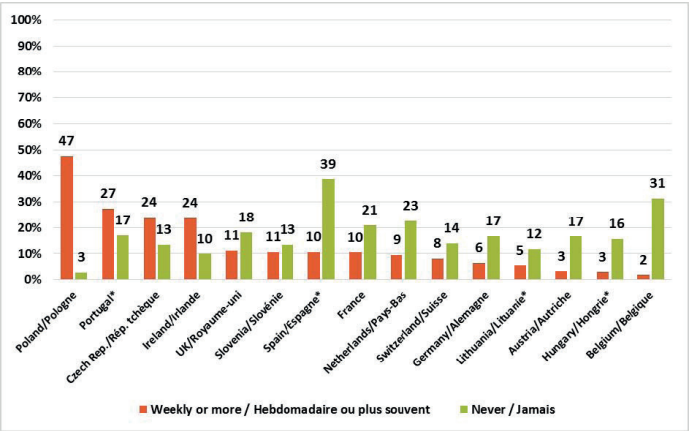


Fig. 2.1 arranges our countries by the proportion of young adults identifying as Catholic in each, from highest to lowest. Poland is, by a significant margin, the leader here, with eight in every ten 16-29 year-olds claiming to be Catholic. Lithuania is a moderately close second, with seven in ten, followed by three other countries – Slovenia, Ireland, and Portugal – with slightly over half.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Israel and Russia have no or (in the latter case) almost no Catholics in the sample (which is not, of course, to say that there are no such young adults in these countries; simply that, as a proportion of the whole, their numbers are very slight.) These are closely followed by Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Estonia, with either 1 or 2%. Given the historical importance of Catholicism in the Netherlands, it is striking that only 7% of young adults there consider themselves to be Catholics. This is the same proportion as in the Czech Republic – by some margin, the most nonreligious country in our sample (see fig. 1.1) – where, however, Catholics form the majority of all (albeit out of relatively few) religious affiliates.

2.2 Frequency of church attendance, outside of special occasions, of Catholic 16-29 year-olds in 15 European countries (ESS 2014-16)

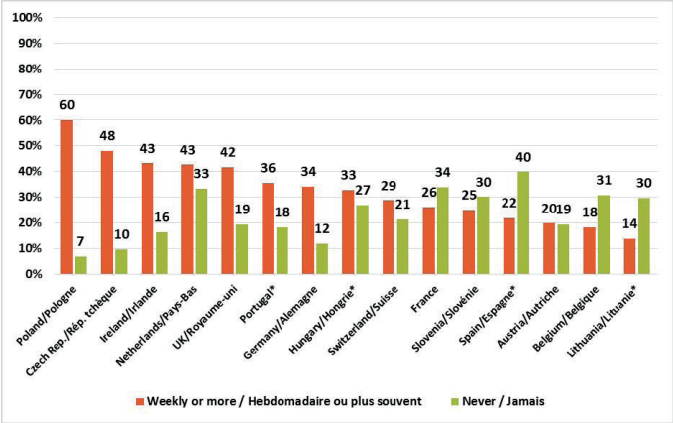


Similarly to the earlier fig. 1.4, the above graph compares the proportions of Catholic young adults who say they attend religious services either weekly-or-more, or never, in fifteen European countries (outside of special occasions, such as weddings, funerals, etc.). Please note that seven out of our original twenty-two countries – the four Scandinavian ones, plus Estonia, Russia and Israel – are excluded here due to the unusably small numbers in their Catholic subsamples.

Poland is, once again, the exceptional case here. Not only does the country have a very high proportion of Catholic affiliates (fig. 2.1), but they exhibit remarkably high levels of actual practice: almost half attend Mass at least weekly, and only 3% never attend. This correlation between levels of high affiliation in a country, and high practice among those who affiliate, cannot however be taken for granted. While 71% of Lithuanian young adults identify as Catholics, for instance, only 5% of these are weekly-or-more Massgoers. (Austria and, to a lesser extent, Slovenia are also striking in this regard.) This works both ways. Whereas only a small proportion of Czech young adults identify as Catholics, those who do exhibit similar levels of practice as those in Portugal and Ireland (both countries with high proportions of young Catholics, and – comparatively speaking – notably high levels of practice among them).

With only three exceptions, ‘never attenders’ account for between a tenth and a quarter of all Catholic young adults across our sample of countries. (NB: The data do not, of course, include Catholic disaffiliates: i.e., those who were previously Catholic, but who now no longer identify as Catholics. See fig. 3.3 for French and British data on this phenomenon, however.) The anomalies here are, at the extreme low end, Poland (mentioned above) and, at the high end, Spain and Belgium. Fully two-fifths of Spanish Catholic youth never attend church, a far higher proportion than in countries with similar proportions of weekly attenders. In Belgium, the proportion of never-attenders is 31%. Remarkably, this is fifteen times the number of weekly-or-more Massgoers (2%).

2.3 Frequency of prayer, outside of religious services, of Catholic 16-29 year-olds in 15 European countries (ESS 2014-16)



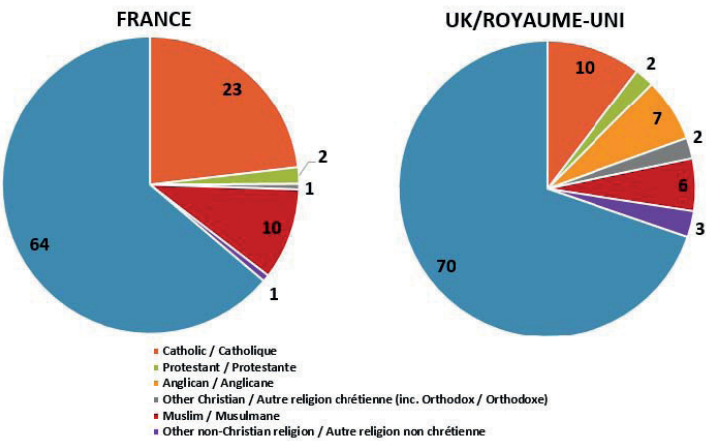
As in fig. 1.5, the final graph of this chapter concerns frequency of prayer (other than at religious services) among Catholic young adults in the same 15 countries included in fig. 2.2.

Poland’s position as the highest in the ‘weekly or more’ category (60%), and the lowest in the ‘never’ category (7%), should, by now, come as no shock. The relatively high levels of young Catholic prayerfulness in the Czech Republic, Ireland, and Portugal are also in line with expectations based on the rates of church attendance (fig. 2.2).

More noteworthy, however, are the comparatively high percentages of regular pray-ers among young Catholics in the Netherlands and the UK (for a fuller breakdown of Catholic prayerfulness in the latter, see fig. 3.6). In light of the previous discussion of religious practice in countries with high levels of Catholic affiliation, the presence of Lithuania, Austria, Spain, and Slovenia – alongside, once again, Belgium – among the least prayerful countries is also worth noting.

3. Young adults and religion in France and the UK

3.1 Religious affiliation of French and British 16-29 year-olds (ESS 2014-16)



These two pie charts offer a somewhat more user-friendly breakdown of the religious identities of contemporary French and British young adults than that given in fig. 1.3. They also, in the British case, allow one to distinguish adherents of Anglicanism (including the Church of England, Church in Wales, Church of Ireland, and the Scottish Episcopal Church) from members of other Protestant denominations.

Evidently, there are both similarities and differences in the religious profile of these neighbouring countries’ youths. 23% of French young adults identify as Catholic, compared to only 10% in the UK. Notably, however, in both France and the UK Catholicism is the dominant Christian identity. Both countries have a significant minority – around one in every ten 16-29 year-olds – of members of non-Christian religions, with Islam being the largest contributor. Yet overall, ‘no religion’ is the default identity of French and British young adults alike, accounting for around two-thirds of each.

3.2 Religious affiliation of French and British 16-29 year-olds, by sex (ESS 2014-16)

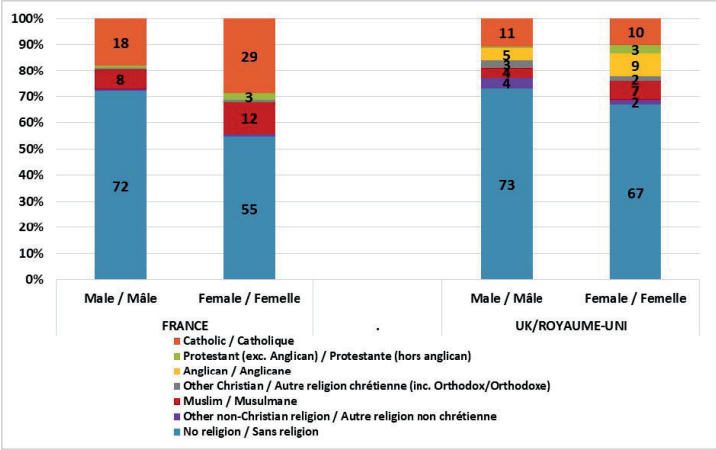
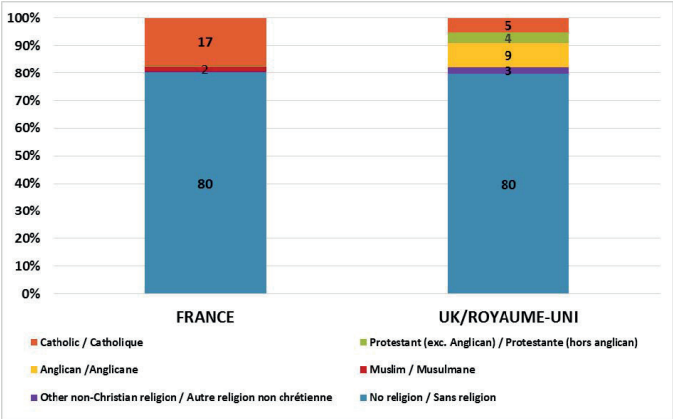


Fig. 3.2 separates the sexes in each country, and presents a breakdown of religious affiliation for each. There are clear differences between men and women, especially in France. Thus three-in-ten French 16-29 year-old women identify as Catholic, compared to just two-in-ten men. In fact, the former are significantly more likely than the latter to identify with any religion: the popularity of ‘no religion’ is higher among male French youths by a clear 17 percentage points (72% to 55%).

A gender divide also appears in our UK data, albeit far less sharply. There is, for example, no real difference in the proportion of self-identifying Catholics between men and women. And overall, while the data suggest that men are slightly more likely than are women to say they have no religion, the difference is a relatively slight one.

3.3 Religious upbringing of French and British 16-29 year-olds who now have no religious affiliation (ESS 2014-16)



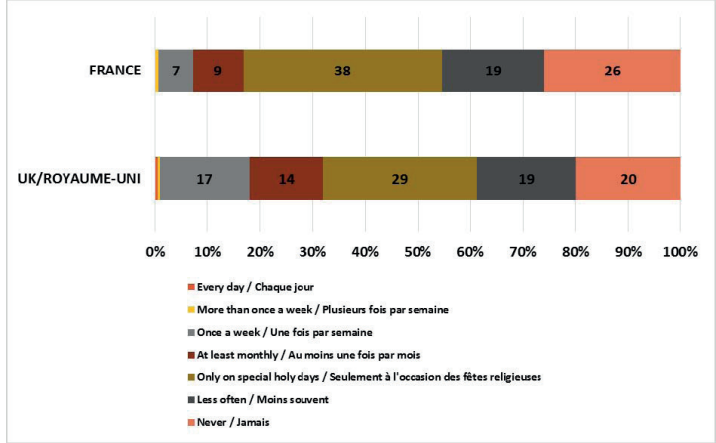
As seen in previous charts (e.g., fig. 3.1), 64% of French young adults, and 70% of British ones, say that they currently have no religion. The ESS also asks respondents ‘Have you ever considered yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?’

Those who answer ‘yes’ are then asked to choose one from the same list of religions/denominations as given for current affiliation. This question serves, therefore, as a useful proxy for probing the religious upbringing of young adults (on the reasonable assumption that this previous religious affiliation will, at least in most cases, be the one in which the respondent was raised).

As can be seen above, four out of every five young adult ‘nones’ in both countries deny having had any previous religious affiliation. That is, they were brought up with no religion, and have retained it into adulthood. That means, therefore, that one in five is a nonvert – this is a relatively recent term to describe, as per *The Oxford Dictionary of Atheism*, ‘a person who was brought up with a religious affiliation, but who now identifies as having no religion (i.e. none).’

Young French nonverts are primarily comprised of former Catholics, plus a much smaller proportion of ex-Muslims. In the UK, however, young adult nonverts come from a wider range of religious background, although – as in France – around seven-eighths are former Christians of one denomination or another. The rest in our sample were all raised in non-Christian religions (though not, unlike in France, including Islam).

3.4 Frequency of church attendance among 16-29 year-old Catholics in France and the UK (ESS 2014-16)

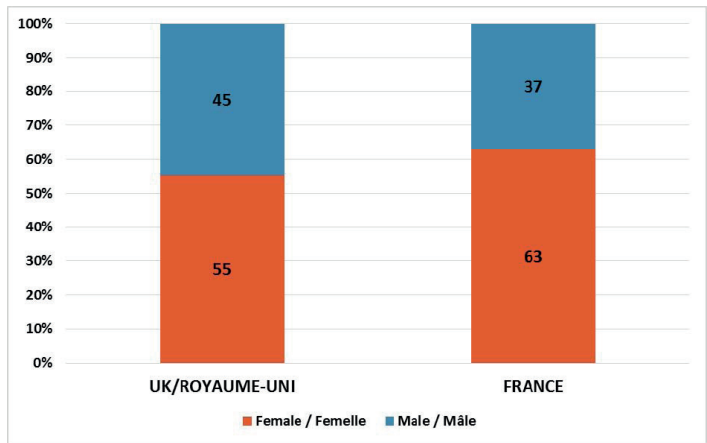


The above graph includes only those respondents who reported their current religious affiliation as Catholic. It gives a full breakdown of the possible responses to the ESS’ question on frequency of religious practice, outside of special occasions like weddings and funerals.

Both countries have very small numbers of daily or more-than-weekly Massgoers: as elsewhere in this report, categories with percentages smaller than 1.0% are not given a numerical label. The proportion of weekly attenders, meanwhile, is 17% in the UK, and 7% in France: a significant difference. In fact, all of France’s ‘at least monthly’ attenders (i.e., the four ‘most-frequent’ categories combined) only add up to the proportion of ‘weekly or more’ attenders in the UK: i.e., c. 18%. France does, however, have a larger percentage of ‘special holy days’ – a generic ESS term, which in this Catholic context is perhaps most naturally interpreted as ‘Christmas and/or Easter’ – Massgoers.

In France, a quarter of young adult Catholics say that they ‘never’ attend religious services. In Britain, it is one in five.

3.5 Gender breakdown of ‘monthly or more’ church attending Catholics, aged 16-29, in France and the UK (ESS 2014-16)



The above graph includes all those in fig. 3.4 who reported attending religious services at least once a month: i.e. roughly 18% of all French young adult Catholics, and 32% of their British counterparts. It then divides them according to sex.

As expected from other studies, women make up a larger proportion of regular churchgoers than do men, although this effect is slightly more marked in France than in the UK. In the former, around three-fifths of monthly-or-more Massgoers are women. In the latter, it is slightly over half.

3.6 Frequency of prayer among 16-29 year-old Catholics in France and the UK (ESS 2014-16)

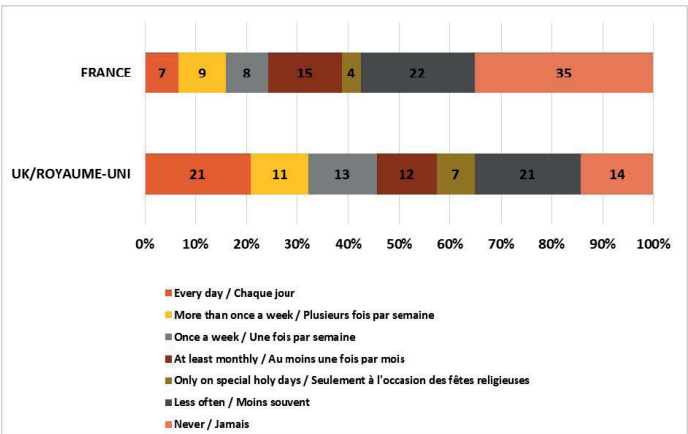
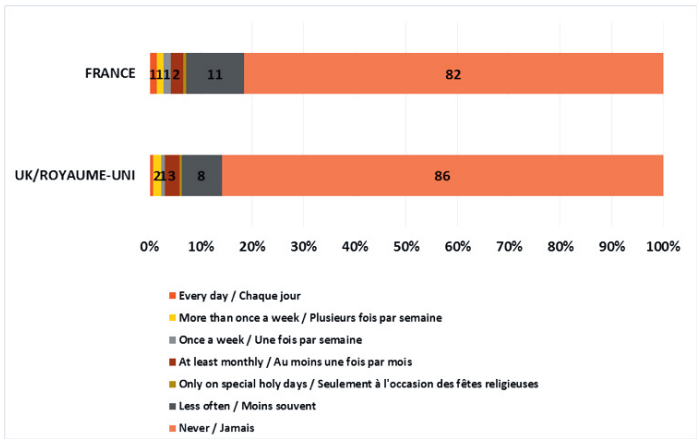


Fig. 3.6 offers the same breakdown for frequency of prayer (outside of religious services) as fig. 3.4 did for religious attendance, again focusing on Catholics specifically.

As there, we see notable differences between Catholic young adults in France and the UK. In France, fully a third say that they never pray, and fewer than two in five claim to pray on at least a monthly basis. In the UK, only 14% never pray, and approaching three-fifths claim to do so on at least a monthly basis. The proportion of daily pray-ers in the UK is, moreover, three times what it is in France.

3.7 Frequency of prayer among 16-29 year-olds with no religion in France and the UK (ESS 2014-16)



Finally, having looked at the prayerfulness of young adult Catholics in France and the UK, we turn now briefly to consider the prayerfulness of those who say they have no religious affiliation.

Not surprisingly, overall levels of prayer frequency in this group are very low. In both countries, over four-fifths of nones say that they never pray. Nevertheless, each country does possess a small proportion of nonreligious regular pray-ers – around 3% of whom claim to do so on at least a weekly basis, rising to around 5% with the inclusion of all those who do so at least monthly.



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