Does the Religious Context Moderate the Association Between Individual Religiosity and Marriage Attitudes across Europe? Evidence from the European Social Survey

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Introduction

In Christianity, like in most other religions, marriage is highly valued. In line with this, research has shown that religiously involved people are much more likely than the non-religious to object to behaviors such as unmarried cohabitation and divorce, that are seen as undermining the centrality of marriage (Thornton, 1985; Sweet & Bumpass, 1990; Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993; Pearce & Thornton, 2007). These studies have examined religiosity as an individual characteristic. However, religion is also a major societal institution, and the strength of that institution could also be relevant for the strength of the association between religiosity and attitudes towards behaviors that undermine the centrality of marriage, like unmarried cohabitation and divorce (cf. Adamczyk, 2008). First, it could be that pro-marriage attitudes are stronger in more religious contexts – and not just because there are more religious people who value marriage, but also because the non-religious may be more likely to value marriage than non-religious people in more secular contexts (Moore & Vanneman, 2003). Second, it could be that the differences between the opinions of the religious and the non-religious differ more strongly in some contexts than in others.

In this paper, we examine this second issue. The central research question is whether the influence of individual religious involvement on marriage attitudes varies by the average level of religiosity in a region. To do so, we use data from the third wave of the European Social Survey (2006-2007).

Hypotheses

We formulate four competing hypotheses about how the strength of the association between religious involvement and marriage attitudes may differ across religious contexts, based on four different potential mechanisms.

Internal secularization mechanism

Most modern societies are undergoing a process of secularization (Gorski & Altinordu, 2008). The most common view on secularization is that this implies that the proportion of the population that agrees with a religious worldview is diminishing. However, apart from this process of 'external' secularization, religious communities may also undergo a process of internal secularization. By internal secularization, we mean a process in which the 'translation' of the religious doctrines to the personal lives of the religious is increasingly left to religious individuals themselves (Dobbelaere, 1981). Instead of the religious community deciding on

what the religious doctrines imply, individuals themselves are expected to decide on this. It can be expected that such a process of internal secularization is more likely in regions where the process of external secularization has also progressed far than in regions where external secularization is not very widespread. This could imply that religious individuals pay less attention to the teachings of the Church on marriage, and that the centrality of marriage is weaker among religious individuals in highly secularized regions than in regions where most people still are religious. In addition, in secularized contexts the religious may experience normative pressures to 'modernize' their views on issues like unmarried cohabitation and divorce and to align these views with those of the non-religious majority. This leads to the internal secularization hypothesis, that the effect of individual religiosity on marriage attitudes is weaker the lower the average level of religiosity in a region is (H1). This relationship is graphically represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 about here

Reformation mechanism

Above, we suggested that religious people who live in a largely non-religious context, are likely to be relatively critical towards traditional religious teachings themselves as well. However, it could also be that in a highly secularized context, those who remain religious become a rather selective group that stresses traditional values. In addition, this they may feel that they are a small group that must show that they differ from their secular environment, and this may even lead to a re-affirmation of traditional teachings. Both processes would lead us to expect that the differences in the centrality of marriage between the religious and the non-religious is stronger in a secularized context than in a non-secularized one. Thus, we formulate the reformation hypothesis that the effect of religious involvement on marriage attitudes is stronger the lower the average level of religiosity in a region is (H2). This is graphically illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 about here

In our reasoning about these first two competing hypotheses, our focus has been on the reaction of religious people on their religious context. However, the religious context could also influence the marriage attitudes of the non-religious. If so, both types of mechanisms discussed above could be generalized, leading to two additional hypotheses.

Adaptation mechanism

The non-religious who live in a highly religious environment may experience social pressure to align their views to those of the religious majority and thus might adapt their views on marriage in a traditional direction. If they do so, and if the religious in a non-religious context act accordingly as well (see H1), the internal secularization hypothesis can be generalized and we can expect that the differences between the religious and the non-religious in their marriage attitudes will be smallest in either highly secularized contexts or in highly religious contexts. As a result, the association between individual religiosity and marriage attitudes is expected to be highest at medium levels of regional religious involvement (H3). This is graphically illustrated in Figure 3. We call this the adaptation hypothesis.

Figure 3 about here

Polarization mechanism

A final possibility is to generalize the reformation mechanisms. It could be that the non-

religious in a very religious region constitute a very selective group that wants to differentiate itself from the very traditional, Christian majority. If so, and if the same holds for the religious in secularized regions (see H2), it can be expected that the differences between the religious and the non-religious are largest in both highly secularized and highly religious regions. In that situation, the effect of religiosity on marriage attitudes will be smallest at medium levels of regional religiosity (H4). This polarization hypothesis is graphically represented in Figure 4.

Figure 4 about here

Data, measures, and method

To test our hypotheses, we compare the effect of individual religious involvement on marriage attitudes by country and region, using data from the third wave of the European Social Survey (2006-2007). Here, we focus on comparisons at the regional level. The level of religiosity can be expected to show quite strong regional variation within many European countries, and therefore we expect that the effect of individual religiosity on marriage attitudes is more likely to differ at the regional than at the national level. There is also a practical reason to focus on regions; the number of units at the country level in the ESS is only 25, whereas we can distinguish 226 regions.

Attitudes towards marriage were measured by three Likert-type items. Respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point scale running from 'strongly disapprove' to 'strongly approve' to what extent they approved or disapproved if a woman (1) lives with a partner without being married to him, (2) has a child with a partner she lives with but is not married to, and (3) gets divorced while she has children aged under 12? Respondents were randomly assigned to questions about the behavior of women or the behavior of men. We include the gender that was used in phrasing the questions as a control variable in our multivariate models. The coding of the three items was reversed and a mean score on the three items as used as our indicator of marriage attitudes; the higher the score, the stronger respondents favored marriage.

Three items on religious involvement were used. The first item asked 'Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?', with response options running from 'not at all religious' (0) to 'very religious'(10). The second item was 'Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?' The wording of the third item was 'Apart from when you are at religious services, how often, if at all, do you pray?' The last two items both had scores ranging from 'every day' (1) to 'never' (7). A factor analysis showed one clear factor underlying these three items. Country-specific analyses showed that – depending on the country – a one-factor model explained between 61 and 82 percent of the variance in these items. In the pooled dataset this factor explained 76 percent of the variance. The standardized factor score was used to indicate respondents' level of religious involvement. The higher the score, the stronger religiously involved respondents were.

To construct a regional-level indicator of religious involvement, individual factor-scores for respondents in waves 1, 2 and 3 were calculated and averaged by region. Given the small number of respondents per region per wave, we decided to pool data from three waves of the ESS, in order to have a more robust estimate of the regional level of religiosity.

The following control variables were included in our multivariate models; gender (0 = male, 1=

female), age (in years), level of educational attainment, migrant status (0 = born in the country of residence, 1 = born elsewhere), level of urbanisation, religious denomination, and the gender used in the formulation of the marriage attitude questions (0 = male, 1 = female). Educational attainment is measured on a seven-point scale running from ' primary education not completed' (1) to 'university degree' (7). Level of urbanisation is measured on a five- point scale running from 'a farm or home in the country side'(1) to 'a big city'(5). Based on a question of denominational belongingness, respondents were classified into one of six categories: Roman-Catholic, Protestant, Eastern-Orthodox, Other Christian, Non-Christian, and non-religious.

Three-level regression-models were estimated, with individuals, regions, and countries as the three levels. The sample consisted of 45,144 respondents, nested in 226 regions, nested in 25 countries. Four separate multi-level models were estimated. Model 1 is a random intercept model. Model 2 is a random slope model, in which the effect (slope) of individual religiosity was allowed to vary across regions and countries. In Model 3, an interaction between individual and regional religiosity was added to the model in order to test H1 and H2. In the final Model 4, we also added an interaction between individual religiosity and the squared regional level of religiosity to test H3 and H4.

Results

Model 1 shows that opinions on the centrality of marriage show significant variation at all three levels, but clearly vary most strongly at the individual level, followed by the country and the regional level. The estimated effects of individual-level control variables gender, age, educational attainment, migrant status and level of urbanisation all are as expected on the basis of earlier research. The negative effect of the gender used in the question wording implies that respondents are less likely to reject behavior that undermines marriage if it is a woman who chooses to do so, than if it is a man. As expected, there is a strong positive effect of religious involvement on the centrality of marriage, implying that the more religious people are, the more traditional their views on marriage and other living arrangements are. In addition, Model 1 shows that, after controlling the level of individual religiosity, the centrality of marriage among Roman-Catholics and Protestants does not differ from that among the non- religious. Marriage is slightly less supported among Orthodox respondents than among the non-religious, but clearly more supported among members of other Christian denominations and of non-Christian denominations. Most of these effects are relatively stable across models, with the exception of the effect for Eastern-Orthodox, which becomes non-significant in subsequent models.

Table 1 about here

Model 2 is a random slope model, in which the effect of individual religiosity is allowed to vary across regions and across countries. The slope estimate for individual religiosity is statistically significant at both levels, suggesting that the effect of individual religiosity differs both between regions within a country and between countries.

In Model 3, the main effect of the regional level of religiosity and the interaction between level of religiosity at the individual and at the regional level are included in the model. The effect of the regional level of religiosity is positive, suggesting that individuals living in a highly religious region – irrespective of their own level of religiosity – hold more traditional marriage attitudes than individuals living in region where relatively few people are religious. More importantly, Model 3 shows a statistically significant positive effect for the interaction between individual religiosity and the average level of religiosity in a region, implying that

the effect of individual religiosity on marriage attitudes is stronger the more religious a region is. This is illustrated graphically in Figure 5. This effect is in line with the internal secularisation hypothesis (H1) and runs counter to the reformation hypothesis (H2).

Figure 5 about here

Finally, in Model 4 we add an interaction between individual religiosity and regional religiosity squared, to examine whether the interaction effect is curvilinear rather than linear. The added interaction effect turns out to be statistically insignificant. Therefore, no support is found for either the adaptation hypothesis (H3) or the polarisation hypothesis (H4).

Conclusion

It is well-known that people with a strong religious involvement more strongly adhere to marriage than people with a weaker level of religious involvement – or no religious involvement at all. It is unclear, however, whether the strength of the association between religious involvement and marriage attitudes depends on the religious context in which religious and non-religious people operate. To fill this gap, we examined whether the strength of this association depends on the average level of religious involvement at the regional level. We formulated four competing hypotheses about the way in which the religious context shapes the association between individual religiosity and marriage attitudes. Data from the third wave of the European Social Survey were used to answer this question.

Our results show support for the internal secularisation hypothesis. The higher the average level in a region is, the stronger the effect of individual religiosity turns out to be. This could reflect a process of internal secularization where norms that are thought to be strongly linked to the Christian faith loose part of their relevance even among believers. This process of internal secularization is thought to be particularly prevalent among believers who live in a rather secularized environment.

To do

In the next stage of this paper, we examine whether the observed interaction between regional religious involvement and individual religious involvement is found in different parts of Europe. One could, for example, expect the interaction to be stronger in Protestant regions (with a strong emphasis on individual responsibility) than in Catholic regions (with a strong emphasis on established norms that are not very strongly reflected upon).

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Figure 1 The effect of individual religious involvement on marriage attitudes by aggregate religiousness of the region, based on the internal secularization mechanism

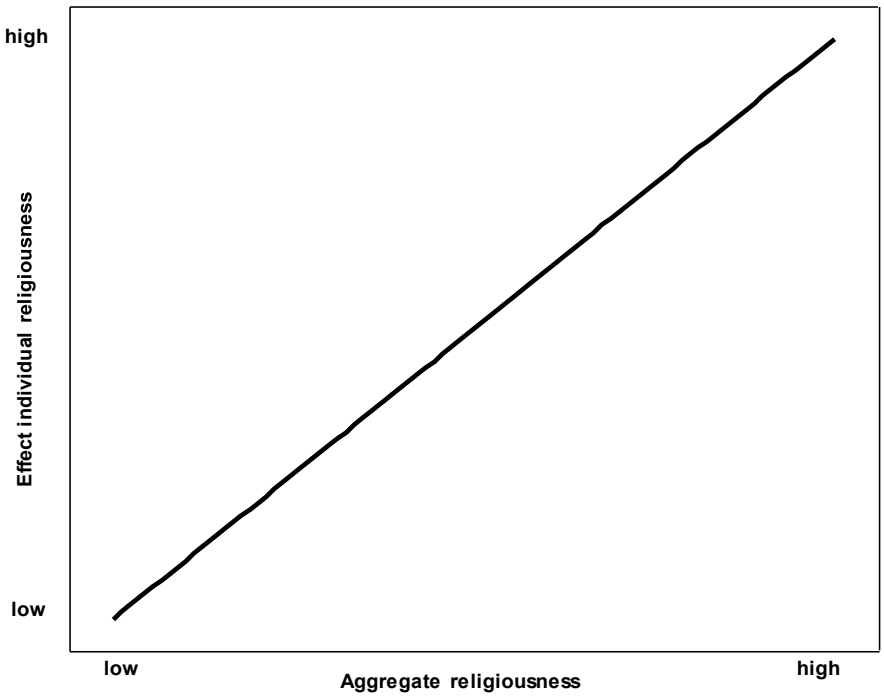

Figure 2 The effect of individual religious involvement on marriage attitudes by aggregate religiousness of the region, based on the reformation mechanism

Figure 3 The effect of individual religious involvement on marriage attitudes by aggregate religiousness of the region, based on the adaptation mechanism

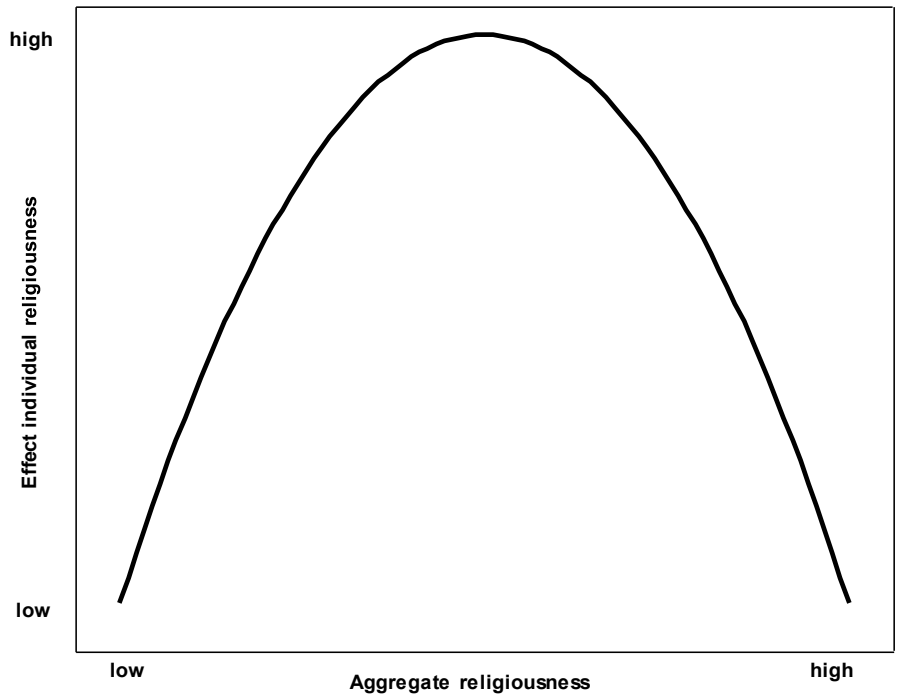

Figure 4 The effect of individual religious involvement on marriage attitudes by aggregate religiousness of the region, based on the polarization mechanism

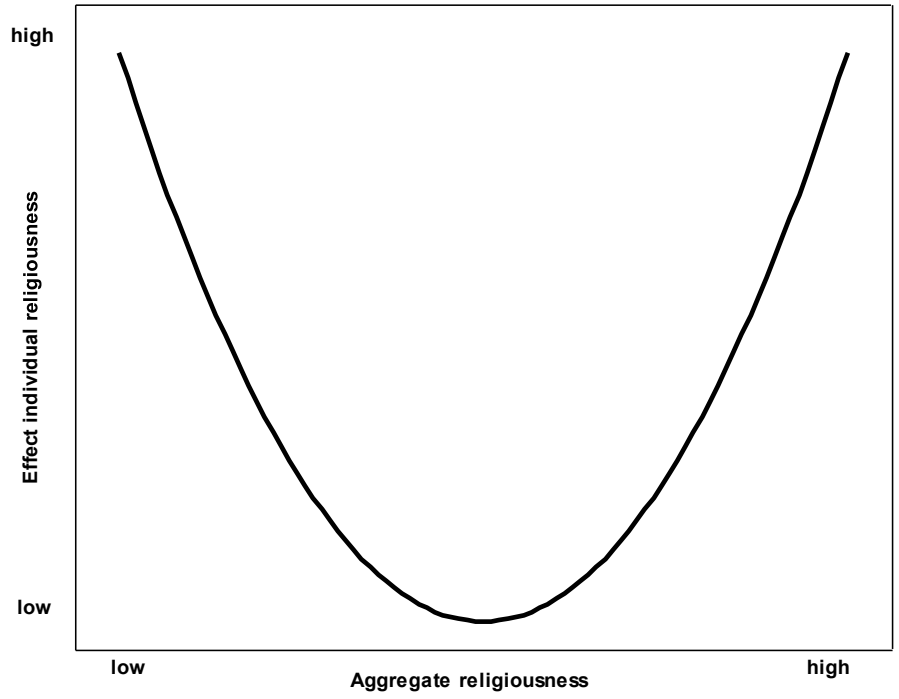

Figure 5 The effect of individual religious involvement on marriage attitudes by religious of the region, based on Model 3 in Table 1

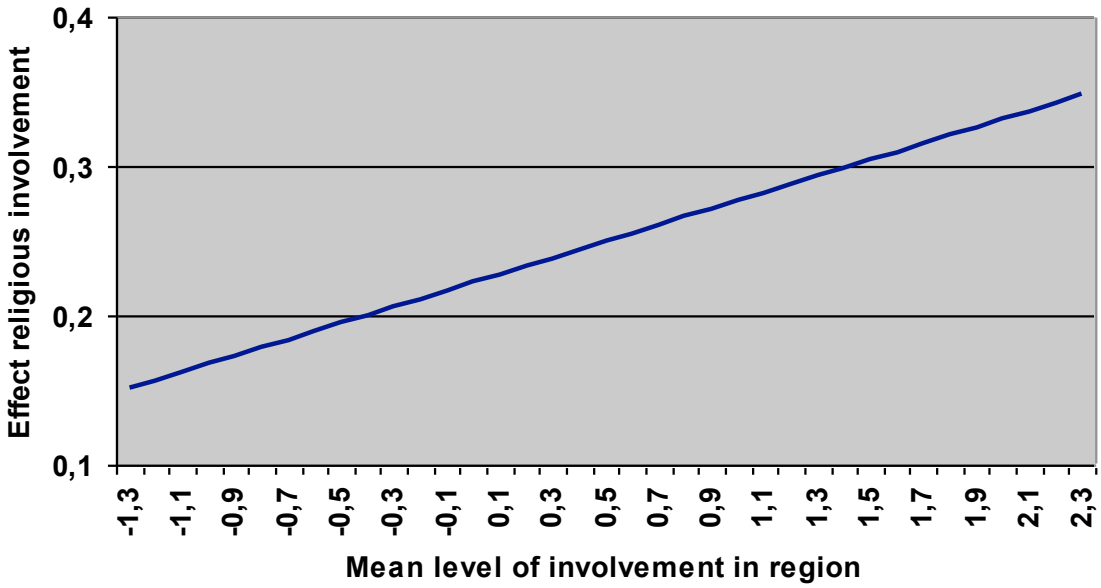

Table 1 Effects of religious involvement and control variables on centrality of marriage, based on a three-level regression model

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Fixed part	coef.	s.e.	coef.	s.e.	coef.	s.e.	coef.	s.e.
Constant	2.75***	0.09	2.73***	0.08	2.72***	0.08	2.74***	0.08
Gender (1 = female)	-0.11***	0.01	-0.10***	0.01	-0.10***	0.01	-0.10***	0.01
Age	0.01***	0.00	0.01***	0.00	0.01***	0.00	0.01***	0.00
Level of education	-0.06***	0.00	-0.06***	0.00	-0.06***	0.00	-0.06***	0.00
Migrant status (1 = migrant)	0.13***	0.01	0.12***	0.01	0.12***	0.01	0.12***	0.01
Urbanisation	-0.01***	0.00	-0.01***	0.00	-0.01***	0.00	-0.01***	0.00
Gender wording marriage questions	-0.10***	0.01	-0.10***	0.01	-0.10***	0.01	-0.10***	0.01
Religious denomination (ref. cat = non-religious)								
Roman-Catholic	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Protestant	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Eastern-Orthodox	-0.04*	0.02	0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02
Other Christian denominations	0.22***	0.03	0.23***	0.03	0.23***	0.03	0.23***	0.03
Non-Christian denominations	0.42***	0.03	0.44***	0.03	0.44***	0.03	0.44***	0.03
Religious involvement	0.22***	0.00	0.22***	0.02	0.21***	0.02	0.21***	0.02
Mean religious involvement in region					0.13***	0.03	0.12***	0.04
Interaction individual involvement and regional involvement					0.05**	0.02	0.05*	0.02
Mean regional religious involvement squared							-0.06	0.04
Interaction individual involvement and regional involvement squared							0.05	0.03
Random part								
Individual level								
sd (constant)	0.73***	0.00	0.73***	0.00	0.73***	0.00	0.73***	0.00
Regional level								
sd (constant)	0.10***	0.01	0.10***	0.01	0.09***	0.01	0.09***	0.01
sd (religious involvement)			0.05***	0.01	0.05***	0.01	0.05***	0.01
corr (constant, involvement)			0.17	0.13	0.12	0.15	0.12	0.14
National level								

sd (constant)	0.41***	0.06	0.39***	0.06	0.38***	0.06	0.39***	0.06
sd (religious involvement)			0.08***	0.01	0.08***	0.01	0.08***	0.01
corr (constant, involvement)			-0.64***	0.13	-0.74***	0.13	-0.75***	0.10
-2 Log likelihood	100184.1		99716.1		99691.9		99687.4	
N (individuals)					45144			
N (regions)					226			
N (countries)					25			

*$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$