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BRIEF REPORT



# Religiosity in the major religious cultures of the world

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## ABSTRACT

Compared to other cross-national surveys, the religion-modules of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) include a larger number of indicators on individual religiosity and thus allow for more differentiated analyses of cross-national differences. In this paper, we use these findings to point out in which ways the forms and development of religiosity differ between the major religious cultures of the world. In order to have a sufficient number of cases for all geographical macro-regions, three data sources were used: ISSP 2018 data from 37 countries, the 2018 Templeton survey that fielded ISSP 2018 survey questions in another 10 non-European countries, and data from the ISSP 2008 religion module for 10 countries that did not participate in ISSP 2018. The comparison covers three dimensions: religious affiliation and non-affiliation, private and public forms of religious practice, and different types of religious beliefs. In the final section, we discuss what conclusions can be drawn from the results with regard to the secularization thesis, i.e., the assumption that socioeconomic modernization leads to a decline in individual religiosity.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Cross-national comparative survey research is based on the universalistic assumption that certain social phenomena exist in a similar way in all societies in the world, and that it is therefore possible to investigate the significance of these phenomena by considering their frequency and importance in different societies (e.g., Hofstede 2001; Schwartz 1992). When it comes to the investigation of religion, the focus on quantification is reinforced by a tendency among survey researchers to view individual religiosity in quantitative terms: respondents are asked how frequently they pray and attend religious service, how strongly they believe in God, how important religion is for them. By aggregating the individual results, societies are assessed as “more or less religious.” Lower and higher levels of religiosity on the macro-level of societies, in turn, are often explained through different variants of modernization theories, e.g., the assumption that an increase in material wellbeing leads to a decline in religiosity (Norris and Inglehart 2011), or other nomothetic approaches, such as the market theory of religion which

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assumes that higher levels of competition among the providers of religious goods will lead to higher religious demand, and thus to an increase in individual religiosity (Finke and Stark 2003).

We recognize the merits of nomothetic approaches in cross-national comparative survey research on religion. A considerable part of the variation of the level of religiosity in different countries can in fact be explained by socio-economic indicators such as HDI (e.g., Höllinger and Muckenhuber 2019). However, this kind of approach has substantial limitations and faces challenges. One problem is the question of functional equivalence of concepts and indicators (Bachleitner et al. 2013; Höllinger and Eder 2016). Survey researchers try to tackle this problem through the improvement of translation techniques (Harkness 2008) and sophisticated statistical methods of testing measurement equivalence across different societies (Davidov et al. 2018). However, when it comes to investigating religion, most survey researchers pay little attention to experts from the fields of religious science, anthropology, history of religion, and postcolonial studies who have pointed out that comparative research is strongly biased toward the Western, Christian concept of religion and question whether this concept allows for an adequate understanding of religious phenomena in other cultures (Masuzawa 2005; Bhambra 2007). As a matter of fact, the religiousness indicators used in cross-national surveys focus on the official forms of religiosity in Christian churches. Frequently only a small number of items, such as prayer, attendance of religious service and belief in God, are used for such comparisons. Rituals and beliefs that are characteristic of popular religion, such as religious offerings and vows, divination, spiritual healing and trance techniques, are given little attention. Thus, survey research often provides a limited and distorted picture of the presence of religion in different societies.

Comparative religious studies and previous survey research have shown that the ways in which religion is practiced, and the relevance of certain rituals and beliefs differ greatly between macro-regions of the world (Juergensmeyer 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2011). In this paper, we will use the ISSP findings to point out in which ways the forms and the development of religiosity differ between the major religious cultures of the world. In order to have a sufficient number of cases for all geographical macro-regions, data from three datasets were included in the analysis: (1) ISSP 2018 data from 37 countries, (2) the 2018 Templeton survey that fielded the ISSP-2018 survey questions in another 10 non-European countries and (3) data from the ISSP 2008 religion module for 10 countries that did not participate in ISSP 2018. Drawing on previous research and considering the empirical results that are presented in the following sections, we decided to assign the 57 countries to five geographical macro-regions which are characterized by specific forms of religious culture: (a) Western nations, i.e., European countries and countries whose populations are primarily descended from European migrants; (b) Latin America; (c) Sub-Saharan Africa; (d) North-Africa and Middle East and (e) East and South Asia.

Compared to other cross-national surveys such as the World Value Survey, the European Value Study and the European Social Survey, the religion modules of the ISSP include a somewhat larger number of indicators on individual religiosity and thus allow for more differentiated analyses of cross-national differences. As in most surveys on religion, the ISSP measurement of religiosity focuses on the dimensions of belief and

practice.<sup>2</sup> Religious practice, in turn, is divided into the two subdimensions of private and public, i.e., rituals that are performed individually or in the privacy of the family household vs. community rituals that take place regularly or on certain solemn occasions in the public space. The belief dimension covers belief in God, heaven, hell, religious miracles and belief in the spiritual power of ancestors. In some of the countries, questions about belief in popular religious phenomena (such as faith healing and astrology) were also asked. In the following empirical part, we will compare the patterns of religious affiliation and non-affiliation, religious practice and religious beliefs in the five macro-regions and in subgroups of countries within these regions. In the final section, we will discuss what conclusions can be drawn from the results presented with regard to the secularization thesis, i.e., the assumption that socioeconomic modernization leads to a decline in individual religiosity.

## 2. Religious affiliation and non-affiliation in the five macro-regions

Table 1 gives an overview of the patterns of religious affiliation and non-affiliation in the five macro-regions. In two of the five regions, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Muslim countries of North Africa and the Middle East, all countries belonging to these regions are characterized by similar patterns of religious affiliation/non-affiliation and also similar patterns of religious practice and beliefs, as we will see in the subsequent tables. Therefore, only the average values for all countries are given for these regions. The other three macro-regions are more diverse both in terms of religious affiliation and patterns of religious belief and practice. Thus, these regions are divided into subgroups of countries that are characterized by similar patterns of religiosity. A central factor for this subdivision is the predominance of a specific religion or combination of religions. The term “predominant religion” refers both to numerical size and to the historical shaping of the population by a particular religion (in some countries this religion no longer represents the majority of the population as a result of the strong increase in the number of non-affiliates).

In the majority of European countries, religious life was and continues to be strongly shaped by one Christian denomination—Catholicism, Lutheranism or Orthodoxy—that has had the position of a state church during the last few centuries. Countries with a (former) Protestant state church, in which a significant part of the population is Catholic, are designated as “Semi-Protestant.” The United States of America is a special case among the Western societies because here religious life was not dominated by a single church, instead a large number of Christian denominations coexisted since the beginnings of the state’s formation. Thus, the religious culture of the USA is referred to as “religious denominationalism.” In most European and non-European Western societies, a substantial part of the population has distanced themselves from organized religion today. In many countries this proportion is around 20 to 30%, in some countries such as France, the Czech Republic and Great Britain, the share of nonaffiliated is over 50%. In a few Catholic countries, such as Ireland, Italy, Poland and Portugal, and in the Orthodox countries, the nonaffiliated proportion of the population continues to be relatively small.

**Table 1.** Religious affiliation by macro-regions and religious culture (in percent).

Table 10. Religious affiliation by major regions and religious culture (in percent)							
Predominant religion(s)	Countries	Religious affiliation					
		Catholic	Protestant	Orthodox	Muslim	Other	None
<b>Europe and Western</b>							
Protestant	DK, FI, IS, NO, SE	1.6	68.9	.8	.9	1.3	26.5
Semi-Protestant	AU, CH, DE, GB, NZ	19.4	31.3	1.0	2.4	3.5	42.4
Catholic	FR, CZ	36.5	3.0	.4	1.5	.7	57.9
	AT, HU, LT, SI, SK, ES	63.3	6.9	1.4	1.5	.3	26.7
	IE, IT, PL, PT	85.9	2.1	.6	.5	.8	10.3
Orthodox	BG, RU	.3	2.3	74.8	8.7	.4	13.7
	CY, GE, UA	4.2	2.0	88.5	4.6	.4	3.3
Christian	US	23.0	49.0	.3	.8	4.5	22.4
Jewish	IL	.8	.2	.4	11.2	84.1	3.3
<b>Subsahara Africa</b>							
	GH, KE, MW, NG, ZA, TZ	20.2	56.1	.6	18.6	3.9	5.2
<b>Latin America</b>							
Catholic	CL, UY	56.2	18.9	.1	0	2.0	23.0
	DO, MX, SR, VE	64.7	19.8	.9	2.9	4.1	7.5
	Countries	Christian	Buddhist	Hindu	Muslim	Other	None
<b>East and South Asia</b>							
Buddhist + Confucian	JP, VN, TW	6.0	22.7	.0	.0	24.3	46.9
	MN, TH, KH	1.8	86.1	.0	2.3	1.5	8.2
	KR, SG, LK	19.7	38.6	6.7	8.2	4.5	22.3
Hinduist	NP	2.7	6.6	81.9	7.4	1.4	0
Muslim	ID, MY	1.3	7.8	4.1	74.6	2.2	1.1
Christian	PH	93.8	.1	0	5.4	.3	.5
<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>							
Muslim	DZ, TR, JO	1.3	0	0	97.9	.3	.8

DN = Denmark; FI = Finland; IS = Iceland; NO = Norway; SE = Sweden; AU\* = Australia; CH = Switzerland; DE = Germany; GB = United Kingdom; NZ = New Zealand; FR = France; CZ = Czechia; AT = Austria; HU = Hungary; LT = Lithuania; SK = Slovakia; SI = Slovenia; ES = Spain; IR\* = Ireland; IT = Italy; PL\* = Poland; PT\* = Portugal; BG = Bulgaria; RU = Russian Federation; CY\* = Cyprus; GE = Georgia; UK\* = Ukraine; US = United States of America; IL = Israel; GH = Ghana; KE = Kenya; MW = Malawi; NG = Nigeria; ZA = South Africa; TZ\* = Tanzania; CHL = Chile; UY\* = Uruguay; DO\* = Dominican Republic; MX\* = Mexico; SR = Suriname; VE\* = Venezuela; JP = Japan; VN = Viet Nam; TW = Taiwan; MN = Mongolia; TH = Thailand; KH = Cambodia; KR = South Korea; SG = Singapore; NP = Nepal; LK = Sri Lanka; PH = Philippines; ID = Indonesia; MY = Malaysia; DZ = Algeria; TR = Turkey; JO = Jordan.

Data source: ISSP-2018 (37 countries) + Templeton ISSP-2018-survey (10 countries) + ISSP-2008 (10 countries, marked with an asterisk). Unweighted data.

Latin America was dominated by the Catholic Church since the times of Spanish and Portuguese colonization. However, the religious culture of Latin American countries differs substantially from the European Catholic countries insofar as the spirit of indigenous religion has strongly survived in Latin America. This seems to be a major reason why substantial parts of the population in Latin American countries have converted to spiritualist Pentecostal Churches during recent decades (Martin 2002; Chesnut 2003). Similar developments can be observed in Sub-Saharan Africa. Here, a considerable share of the population was attached to African indigenous beliefs until well into the first half of the 20th century. In the course of the 20th century, one can observe a spectacular growth of Christian churches and Islam. A large part of African Protestants are members of Pentecostal churches (van Binsbergen 2004). In most Latin American countries, in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa, the share of religiously unaffiliated is much smaller than in Western societies.

The religious culture of East Asia was shaped by the coexistence of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Many people do not identify with one specific religion, but combine elements of Taoist, Buddhist and traditional popular religious beliefs and

**Table 2.** Private religiosity by religious macro-regions (in percent).

Table 2. Private religiosity by religious macro-regions (in percent)						
Predominant religion(s)	Countries	Frequency of prayer			Read scriptures <sup>b</sup>	Shrine/relig. object at home <sup>c</sup>
		Almost daily	Sometimes <sup>a</sup>	Never		
<b>Western</b>						
Protestant	DK, FI, IS, NO, SE	16	32	52	25	17
Semi-Prot.	AU, CH, DE, GB, NZ	23	32	45	31	20
Catholic	FR, CZ	16	25	59	30	29
	AT, HU, LT, SI, SK, ES	21	38	40	22	42
	IE, IT, PL, PT	45	41	15	33	72
Orthodox	BG, RU	20	42	38	21	61
	CY, GE, UA	46	37	17	43	81
Christian	US	64	21	15	59	40
Jewish	IL	39	23	38	55	87
<b>East and South Asia</b>						
Buddhist+Confucian	JP, VN, TW	20	62	18	23	47
	MN, TH, KH	15	68	17	63	72
	KR, SG, LK	35	30	35	38	40
Hinduist	NP	56	42	2	71	89
Muslim	ID, MY	78	19	3	85	77
Christian	PH	82	18	1	71	69
<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>						
Muslim	DZ, TR, JO	65	23	12	84	70
<b>Subsahara Africa</b>						
	GH, KE, MW, NG, ZA, TZ	54	42	3	81	42
<b>Latin America</b>						
Catholic	CL, UY	43	30	27	52	52
	DO, MX, SR, VE	59	35	7	66	50

Notes. Country abbreviations: see Table 1. Unweighted data.

<sup>a</sup>Frequency of prayer: Sometimes = once a week to once a year.

<sup>b</sup>Did you read holy scriptures (e.g., Bible, Quran, Torah, Sutras) during the last two months? percent “yes.”

<sup>c</sup>Do you have at home a shrine, altar or religious objects (country specific examples, e.g., crucifix, icon, menorah)? percent “yes.”

rituals (Chau 2019). Thus, the fact that around 60% of the respondents in Japan and Vietnam, and almost 40% of South Koreans indicate “no religious affiliation” does not imply that they are non-religious; it may only mean that they do not identify with a specific religion.<sup>3</sup> In the two South Asian countries, Indonesia and Malaysia, Islam has gradually expanded and mixed with Hinduism, Buddhism and indigenous religious traditions over the past millennium. Today these two countries are predominantly Muslim. Due to Spanish colonization, the Philippines became predominantly Catholic. Similar to Sub-Saharan Africa, a considerable growth of Pentecostalism and Catholicism can be observed in the Southeast Asian countries. In South Korea, the proportion of Christians today is clearly higher than the proportion of those who are attached to traditional East Asian religions (Martin 2002).

### 3. Religious practice and beliefs

#### 3.1. Private religiosity

Table 2 impressively illustrates the divergent significance in the exercise of private religiosity between the five macro-regions and the subgroups of countries contained therein. In the five Muslim countries and in almost all other countries of the Global South, i.e., in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and South Asia, a clear majority (55–80%) of the respondents say that they pray daily or several times per week. At the opposite pole are

the Protestant and semi-Protestant countries of North and North-West Europe, the more secularized Catholic countries of Europe such as France and the Czech Republic, and the two Orthodox states of Russia and Bulgaria. In these countries only 15–20% of respondents pray regularly, whereas 40–60% say that they never pray. In some European Catholic and Orthodox countries (Ireland, Italy, Poland and Portugal; Cyprus, Georgia and Ukraine), as well as in the USA and Israel, the level of private religiosity lies between the poles of the highly secularized European countries and the highly religious Global South.

Similar to the highly secularized European countries, in several East and South Asian countries relatively few people pray daily or frequently. This pattern must be interpreted against the background of East Asian religious cultures, however. The concept of prayer as a “dialogue with God” is characteristic of the monotheist world religions and was introduced into East Asian cultures and languages only in the course of the last century. For East Asians the typical way of interacting with the divine is to perform rituals such as burning incense or symbolically offering food to the ancestors. Many East Asians do not think of these rituals when asked how often they pray. This is also reflected in the finding that the proportion of respondents in East and Southeast Asia who pray regularly is much higher among Christians and Muslims than among Buddhists, Taoists and persons practicing traditional popular religions. The importance of private religiosity in East Asia becomes apparent in a further ISSP question: The share of respondents who have a shrine, altar or religious objects in their home is clearly higher in East and Southeast Asia than in the highly secularized Western countries.

Also, in the Orthodox Christian and Muslim countries, in Israel and in the less secularized Catholic countries (such as Ireland and Poland) large parts of the population have religious objects in their home. In the ISSP 2018 survey, respondents were also asked whether they have read or listened to the reading of their respective religion’s holy scriptures (e.g., the Bible, Quran, Sutras) during the last two months, not counting readings that occur during a worship service. The ranking of approval to this question is similar to the ranking for frequency of prayer: As many as 70–80% of the respondents in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and in the Muslim countries indicate that they read such religious texts. In most Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox countries of Europe and also in some East Asian countries the corresponding share is only between 20–30%.

### **3.2. Public religiosity**

In social surveys, the central indicator for measuring public religiosity is participation in religious rituals in churches, mosques or temples. [Table 3](#) shows that the differences between religious cultures and groups of countries in regard to this form of public religiosity are even larger than for private religiosity. Among the countries in comparison, public religiosity seems to be most fervent in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the three monotheistic countries in East Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines). Here, between two thirds and three quarters of the respondents attend service or participate in Mosque prayers weekly or almost every week. In the three Muslim countries of North Africa and the Middle East (Algeria, Jordan and Turkey), the rate of regular



**Table 3.** Public religiosity by religious macro-regions (in percent).

		Attend religious service / visit mosque or temple			Participate in religious community <sup>b</sup>	Visit holy place <sup>c</sup>
Predominant religion(s)	Countries	Almost weekly <sup>a</sup>	Sometimes	Never		
<b>Western</b>						
Protestant	DK, FI, IS, NO, SE	6	29	65	30	25
Semi-Prot.	AU, CH, DE, GB, NZ	15	23	63	34	25
Catholic	FR, CZ	9	22	69	25	27
	AT, HU, LT, SI, SK, ES	16	35	48	31	25
	IE, IT, PL, PT	42	36	22	34	36
Orthodox	BG, RU	7	39	53	19	21
	CY, GE, UA	21	57	22	26	41
Christian	US	35	29	36	49	30
Jewish	IL	24	23	53	39	43
<b>East and South Asia</b>						
Buddhist + Confucian	JP, VN, TW	9	37	54	36	36
	MN, TH, KH	22	65	13	65	58
	KR, SG, LK	25	32	43	40	44
Hinduist	NP	34	59	6	80	73
Christian	PH	65	22	13	52	60
Muslim	ID, MY	66	25	8	77	57
<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>						
Muslim	DZ, TR, JO	38	26	35	30	26
<b>Subsahara Africa</b>						
	GH, KE, MW, NG, ZA, TZ	74	18	10	75	51
<b>Latin America</b>						
Catholic	CL, UY	19	25	56	33	29
	DO, MX, SR, VE	45	38	17	57	53

Notes. Country abbreviations: see Table 1. Unweighted data.

<sup>a</sup>How often do you attend religious service/visit a temple? Almost weekly = "2 or 3 times a month" or more frequently.

<sup>b</sup>How often do you take part in the activities of a church or place of worship other than attending services? Percent: "once a year or more often."

<sup>c</sup>How often do you visit holy place for religious reasons. Please do not count attending regular religious services at your usual place of worship? Percent "once a year or more often."

participation in mosque prayers is clearly lower. This is primarily due to the fact that women are not allowed to participate in the Friday mosque prayer in these countries. In Judaism, men participate more frequently in temple rituals than women, too. In all other types of religious culture women are more active both in the private and in the public religious domain (see Table 4).

Comparing the findings in Tables 2 and 3 one observes that in Sub-Saharan Africa public religiosity is more widespread than private religiosity. In Latin America the opposite is the case. This difference can be explained by the historical process of religious institutionalization in the two regions. In Sub-Saharan countries the religious field is highly fragmented. In the course of the 20th century, a large number of independent Christian churches were founded. Many of these churches are small congregations, characterized by a strong commitment of the members. Islam is not a homogeneous unit either. Many believers belong to Sufi brotherhoods that perform important social functions and contribute greatly to the vitality of Islam (van Bruinessen 2009). In contrast, religious life in Latin America has been dominated by the Catholic Church since the time of colonization. Like in many European countries, the religious monopoly and the bureaucratic organization of the church has had a negative effect on the

**Table 4.** Religious practice by macro-regions, gender and age-cohorts (in percent).

Predominant religion(s)	Gender				Age			
	Pray <sup>a</sup>		Attend service <sup>b</sup>		Pray <sup>a</sup>		Attend service <sup>b</sup>	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	18–34 y.	55 y +	18–34 y.	55 y +
<b>Western</b>								
Protestant	19	28	11	13	16	30	10	15
Catholic	20	35	19	27	15	40	14	33
Orthodox	24	44	11	19	27	44	12	21
Jewish	40	38	30	18	36	40	25	27
<b>East + South East Asian</b>								
Buddhist + Confucian	19	25	16	19	14	27	12	23
Hinduist	46	65	33	36	52	62	32	36
Christian	79	84	58	71	73	88	61	65
<b>Muslim</b>	68	73	58	41	64	80	46	55
<b>Subsahara Africa</b>	53	55	70	77	57	59	72	73
<b>Latin America</b>	44	60	29	42	44	64	31	42

Notes. In this table, some of the subgroups presented in Tables 1 to 3 have been merged. The category “Protestant” includes Protestant and Semi-Protestant countries and the USA; “Catholic” includes all predominantly Catholic countries in Europe. “Muslim” includes all five predominantly Muslim countries.

<sup>a</sup>% who pray several times a week or more frequently.

<sup>b</sup>% who attend religious service or visit temples 2–3 times per month or more frequently.

participation of the population in the religious rituals offered by the clergy. In the more recently founded Pentecostal churches, religious commitment and participation is much higher (Höllinger 2010).

In those European countries where we found the lowest rates of private religiosity, participation in public religious rituals is also rather low. In the northern European Protestant countries and in the two Orthodox countries of Russia and Bulgaria, only six to seven percent of the adult population attend service regularly (i.e., at least two to three times per month). In several Catholic and in the semi-Protestant countries of Europe this proportion is somewhat higher, but likewise 50–60% of the population have distanced themselves completely from churches. Only in a few Catholic and Orthodox countries does a clear majority of the population maintain a closer relationship with organized religion. In the Orthodox Church, regular church attendance is not a religious obligation, thus the rates of weekly attendance are lower in Orthodox countries than in Catholic countries such as Ireland or Poland.

Compared to the other macro-regions, regular participation in community rituals is also rather low in East Asia, in particular in Japan, Vietnam and Taiwan. Again, this can be explained by the specifics of religious culture in this part of the world. In the monotheistic religions, regular community rituals performed in the public space—the Christian Sunday service, the Muslim Friday prayer, the Jewish Sabbath service—are a central part of religious life. There is no equivalent to this type of regular community ritual in East Asia. As mentioned before, religious life here is centered around the family shrine in private households. Most people visit temples only on religious festivals (Chau 2019). The importance of visiting temples on special occasions can be seen in another questionnaire item. Respondents were asked how often they visit holy places for religious reasons (not counting participation in religious ceremonies that take place on a weekly or daily basis). The answer to this question may refer to a wide range of religious activities ranging from occasional private visits to a place of worship to

participation in a pilgrimage or temple festival that extends over several days. Despite the ambiguity of the answers to this question, the findings suggest that festive forms of religiosity are in fact more important in East and Southeast Asia than in Europe.

Finally, respondents were asked whether and how often they participate in social or cultural activities offered by religious communities (not counting participation in religious rituals). The answers to this question show that for considerable parts of the population, religious communities around the world are and continue to be important meeting points and places for the organization of social activities. This does not only apply to those countries where traditional forms of religion are widespread, but also to the highly secularized Western countries.

### **3.3. Religious practice by age-cohorts**

Attitudinal differences between age cohorts in cross-sectional datasets can be due to aging effects (change of attitudes in the course of life) or cohort effects (attitudinal change between the older and younger generations). Many times, it is difficult to determine which of these effects is responsible for the age group differences. In view of the fact that many longitudinal studies have found a significant decline in religious practice during the last decades in Europe and in other parts of the world (e.g., Inglehart 2021), it seems plausible to assume that age group differences are primarily due to a generational change in the importance of (traditional forms of) religion.

Against this background, we will now compare the proportion of respondents in the youngest and oldest age cohorts who pray and attend religious community rituals regularly. Due to the small proportion of elder persons in the countries of the Global South, the lower age limit for the oldest cohort was set at 55 years; the upper limit for the youngest cohort was set at 35 years. As we can see in Table 4, in the Sub-Saharan countries, the proportion of those who pray and attend religious community rituals regularly is practically the same in the oldest and in the youngest age cohort. In the other four macro-regions the frequency of prayer and participation in religious community rituals is clearly lower among the younger than among the older groups. However, there are notable variations in the size of the age-cohort differences. In the Muslim countries and the two South Asian countries of the Philippines and Nepal, age-cohort differences are rather small and both private religiosity and religious community participation also remains at a high level in the younger generation. In the Catholic and Orthodox countries of Europe, religious practice is significantly lower in the youngest than in the oldest age cohort. Following the above reasoning of age-cohort-effect interpretation, this finding suggests that religious practice and community participation are strongly declining in most Catholic and Orthodox countries in Europe. If this trend continues, these countries will approach the low level of the European Protestant countries in a few decades. A similar decline in religiosity from the oldest to the youngest age cohort can be observed in Latin America. Also, in the East Asian countries the share of respondents who pray and attend religious community rituals regularly is much lower among the younger generation than among the older generation. Even if we consider that the indicators of “prayer” and “attendance of religious service” do not capture the religious

**Table 5.** Religious beliefs by religious macro-area (in percent).

Predominant religion(s)	Countries	God <sup>a</sup>	Higher power <sup>a</sup>	Heaven <sup>b</sup>	Hell <sup>b</sup>	Miracles <sup>b</sup>	Ancestors <sup>c</sup>	Popular religious beliefs <sup>d</sup>
<b>Western</b>								
Protestant	DK, FI, IS, NO, SE	29	24	27	13	25	20	17
Semi-Prot.	AU, CH, DE, GB, NZ	38	21	41	26	41	23	29
Catholic	FR, CZ	26	21	26	20	31	25	36
	AT, HU, LT, SI, SK, ES	43	17	38	32	45	31	38
	IE, IT, PL, PT	69	9	66	52	65	30	37
Orthodox	BG, RU	45	18	33	31	35	29	47
	CY, GE, UA	80	7	65	63	74	32	35
Christian	US	73	13	79	70	74	35	–
Jewish	IL	66	8	53	52	54	43	–
<b>East and South Asia</b>								
Buddhist + Confucian	JP, VN, TW	34	12	41	41	37	51	25
	MN, TH, KH	48	8	63	63	59	66	40
	KR, SG, LK	48	14	56	54	49	33	29
Hinduist	NP	73	10	73	75	72	78	81
Christian	PH	88	4	94	80	69	48	37
Muslim	ID, MY	92	2	94	93	90	43	30
<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>								
Muslim	DZ, TR, JO	96	1	97	97	90	40	30
<b>Subsahara Africa</b>								
	GH, KE, MW, NG, ZA, TZ	91	4	92	85	74	46	49
<b>Latin America</b>								
Catholic	CL, UY	79	7	68	50	71	39	–
	DO, MX, SR, VE	88	4	82	69	78	38	38

Notes. Country abbreviations: see Table 1. Unweighted data.

<sup>a</sup>Belief in “God” and belief in a “higher power” are derived from the question: Which statement below comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?: “I know God really exists” + “while I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God” = belief in God; “I don’t believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a higher power of some kind” = belief in higher power.

<sup>b</sup>Belief in heaven, hell, miracles: % of respondents answering “yes, definitely” or “yes, probably.”

<sup>c</sup>Belief in ancestors = Do you believe in the supranatural power of deceased ancestors? % “yes, definitely” + “yes, probably.”

<sup>d</sup>Popular religious beliefs: Please indicate whether you think the following statements are true: (a) Good luck charms sometimes do bring good luck; (b) Some fortune tellers really can foresee the future; (c) Some faith healers do have God-given healing powers; (d) A person’s horoscope can affect the course of their future. These items were asked only in 37 countries. The number presented in the table is the arithmetic mean of the percentage of respondents who consider these four statements to be “definitely” or “probably true.”

phenomena in East Asia adequately, these findings suggest that community-oriented religious practice is declining.

### 3.4. Religious beliefs

The central indicator of religious belief in ISSP is belief in God. Four items are used to measure whether and how strongly respondents believe in God. For the following comparison we use a question that makes a distinction between belief in God and belief in “a higher power of some kind.” Three other ISSP items ask about belief in heaven, hell and religious miracles. Because ancestor worship is central in East Asian religions, a question about belief in the “supranatural powers of deceased ancestors” was included in the ISSP-religion modules. Popular religious beliefs—belief in the efficacy of good luck charms, faith healing, fortune telling and astrology—are considered too, however, these questions are optional and were asked in only some of the participating countries.

The ranking of the macro-regions and subgroups of countries in regard to central religious beliefs—God, heaven, hell and religious miracles—corresponds rather well to the ranking in relation to religious practice (see [Table 5](#)). In the five Muslim countries, the six Sub-Saharan countries and the Philippines, an overwhelming majority (between 85–95%) of the respondents believe in God, heaven and hell, while belief in religious miracles is almost as high. Next in the rank-order are a number of countries, where belief in God and religious miracles is also very high (from 70% to over 80%), but belief in the traditional religious concepts of heaven and hell is somewhat lower (generally between 50 and 70%, but in a few countries up to 80%). This applies to the Latin American countries, Nepal, the United States and to some Catholic and Orthodox countries in Europe.

The concept of a supreme divine being (God), as well as the concepts of heaven and hell do not exist in the classical Buddhist and Taoist scriptures. However, Buddha and the Bodhisattvas are elevated to the status of divine beings in popular Buddhism. Deities and spirits also play an important role in other popular religious traditions in East and South Asia. Therefore, it is not surprising that a considerable part (between 35 and 50%) of the population of Eastern Asian countries believe in “God” or related concepts of divine entities. As can be seen in [Table 5](#), belief in heaven and hell is also relevant in the popular religiosity of East Asia. Compared to the rest of the world, belief in God, heaven, hell and religious miracles is by far lowest in the Protestant countries of Northern Europe and in the two highly secularized Catholic countries—France and the Czech Republic. Only around 25–30% of the population in these countries believe in God, heaven and religious miracles. In the semi-Protestant European countries, in Russia and Bulgaria as well as in a number of Catholic countries, belief in these concepts is only slightly more widespread than in the aforementioned countries.

According to the Western image of the East Asian religions, one would expect that a considerable proportion of East Asians believe in the concept of a “universal life energy” or “higher spiritual power” as an alternative to the monotheistic concept of God. However, the ISSP results show that belief in a “higher spiritual power” is more widespread in the secularized European countries than in East Asia. A possible explanation for this result could be that the expression “higher spiritual power” does not adequately describe the spiritual concepts of East Asians. As one would expect, belief in the spiritual power of ancestors is more common in East Asia than in other parts of the world. Somewhat surprisingly however, in the Muslim countries, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and Israel around 40% of the population hold such beliefs.

For popular religious beliefs no clear cross-national pattern can be ascertained. Belief in the efficacy of good luck charms, the extraordinary skills of fortune-tellers and faith healers, and in the influence of astronomic constellations on people’s lives is widespread in only one country of the sample—Nepal. In most countries, where these questions were asked, between 30–50% of the respondents indicated that they believe in such phenomena. These beliefs are an important component of traditional folk magic and folk religions, especially in the less developed countries of the Global South, but also in parts of Western and Eastern Europe. In the highly developed Western countries these beliefs (and the corresponding practices) are also a component of new alternative forms of spirituality and esotericism (Heelas and Woodhead [2007](#); Knoblauch [2009](#)). For the

Northern European Protestant countries, the image of strong secularization and disenchantment that has been presented in the results so far is consistent with regard to popular religious beliefs. The share of respondents who believe in such phenomena is significantly lower here than in all other parts of the world.

#### 4. Summary

The findings presented in this report show huge differences in the patterns of religiosity between the major religious cultures and geographical macro-regions of the world. In most parts of the Global South, especially in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, but also in Latin America, traditional forms of religion are still very common. Most people pray daily, participate regularly in religious community rituals, and believe in God, heaven, hell and religious miracles. There are only two regions where traditional forms of religion are significantly less common. One of these regions is Europe, plus some non-European countries that are strongly influenced by Anglo-Saxon culture (in our country sample Australia and New Zealand). In this part of the world, religiosity is generally much lower, with considerable differences between the countries. Religiosity is particularly low in the Protestant and semi-Protestant countries of Northwestern Europe. In a few Catholic as well as in some Orthodox countries, and in the USA it continues to be clearly above the average level of Western countries. The comparison of age groups suggests that the low level of religiosity in Europe is actually due to a decline of traditional forms of religiosity over the last half century. According to the standard Western indicators of religiosity (prayer, church attendance and belief in God), a large part of the population in several East Asian countries is also not religious. However, the picture changes considerably, when additional indicators that are more appropriate for the religious cultures of East Asia are taken into account, such as having a religious shrine in one's home, visiting sacred places on specific occasions (i.e., temple festivals or pilgrimages) and ancestor worship.

The findings of cross-national comparative research on religiosity are interpreted differently in the social science community. The strong persistence of traditional forms of religiosity in large parts of the world has led many social scientists to question the validity of the secularization thesis (e.g., Berger 1999). Others direct their attention at the strong negative correlation between levels of socio-economic development and levels of religiosity, and interpret this connection as a confirmation of the secularization thesis (e.g., Pollack and Rosta 2015). With our analysis we wanted to show that the degree of religiosity depends not only on socio-economic development, but also on the ways in which individual religious behavior and beliefs are shaped by different religious cultures. From this perspective, the sharp decline in religiosity in Europe can be explained as a result of the radical religious disenchantment triggered by the Protestant Reformation and reinforced by the controlling authority of the European state church. On the other hand, the high level of religiosity in the Global South is due to fact that the effervescent, spiritualist religious traditions of the indigenous populations are still very much alive in this part of the world and are maintained even when people convert to Christianity or Islam (Höllinger 2010).

Finally, we would like to emphasize that traditional forms of religion such as prayer and participation in religious community rituals are not only declining in Europe, but also in other parts of the world. This decline, however, does not necessarily imply a

decline in religiosity; it only indicates a decrease in the importance of traditional organized forms of religion that goes hand in hand with a rise of noninstitutionalized forms of religion (Tyrell 1996; Houtman and Aupers 2007). Unfortunately, these new forms of religiosity and spirituality have so far been inadequately investigated in cross-national comparative surveys.

## Notes

1. This article is part of the special issue on the ISSP religion survey. Previous special issues covered the ISSP surveys “citizenship” (Scholz et al. 2017; Eder 2017), “work orientations” (Jutz et al. 2018; Volk and Hadler 2018) “role of government” (Edlund and Lindh 2019; Hadler et al. 2019) and “social networks” (Sapin et al. 2020; Hadler et al. 2020).
2. The comparison of respondent’s religious affiliation and the affiliation of their parents in the ISSP-dataset shows this development very clearly: Almost 60% of respondents in South-Africa indicated to be members of Protestant churches. Asked about the religion of their parents when they (i.e. the respondents) were children, only 20% indicated that their parents were protestants. Similar trends can be seen in other Sub-Sahara African, in Latin American and also in some South East Asian countries.
3. With the exception of Taiwan, very few respondents in the East Asian countries indicate Confucianism or Taoism as their religion. This is due to the fact that the Western concept of “religion” was adopted by the East Asians only in the course of the last century East Asian culture and languages in the course of the last century. Before that, the concept of “religion” did not exist in East Asia, and until today most people there do not consider Confucianism and Taoism as “religions” (see Masuzawa 2005).

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