

National Context, Parental Socialization and the Varying Relationship Between Religious Belief and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Parents are crucial agents of religious socialization, but the broader social environment is also influential. A key question is whether parents are more or less influential when their religious beliefs and practices are not shared by people around them. Current thinking on the issue has largely been shaped by Kelley and De Graaf (1997), who argued that parental religious socialization matters most in secular countries. We maintain that that conclusion is mistaken: levels of parental and national religiosity are both important, but their effects are largely independent of each other. Kelley and De Graaf's findings rely on the assumption that religious belief and practice are different expressions of the same underlying phenomenon (religiosity) and vary in the same way across time and space. These measures are not equivalent, however. In relatively religious societies, belief in God is widespread even among those who do not attend services, whereas in societies where religious involvement is low, non-churchgoers tend to be non-believers.

INTRODUCTION

Families are important in transmitting religious identity, belief and practice to children, but young people are also influenced by peers, education and popular culture. A key question is how much parents and the social context each matter, and how they are related to each other, in religious socialization.

The pioneering work on this topic was by Kelley and De Graaf (1997), who examined the relative effects of parents and the national context on religious beliefs in 15 historically Christian Western countries. They found that the national level of religiosity¹ affects the relative influence of parents. Their claim is that “in relatively secular nations, family religiosity strongly shapes children’s religious beliefs, while the influence of national religious context is small; in relatively religious nations family religiosity, although important, has less effect on children’s beliefs than does national context” (Kelley and De Graaf 1997:655).

This article in *American Sociological Review* has been highly influential. It has been cited hundreds of times, with the highest number of citations coming in 2018 (according to Google Scholar), followed by nearly as many in 2019. It has been particularly influential on studies of religion and morality, as well as immigrant religiosity and integration. It connects to a related avenue of research initiated by Rodney Stark (1996) on the effect of religious context (or “moral communities,” in Durkheim’s terminology) on individual behavior. Subsequent research considered the way that “religion is thought to directly affect the behavior of the group’s members as well as to indirectly moderate how individuals’ religious traits shape their personal behavior” (Regnerus 2003:524). In communities where the majority of people are religious, some individual attitudes and actions may in part represent cultural conformity, as a number of later studies also imply (see for example Scheepers, Te Grotenhuis and Van der Silk 2002, Bohman and Hjerm 2014). In their study of “Cross-national moral beliefs: the influence of national religious context,” Roger Finke and Amy Adamczyk note that “research is sparse” on the influence of national as opposed to local context, citing Kelley and De Graaf (1997) as a rare exception (Finke and Adamczyk 2008:620).

Kelley and De Graaf argue that religious parents try harder to instill religious commitment if they live in secular societies. The alternative hypothesis also seems plausible, however: parents

might feel encouraged to transmit their faith when it is socially recognized as having high value, with less inclination to undertake religious socialization in more secular contexts. Or perhaps there is no interaction: the religiosity of a person's family and the wider society are both important in religious socialization, but their effects may be independent of each other.

We show that Kelley and De Graaf's conclusions are mistaken. Their result arises from using different measures of religiosity for parents and children. Scholars investigating the relative influence of family and the cultural environment on religious socialization need to be aware that the evidence does not support their hypothesis.

DATA

We follow Kelley and De Graaf in using the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) module on religion.² The survey includes questions on religious identity, belief and practice, and also on the religious affiliation and service attendance of the respondent's father and mother. The dataset from 2008 includes nearly 60,000 respondents from more than 40 countries.

Respondents were asked "How often do you attend religious services?" and also "When you were a child, how often did your mother/father attend religious services", with values ranging from "Never or practically never" to "Several times a week"³. The average attendance of both parents is used for most of the analyses⁴.

Belief in God is the main measure used by Kelley and De Graaf (1997) in their analysis.⁵ The question was "Please indicate which statement below comes closest to expressing what you believe about God", with answer categories ranging from "I don't believe in God" to "I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it."⁶

THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN PRACTICE AND BELIEF

Ideally we would measure religiosity using both belief and practice, but respondents cannot be expected to know their parents' internal states of mind. Attendance at services is therefore the best available measure of the parents' religious commitment when the respondent was a child. Using ISSP 1991 data, Kelley and De Graaf showed that parental attendance frequency is more closely associated with their children's subsequent religious beliefs in secular than in religious societies.

We can replicate this finding using the more recent ISSP dataset from 2008.⁷ Figure 1 shows respondent's belief on the vertical axis by mean parental attendance on the horizontal axis. Countries have been divided into quartiles by the average attendance of survey respondents.⁸ The size of the circles corresponds to the number of people in each category: it is easily seen, for example, that weekly attendance is the modal frequency for parents in the most religious countries, while never attending is the modal category in secular countries.

< Figure 1 >

As one would expect, the average levels of belief in God are highest in the most religious societies and lowest in the most secular. How much higher or lower, however, depends on the level of parental churchgoing. For respondents whose parents never attended, the cross-national differences are substantial. For respondents whose parents were very frequent churchgoers, the belief gaps are relatively modest. The question is whether this association between respondent belief and the interaction of parental attendance and religious environment is causal, as argued by Kelley and De Graaf (1997) and later repeated by Kelley (2015).

In measuring religiosity, Kelley and De Graaf use parental attendance but respondents' belief in God. Hence their conclusions rest on the assumption that attendance and belief are different expressions of the same underlying phenomenon (religiosity) and vary in the same way

across religious and secular nations. That assumption is incorrect, however. In societies where religious involvement is low overall, people who never attend church often do not believe in God either, whereas in relatively religious societies, religious belief is widespread even among those who do not attend services.⁹

The distribution of religious practice in secular countries is very skewed: most people never or rarely attend. By contrast there is a much more uniform spread across degrees of belief and unbelief. In religious countries, the situation is reversed: practice is relatively variable but the large majority of people are believers.

Figure 1 shows that parental attendance and national levels of religiosity appear to interact in producing the religious beliefs of survey respondents. As a straightforward demonstration that the causal interpretation of this finding is unjustified, Figure 2 shows essentially the same picture when parental attendance is replaced by the individual's own attendance. In other words, what varies cross-nationally is not the degree of parental influence but the relationship between religious belief and practice. In religious societies, even non-attenders tend to believe; in secular societies, non-attenders are often non-believers.

< Figure 2 >

In short, the findings illustrated in Figure 1 provide no support for the theory that religious and secular parents respond differently in different religious environments. The bivariate distribution of attendance and belief changes with secularization.¹⁰ The fact that the religious beliefs of survey respondents seem to vary with parental attendance and national religiosity in combination is simply the result of differences in how religious belief and practice are linked in different societies.

THE TRANSMISSION OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Overview

Kelley and De Graaf asserted that churchgoing parents have more influence in secular than in religious societies. As we have seen, their findings on the religious beliefs of survey respondents do not provide good evidence of a causal effect. Perhaps, however, the influence is apparent if we look at attendance at services to compare like with like.

Figure 3 shows the average relationship between the current attendance of respondents and the attendance of their parents during their childhood. The magnitude of parental influence is shown by the slope of the trendlines. What stands out immediately is that the lines are remarkably parallel: the gradients are the same whatever the national level of religiosity.¹¹ For any given level of parental practice, people in more secular countries are less likely to attend than people in more religious countries, but the size of the gap does not vary with parental attendance. Although both national and parental levels of attendance are influential, there is no sign of interaction between the two in predicting the attendance of survey respondents. This result is consistent with previous findings on the transmission of religious service attendance and self-reported religiosity (Storm and Voas 2012).

< Figure 3 >

Statistical analysis

To test more formally whether parental influence varies with national religiosity, we ran a variety of statistical tests, including multilevel regression models. We controlled for gender, age, education, household size and area (urban or rural¹²).

In the first test, we ran an OLS regression for each of 41 territories¹³ covered by the 2008 ISSP, with frequency of attendance as the dependent variable and the frequency of parents' attendance when the respondent was a child as the key explanatory variable. The coefficients for

parental attendance (representing the family effects) in each country are uncorrelated with the national attendance means. If parents matter most for religious socialization in relatively secular countries, we would expect this correlation to be significant and negative. (The table is available on request.)

An alternative to this two-stage process is to run a single multilevel (or hierarchical) model. The hierarchical structure reflects the nesting of individual respondents within countries and allows us to see whether the *relationship* between attendance of parents and children varies between countries depending on the national *level* of attendance.

Respondent attendance is the outcome variable. The independent variables of interest are *parental attendance* and *national mean parental attendance*. The first of these is the average attendance of the respondent's mother and father.¹⁴ The second is the mean attendance of parents in the country, which is a measure of the contextual influence of the national culture. We use the mean of parental attendance rather than respondent attendance to avoid having an independent variable derived from the outcome variable, but also because we are principally concerned with the religious environment of upbringing. In our final model we include an *interaction between parental and national mean parental attendance*, to see whether being in a more religious context increases or decreases the effect of parental attendance on respondent attendance.

The hierarchical models include 46,762 individuals nested in 40 countries¹⁵. The results are shown in Table 1. The random intercept models (Models 0 and 1) account for national differences in the *level* of religious attendance when measuring the relationship between parents' and respondents' attendance. Model 0, the null model, shows that the country level accounts for 22 percent ($2.004/(7.134+2.004)$) of the total variance. Model 1 includes all the control variables, parental attendance and mean parental attendance, both of which have large effects.

Models 2 and 3 include a random slope for parental attendance to test whether the relationship between parental and respondent attendance varies across countries. The coefficient is significant, so this association does vary. The covariance estimate is not significant, however, meaning that there is no particular pattern to this variation. In other words, the relationship between parental and respondent attendance is not consistently weaker (or stronger) in more religious countries.

Model 3 includes an interaction between parental and national mean parental attendance as a further test of the effect of context on parental influence (Goldstein 2011:35). The coefficient is positive, though small, suggesting that the effect of parental attendance on respondent attendance is slightly higher in more religious contexts.

< Table 1 >

To summarize, there does not appear to be any substantial interaction between family influence and national context. Both are important in the socialization of children, but they are largely independent of each other. To the extent that there is any national influence on religious transmission from parents to children, a more religious environment slightly increases rather than decreases the effect of parental religiosity.

DISCUSSION

We can reject Kelley and De Graaf's hypothesis that religious parents have more influence where the social environment is relatively secular. On balance, parents appear to have much the same influence on average across different societies. To the extent that national and parental effects are not completely independent, it seems that religious parents transmit their faith more effectively in religious than in secular environments. The mechanisms at work are likely to include the mutual reinforcement of parents, peers and public institutions; individual perception

of the social value of religious commitment, including the benefits of conformity; the tendency for media and popular discourse to endorse some identities, practices and worldviews and to stigmatize others; and so on. Individuals assimilate social norms, which they reinforce in turn through their actions.

Another important conclusion is that religious attendance and belief are not interchangeable as measures of religiosity in cross-national comparisons (with implications for recent studies such as Müller et al. 2014 and Kelley 2015). The relationship between the two varies with the religious context. In the most religious countries, knowing how often someone goes to church tells us relatively little about their beliefs. By contrast, only the most committed frequently attend in secular societies. In consequence, the extent to which attendance is a good indicator of belief varies cross-nationally and over time.

Notes

¹ They placed the 15 countries – Hungary, Slovenia, Poland, East Germany, West Germany, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the United States – into five categories based on “an unweighted average of parental church attendance in the nation as a whole and religious belief in the nation as a whole” (Kelley and De Graaf 1997: 647), though average church attendance by survey respondents would support the same classification.

² The dataset can be obtained from the GESIS data archive for the social sciences.

³ The original variable had 9 categories from 1) Never to 9) Several times a week. The scale has been slightly stretched at both ends by giving ‘Never’ the value 0 and ‘Several times a week’ the value 10. There are two reasons for this adjustment. First, the ordinal values do not form an ideal scale. Because most of the middle categories are fairly close together there are good theoretical reasons for acknowledging a more substantial difference between denying *any* religious attendance and going rarely. It is also worth differentiating between attending several times a week, which in most countries is a sign of very high commitment, and more conventional weekly attendance. Secondly, re-numbering the categories as described causes the relationships to be almost perfectly linear rather than slightly curvilinear, making the graphs easier to read.

⁴ We average mother’s and father’s church attendance to follow Kelley and De Graaf, who wrote that “Averaging them gives a reliable measure ...; separating them would unnecessarily complicate the analysis and would be difficult because of their high correlation” (Kelley and De Graaf 1997:644-5). Respondents whose parents were not present in childhood are treated as missing in the analysis.

⁵ Kelley and De Graaf (1997:643) use a combined measure of four highly correlated variables all concerning belief in God, and one of these is the same as the question we use here.

⁶ The original variable had 6 categories: 1) I don't believe in God; 2) I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out; 3) I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind; 4) I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others; 5) While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God; 6) I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it. Categories 3 and 4 were combined as it is not evident that one or the other is more strongly theistic.

⁷ A very similar graph can be produced using the 1991 ISSP data. Kelley and De Graaf used diagonal reference models, a method developed for the study of social mobility, where the reference categories are social origins and destinations. We have doubts about whether the strong assumptions embedded in the model are appropriate when applied to parental influence and national context. In any event, it is evident that their findings arise because they used different measures of religiosity for parents and respondents, not because of their choice of method.

⁸ Religious: Dominican Republic, Ireland, Mexico, Northern Ireland, Philippines, Poland, South Africa, Turkey, Venezuela; Less religious: Chile, Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, United States; Less secular: Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany (West), Israel, Japan, Latvia, Netherlands, New Zealand, South Korea, Ukraine; Secular: Australia, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany (East), Great Britain, Hungary, Norway, Russia, Sweden, Uruguay.

⁹ Kelley and De Graaf acknowledge, "Regular church attenders have much the same religious beliefs in all the nations for which we have data" and "the largest variation occurs among those

who never attend church” (1997: 645-6). Having found no change in the results after excluding the extreme cases (East Germany, Northern Ireland and the United States), they did not pursue this observation.

¹⁰ The shifting relationship between belief and attendance can also be observed between birth cohorts in a single country. Data from the U.S. General Social Survey (GSS) on the average level of belief in God by frequency of attendance at services shows that young non-churchgoers are much less likely to believe than older non-attenders.

¹¹ Replicating this graph using the ISSP 1991 shows the same pattern of parallel lines.

¹² The variable “Area (Rural)” is the respondent’s self-assessment of the area they live in. It has five categories: 1) Urban, a big city, 2) Suburb, outskirts of a big city, 3) Town or small city, 4) Country village, 5) Farm or home in the country.

¹³ The dataset covers 40 countries; the full list can be found at <https://www.gesis.org/issp/modules/issp-modules-by-topic/religion/2008/>. There were separate surveys in Great Britain and Northern Ireland and separate datasets produced for West and East Germany. In Israel, data for Jews and Arabs are also available separately, but the Arab sample (N=147) is too small to be considered on its own.

¹⁴ It is centered on the national mean to avoid estimation problems (Rasbash et al. 2012:116).

¹⁵ Portugal, Taiwan and Venezuela were not included in these models as they did not have values on all the variables.

References

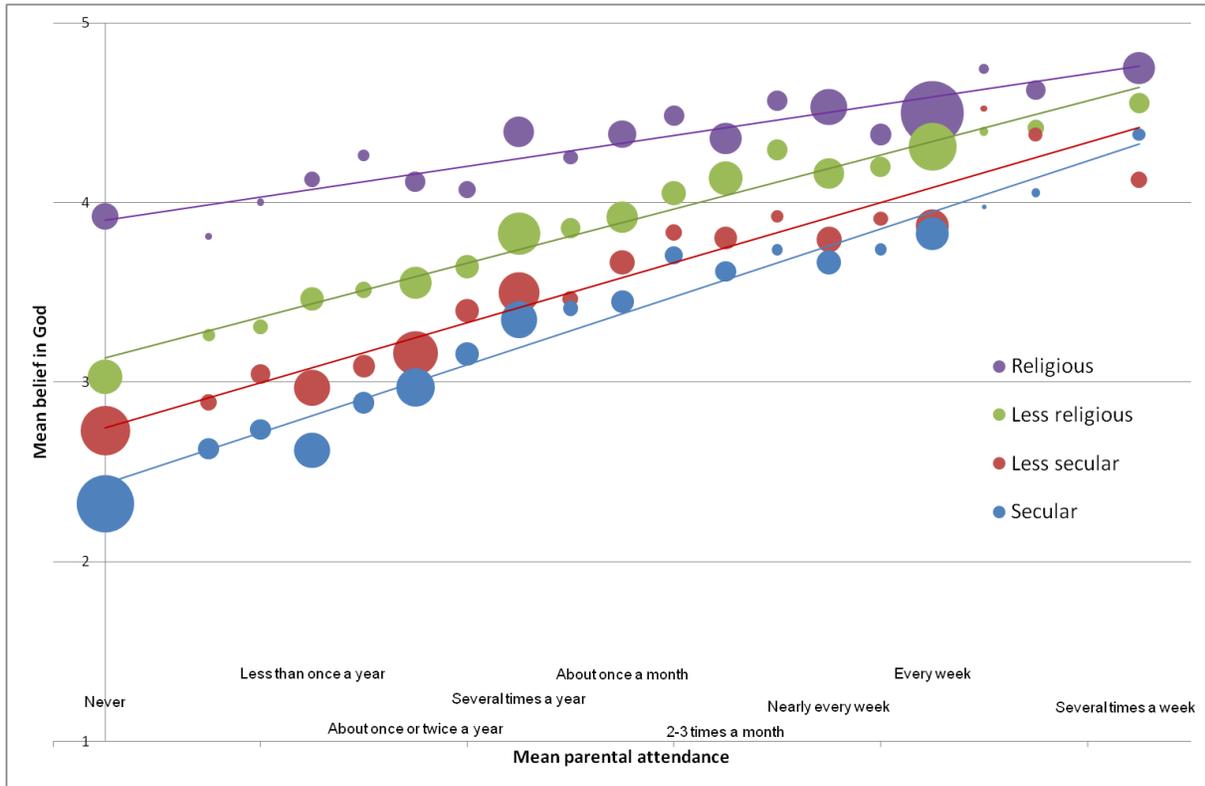
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Table 1: Multilevel random coefficient model: Respondent's religious service attendance

	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Fixed Parameters								
Constant	3.680*	0.225	-0.252	0.259	-0.374	0.266	-0.450	0.268
Gender (Female)			0.596*	0.022	0.592*	0.022	0.593*	0.022
Age			0.020*	0.001	0.019*	0.001	0.019*	0.001
Education			-0.009	0.008	-0.005	0.008	-0.005	0.008
Household size			0.091*	0.007	0.089*	0.007	0.089*	0.007
Area (Rural)			0.079*	0.009	0.069*	0.009	0.069*	0.009
Parental attendance (centered)			0.408*	0.004	0.422*	0.017	0.318*	0.049
National mean parental attendance			0.361*	0.048	0.399*	0.050	0.414*	0.050
Parental attendance*National mean PA							0.023*	0.010
Random Parameters								
<u>Level 1 Individual</u>								
Intercept	7.205*	0.044	5.850*	0.038	5.785*	0.037	5.784*	0.037
<u>Level 2 Country</u>								
Intercept	2.026*	0.455	0.541*	0.124	0.536*	0.122	0.532*	0.121
Covariance					-0.009	0.012	-0.011	0.012
Parental attendance					0.010*	0.002	0.010*	0.002
-2*log likelihood:	256460.9		220166.3		219730.1		219725.1	
Diff -2ll			36294.7		436.12		5.08	
Units Level 1	53,241		47,777		47,777		47,777	
Units Level 2	40		40		40		40	

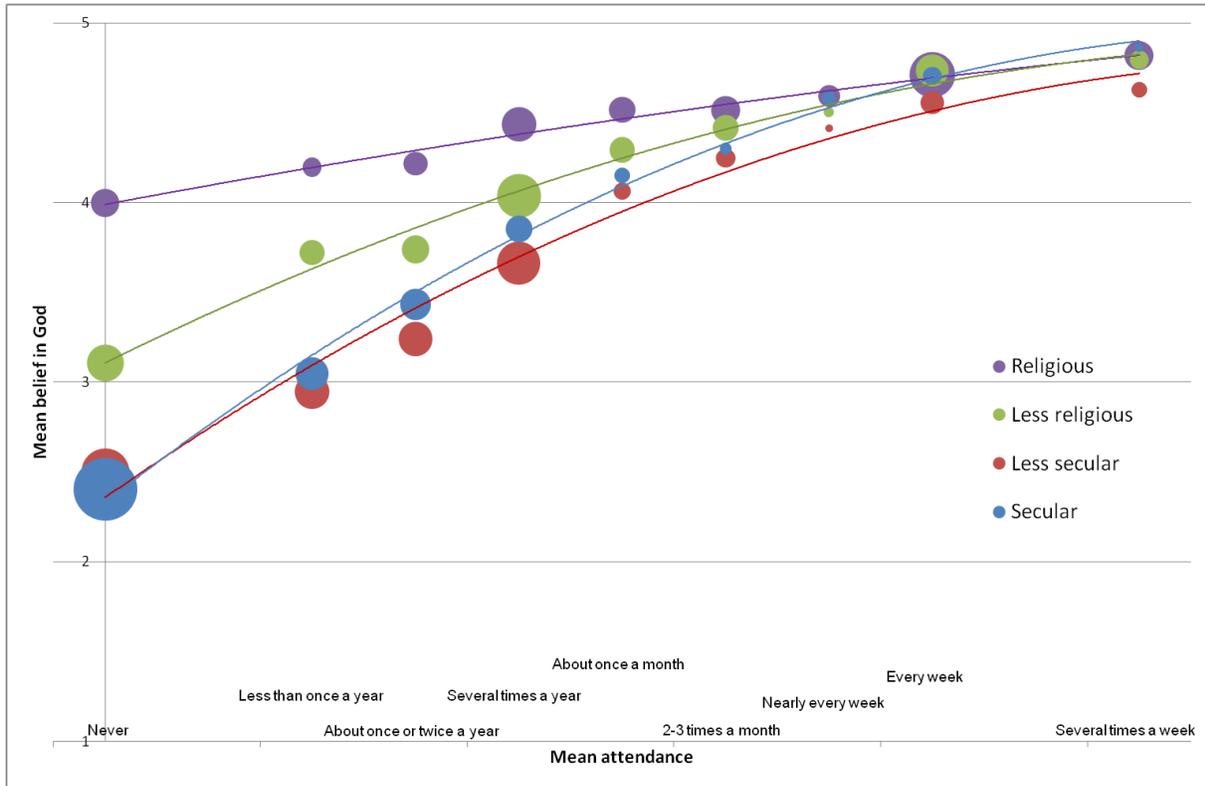
Note: * Estimate/Standard Error>1.96.

Figure 1: Belief by parental and national attendance



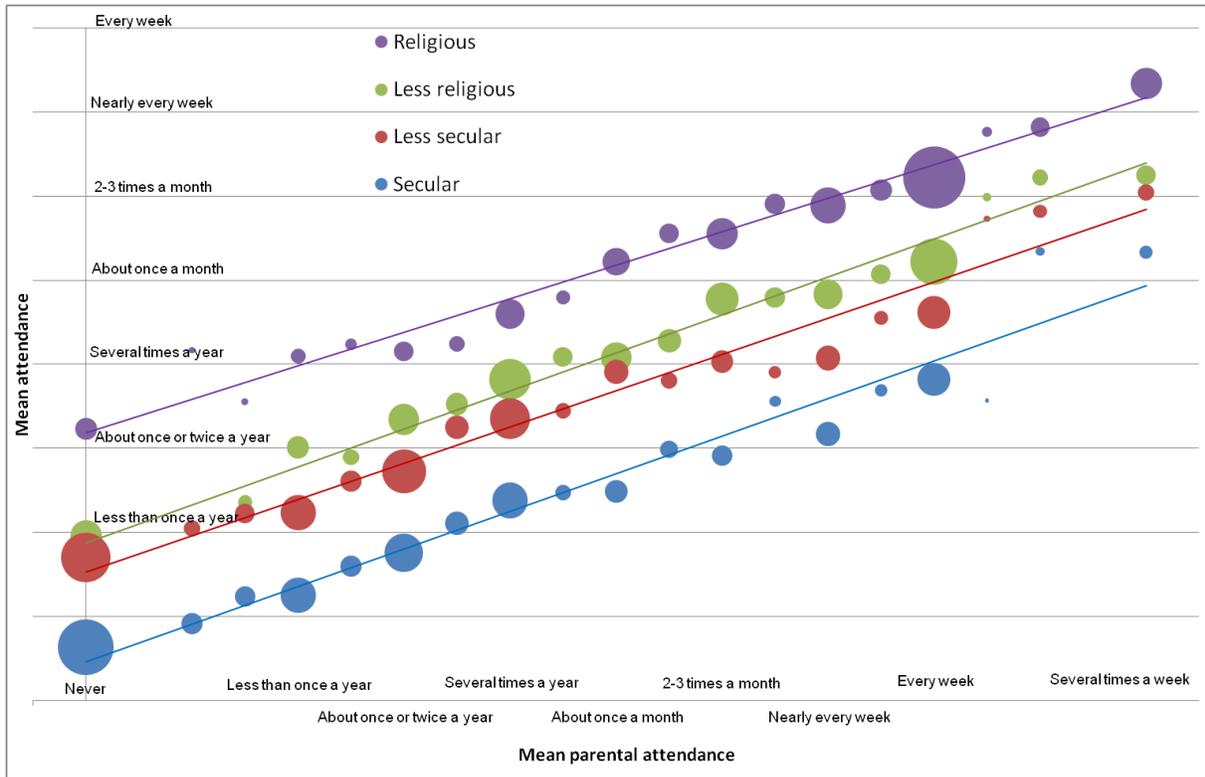
Source: ISSP 2008; for country groups, see footnote 8.

Figure 2: Belief by attendance and national attendance



Source: ISSP 2008; for country groups, see footnote 8.

Figure 3: Attendance by mean parental attendance and country religiosity



Source: ISSP 2008; for country groups, see footnote 8.