

RESEARCH STATEMENT

In my research, I engage core sociological questions and concepts through the study of religion. I plan to continue this line of research by examining religion across the life course, specifically in how unique economic conditions shape religious trajectories of particular cohorts. This will build off my dissertation, in which I describe how socialization in the family leads to macro-level change in religiosity.

Dissertation: The Role of Weakening Religious Socialization in National Religious Decline

My dissertation engages the secularization debate within the sociology of religion. Until the 1980s, most sociologists assumed that religion would become less important to individuals and institutions in modern societies. This general class of theories is known as "secularization theory." Though scholars proposed a number of different mechanisms of decline and even operationalizations of what constituted decline, the most discussed conceptualizations posited change in religious individuals, whereby they would become less sure of their beliefs and less public in their expressions of religion over time. While there had always been a few scholars who dissented from secularization theory, the discipline shifted dramatically away from it in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Religious Right and new religious movements gained attention and the accumulation of data indicated relative stability of a number of religious measures in the US. By the early-2000s, though, a new trend became apparent: the rise of religious "Nones" (those who do not affiliate with any religious identity) among the youngest Americans. This led to renewed theorizing about trends in religious vitality, both within the secularization paradigm and against it. This renewed theorizing is the context for my dissertation.

Like some other contemporary explanations for religious decline in the US, I examine the role of cohort replacement rather than changes within individuals. In contrast to many theories, though, I claim that this change across cohorts is *self-reinforcing* whereby religious decline in one cohort creates a less religious context in which future cohorts grow up. This is made possible by the contemporary conditions in which religion exists, where religion is less strongly bound to other institutions and is cognitively challenged by science, rational frameworks, and pluralistic societies. While evidence suggests religious individuals can manage these complexities and maintain their religiosity, I argue that

these conditions weaken the success of religious socialization in the family and thereby produce aggregate decline across generations.

I do this in two steps. First, I establish that the US trajectory of decline across cohorts is not unique—as has commonly been argued. Rather, it shares a similar shape as those in European countries. This trajectory, theorized by David Voas and described in his 2009 article "The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe," predicts that the "fuzzy" middle become the majority before the secular minority grow to any appreciable degree. As a result, countries appear modestly religious for a protracted amount of time. But once the fuzzy majority reaches a certain peak, the secular minority grows quickly. This can explain the previously unexpected and rapid rise of religious "Nones." Where Voas provided the theoretical description and a non-statistical assessment of the trajectory, I designed a statistical approach that predicts the rate of decline across cohorts in the US and European countries and identifies country-specific characteristics of the trajectories. I find that the European trajectory fits the US data surprisingly well, with US cohorts becoming predictably less religious, more fuzzy, and slightly more secular across time, suggesting a shared process of decline. This work was recently published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (JSSR).

Having established the empirical trends and their similarity, I next consider one group of potential mechanisms: changing religious socialization in the family. Sociologists and psychologists have studied many mechanisms that predict religious transmission in the family, ranging from particular religious beliefs and identities to characteristics of family structure to the warmth of the parent-child relationship. Unsurprisingly, parents are the most important influences on children's religious outcomes. However, few scholars have considered these mechanisms in light of slow change across generations. I leverage the design of the multi-generational Longitudinal Study of Generations dataset and find that the slow religious decline across cohorts is evident within families as well. Children are more likely to be less religious than their parents if their parents a) have high incomes, b) are politically liberal, c) believe society would not be better off if religion were more influential, and d) believe rules for children should be flexible. These characteristics and attitudes are connected to national economic development and attitudinal trends away from exclusivist religious beliefs. I presented a draft of this at the Younger Scholars of

Religion Conference held at Notre Dame University in April 2018. I expect to have the final draft submitted for peer review by January 1st, 2019.

Future research

In my future research, I will examine how the Great Recession of the 2000s affected religious outcomes of emerging adults entering the workforce through its effects on financial stability and family formation. Family formation (marriage and child-bearing) are associated with a re-engagement with religious institutions. There has been a general trend towards delayed family formation which consequently likely shaped the religious landscape. If the Great Recession left a particular cohort of young adults in an economically unstable state, it likely led to further delayed family formation. Glen Elder's *Children of the Great Depression* provides a plausible comparison. Elder found that the older cohort—who entered the workforce during the Great Depression—had poorer educational and economic trajectories than the younger cohort—who entered the workforce as the economy improved. Similarly, youth who entered the workforce during the Great Recession may have experienced greater financial hardship than those who entered the workforce on either side of it. If these experiences further influenced choices about family formation, we would expect to see down-stream changes to Americans' religious lives as well.

This project will be strengthened by the abundance of available data to examine it and separate distinct cohorts. The Great Recession occurred from December 2007 to June 2009, meaning people entering the workforce during and around that time might be expected to have different life experiences than those who entered the workforce before or after it. The National Study of Youth and Religion includes respondents who were between the ages of 19 and 25 by the end of the Great Recession and includes data from during and after the Recession. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health data include a slightly older cohort, who were between the ages of 24 and 32 in 2008. It likewise includes data from during and after the Great Recession. Finally, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort, includes respondents who were 24 to 28 years old in 2008, with multiple waves of data from before, during, and after the Great Recession. The particularities of these datasets will likely provide unique avenues of examining similar questions and opportunities to collaborate with health, education, and family scholars.