

**“Still Losing My Religion: Disaffiliation Is No Longer Just for the Young”**  
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*We typically think of disaffiliation from religion as a young adult phenomenon. However, the rapid rise in persons claiming no religious affiliation in Europe suggests that a substantial amount of disaffiliation may be occurring among older adults (ages 30+) as well. Our paper examines the prevalence of mid-life disaffiliation in three European countries - Ireland, Switzerland, and Austria - using census microdata to track changes in levels of religious affiliation for ten-year birth cohorts from the 1970s-2000s. We find that while few adults in Ireland disaffiliate after young adulthood, a substantial number in Switzerland and Austria do. This surprising pattern of mid-life disaffiliation sheds light on the dramatic social change that has occurred in Europe over the past half century and suggests that religious change in other countries might happen more quickly than a cohort replacement model would predict.*

Studies on religious change in the United States have focused almost exclusively on young adults, under the assumption that the period between adolescence and the mid-thirties is the most religiously volatile time in the life course. As persons enter young adulthood and begin forming their own identities - so the story goes - they are more likely to disaffiliate from their parents' religion. However, once these disaffiliated young adults get married and start having children, many of them likely will return to religious communities and re-affiliate with religion. Following this tumultuous period, older adults are expected to be relatively stable in their religious affiliation.

Although this narrative of rebellious, irreligious youth and returning, religiously-stable adults may ring true for many in the United States, it may not for many Europeans. Over the past half-century, many European countries have seen substantial declines in religious participation and a sharp rise in those claiming no religious affiliation. It would seem that older adults, not just the young, are disaffiliating in large numbers. Yet, aside from a few studies on religious change in Great Britain and the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>, very little attention has been paid to the demographic patterns underlying these rapid changes. In particular, figuring out *when* disaffiliation is occurring in the life course is important for understanding the dramatic social change that has occurred in Europe and may provide clues for the future of religious life in the United States and elsewhere.

In this paper, we look at patterns of disaffiliation in three historically-Christian countries in Europe - Ireland, Switzerland, and Austria - using IPUMS microdata from the 1970s to the 2000s. Our approach is simple but elegant: we disaggregate the religious composition of each country into ten-year birth cohorts and track changes in the percent Christian and Unaffiliated in each cohort across census years. If the percent Christian in a cohort declines and the percent Unaffiliated rises between census years, this constitutes change caused by disaffiliation. Of course, individuals may leave or return between waves – our method shows the aggregate-level pattern of religious change in each cohort.

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<sup>1</sup> Crockett, Alisdair & David Voas, 2006, “Generations of Decline: Religious Change in 20th Century Britain,” *Journal for the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 45(4): 567-584; Te Grotenhuis, Manfred & Peer Scheepers, 2001, “Churches in Dutch: Causes of Religious Disaffiliation in the Netherlands, 1937-1995,” *Journal for the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 40(4): 591-606.

To account for any changes to the religious composition due to immigration rather than disaffiliation we remove all non-native born respondents from the population.<sup>2</sup> This method allows us to see during which age-transitions disaffiliation occurs most often.

The preliminary findings from Ireland, Switzerland, and Austria show wide variation in both the levels of disaffiliation and the age-related patterns of disaffiliation over time. In Ireland, the low-levels of disaffiliation that have occurred since 1970 have been concentrated almost exclusively in the young adult years. However, we also see no evidence of aggregate-level re-affiliation later in adulthood; the Irish who disaffiliated as young adults seem to remain unaffiliated. Switzerland has experienced sharper rises in the unaffiliated population since 1970. While this has been most pronounced among young adults, disaffiliation among older adults has been increasing. This pattern is even more advanced in Austria. In 1971, Austrians in their 40s and 50s were already more likely to be unaffiliated than young adults. Although each new cohort of young adults disaffiliates at high rates, older adults - particularly those born between 1940 and 1949 - continue disaffiliating late into adulthood. Thus, disaffiliation no longer appears to be a young adulthood phenomenon in Austria and Switzerland.

We believe our approach gives an important international perspective on the demography of disaffiliation and has implications for our understanding of future patterns of religious change. In particular, our findings suggest that the growth in the unaffiliated populations in some European countries has not been confined to the speed of cohort replacement of disaffiliating young adults. If this pattern of mid-life disaffiliation holds in other countries, we would expect nonreligious populations to increase more rapidly than the life course model would predict.

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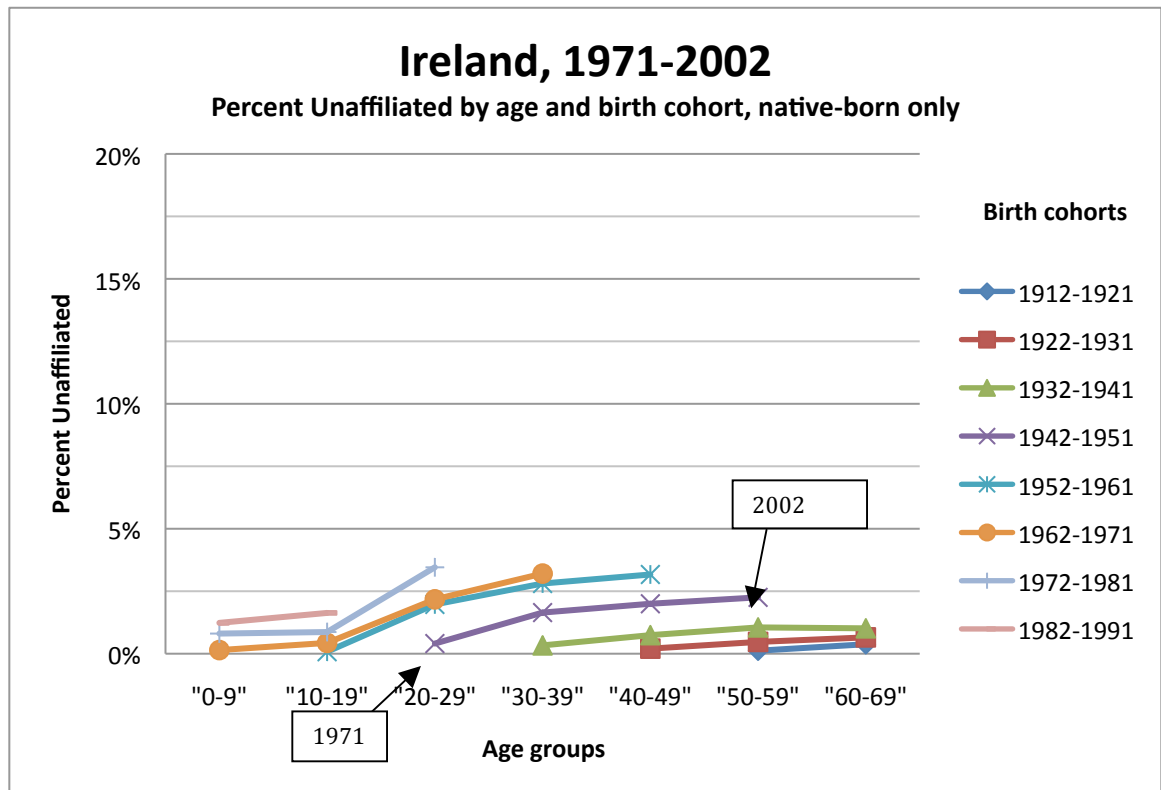
<sup>2</sup> Two problems remain: the naturalization of non-Christian immigrant children and out-migration. The first should only be a problem for the newest cohorts of children. The second problem is difficult to account for, but in order for out-migration to inflate either the Christian or Unaffiliated numbers, migrants would have to be selected on religion. Since we are seeing a rise in the Unaffiliated, it seems unlikely that religious people would be more likely to leave their country than those with no affiliation. In both cases, however, we can check to see if changes in the percent Christian and Unaffiliated are due to changes in the actual number of Christians and Unaffiliated.

**Table 1. Percent Christian and Unaffiliated totals by census years, native-born only.**

	Christian	Unaffiliated
<b>Ireland</b>		
1971	99.76%	0.18%
1981	99.04%	0.91%
1991	97.31%	1.46%
2002	96.26%	2.31%
<b>Switzerland</b>		
1970	98.79%	0.91%
1980	96.72%	3.28%
1990	92.79%	6.40%
2000	87.59%	10.47%
<b>Austria*</b>		
1971	95.19%	4.25%
1981	93.10%	6.04%
1991	89.76%	8.93%
2001	86.11%	12.30%

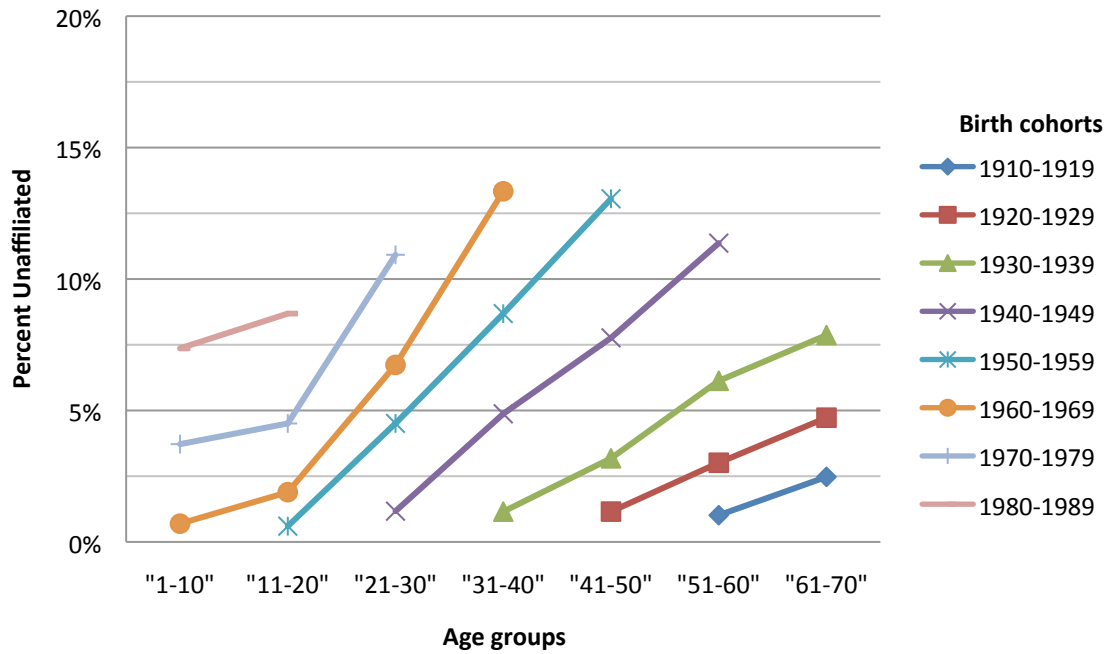
\*Nativity not asked in all years; totals are restricted to citizens-only

A note on the graphs: these graphs show the percent Unaffiliated in ten-year birth cohorts across census years. Each line is a birth cohort. Each point on the line is a census year (not all cohorts were present in every census year). The x-axis indicates the age group of the cohort during that census year. For example, the 1942-51 cohort was 20-29 years old in 1971 and was 50-59 years old in 2002 (Ireland's 2002 census makes our age groups 1 year off).



## Switzerland, 1970-2000

Percent Unaffiliated by age and birth cohort, native-born only



## Austria, 1971-2001

Percent Unaffiliated by age and birth cohort, citizens only

