

Six ways local religious groups have changed in Switzerland, 2008 – 2022

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Website: www.congregation.ch.

Please cite as: Jörn Stolz, Jens Köhrsen, Jeremy Senn, Christophe Monnot, Ann-Lea Buzzi, Adam Hearn, Six ways local religious groups have changed in Switzerland, 2008 – 2022 (2024), University of Lausanne, Lausanne.

Summary

Local religious groups such as parishes, churches, assemblies, synagogues, temples, mosques, or cultural centres continue to be the main organizational form of religion in Switzerland. The second wave of the National Congregations Study Switzerland shows changes in the religious landscape of Switzerland between 2008 and 2022. Six key findings are that: (1) The overall number of religious groups and overall participants at religious rituals every weekend has declined; (2) The average age of both leaders and members has increased; (3) Local religious groups have become more open to female leadership and homosexuality; (4) Christian groups use an increasingly informal style; (5) Religious groups have been more invested in domestic charity work; (6) Ecological awareness in religious groups has increased.

Introduction

Local religious groups such as parishes, churches, assemblies, synagogues, temples, mosques, or cultural centres continue to be the main organizational form of religion in Switzerland as in all European countries (Baumann 2012). Local religious groups are also called "congregations". In this report we use the terms "local religious group" and "congregation" synonymously.

This study asked the following *research question*: How have the attributes and activities of local religious groups in Switzerland changed between 2008 and 2022?

Both in 2008/2009 and 2020/2021¹, the *method* consisted in counting all local religious groups on the Swiss territory (census) and then conducting an interview with a representative sample of spiritual leaders about attributes and activities of their local religious group (survey).

We first engaged in a *census*, systematically counting and categorizing all local religious groups in Switzerland in 2008 and 2020. A local religious group (congregation) is defined as a group of people who meet physically and regularly for explicitly religious purposes (Chaves 2004). Local religious groups are investigated across all religions: Reformed Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox Christian, Other Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Other Religions (e.g., Alternative Spiritualities, New Religious Movements). The way we applied our definition remained the same in both waves (see note in Appendix).

We then conducted the *survey*: Both in 2008/2009 and 2022/23² a stratified random sample was selected from the complete list of local religious groups (congregations). For every chosen congregation, one key informant (in most cases, the spiritual leader) was identified. We conducted an interview with this key informant on the characteristics and activities of local religious groups in one of the three main national languages: German, French or Italian. The approximately 200 questions focused on concrete and verifiable congregational practices and characteristics of the organization. In 2008, all interviews were conducted by telephone. In 2022, interviews were conducted either by telephone or online. In 2008, 1022 interviews were conducted (response rate: 60.3%). In 2022, 1395 interviews were conducted (response rate: 45.4%).

1. Less groups and less participants

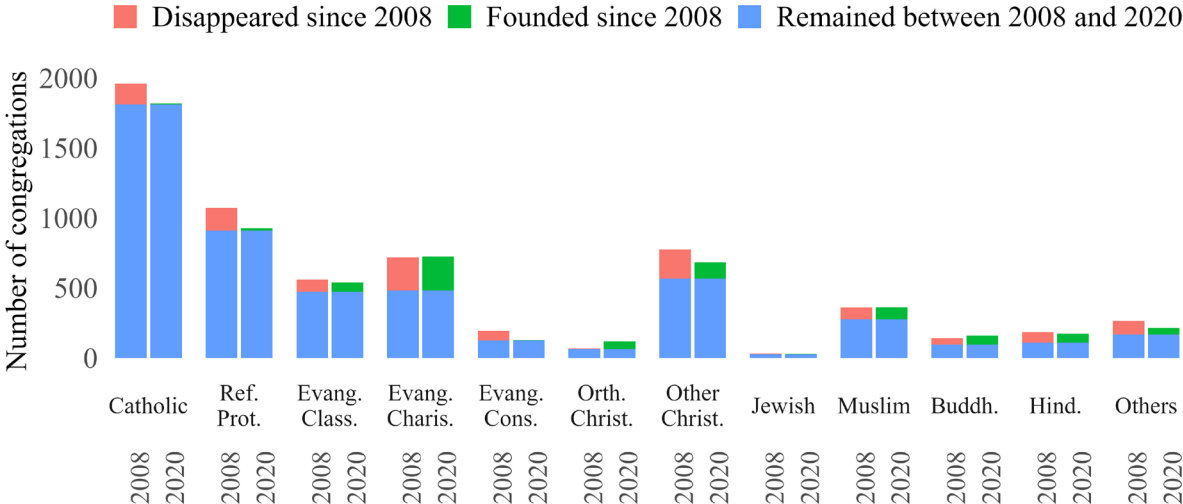
Between 2008 and 2020, the total number of local religious groups as well as the number of regular participants in religious rituals has decreased. The number of local religious groups has decreased from 6,341 to 5,883 groups (Senn, Stolz, and Monnot 2024). This represents a decrease of 7.2%. With the increase in the population over this same period, we went from one community for 1,184 people in 2008 to one community for 1,476 people in 2020. This decline may be interpreted as a sign of the continuing secularization of Swiss society.

¹ The first census took place between 2008 and 2009, while the second took place between 2020 and 2021. For the sake of simplicity, we will only refer to the years 2008 and 2020 when discussing the censuses and their results.

² The first survey took place from 2008 to 2009, while the second ran from 2022 to 2023. We refer to the surveys and their results only as '2008' and '2022'.

The total number of regular participants in rituals of local religious groups in Switzerland has equally declined from around 894,000 to 824,000. We estimate these numbers by multiplying the number of groups with the average of regular participants calculated with our representative sample. The average number of regular participants per community has remained virtually unchanged between 2008 (141) and 2022 (140). However, since the number of total groups has declined in 2020, we arrive at the clearly lower number of regular participants in 2022. In percentages, this means that in 2008, around 11.6% of the population regularly attended a religious service, compared with 9.5% in 2022.

Figure 1. Number of appeared, stayed, and disappeared congregations, by religious tradition (2008 and 2020)



Up to now, we have looked at changes in the total numbers of congregations and participants. But the number of congregations changed quite differently in different religious traditions. Figure 1 shows for every tradition the number of groups that have disappeared (red), newly appeared (green), and remained (blue) between 2008 and 2020. We make four observations regarding Figure 1.

We see that the large recognized religious traditions, that is, Reformed and Catholic, almost only lose groups in the period of observations (normally by merger). Quite similarly, Evangelical conservative denominations also only lose groups.

The situation is very different for the Evangelical Charismatic (or: Pentecostal) tradition. This tradition is worldwide growing (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020). In the Swiss case we see that many new Evangelical Charismatic groups have been created since 2008 (241). However, at the same time, many Evangelical Charismatic groups have disappeared (236). The overall number of groups has

thus remained stable (720 to 725, +0.7%). Likewise, the overall number of average regular participants has remained relatively stable with 169 in 2008 and 161 in 2020. Evangelical Charismatic congregations thus do not grow in Switzerland but have a high turnover.

The family of religious groups that has most grown between 2008 and 2020 is Orthodox Christian. They have increased from 70 local communities in 2008 to 118 in 2020 (+69%). The reason lies in immigration, a consequence in particular of conflicts in Syria, Ethiopia and Eritrea. The effect of the war in Ukraine is not visible in our data, since our census data collection stopped in 2021, before Russia invaded Ukraine (24 February 2022). The other non-Christian religion with a strong increase in local religious groups is Buddhism (+14% in groups, from 141 to 161). However, the reason for this rise lies not in immigration but in greater success among autochthonous individuals.

The number of Muslim mosques has slightly declined between 2008 and 2020 (323 to 311). However, during the observation period, the number of Muslims in Switzerland has increased significantly (+28%) (Office fédéral de la statistique 2022a). Furthermore, the average number of regular participants in mosques has markedly increased (+13%). The discrepancy might partly be explained by the fact that it is quite difficult for Muslims to find spaces for new mosques (Monnot 2013).

2. Higher average age of leaders and regular participants

In the observation period, both the average age of religious leaders and of regular participants has increased significantly. Between 2008 and 2022, the average age of religious leaders increased by 3 years, from 50.8 to 53.8 years. In the same period, the average age of Switzerland's economically active population rose by only 1.2 years, from 40.8 to 42 (Office fédéral de la statistique 2024). Thus, the population of religious leaders is older and is (on average) ageing more rapidly than the rest of the economically active population. The reason for this lies in the fact that not enough younger religious leaders are recruited. This ageing trend is visible in recognized Churches, as well as in non-recognized Christian and non-Christian communities. The only exceptions are Conservative Evangelicals and Other Christians (Figure 2).

The same phenomenon can be observed when it comes to regular participants in religious groups. The proportion of regular participants aged 60 or over has risen from 41% in 2008 to 50% in 2022. Among Swiss residents, between 2010 and 2022, the same percentage has only risen from 23% to 26% (Office fédéral de la statistique 2022b). Again, the explanation is that not enough younger regular participants are replacing older cohorts. The growing proportion of seniors among

regular religious participants is not surprising with regard to recognized churches where the percentage of regular participants above 60 was the majority already in 2008. What is surprising, however, is that this aging trend is also present among non-recognized Christians and even non-Christian traditions. Overall, the aging of religious leaders and regular participants is an indicator of the secularization of Swiss society.

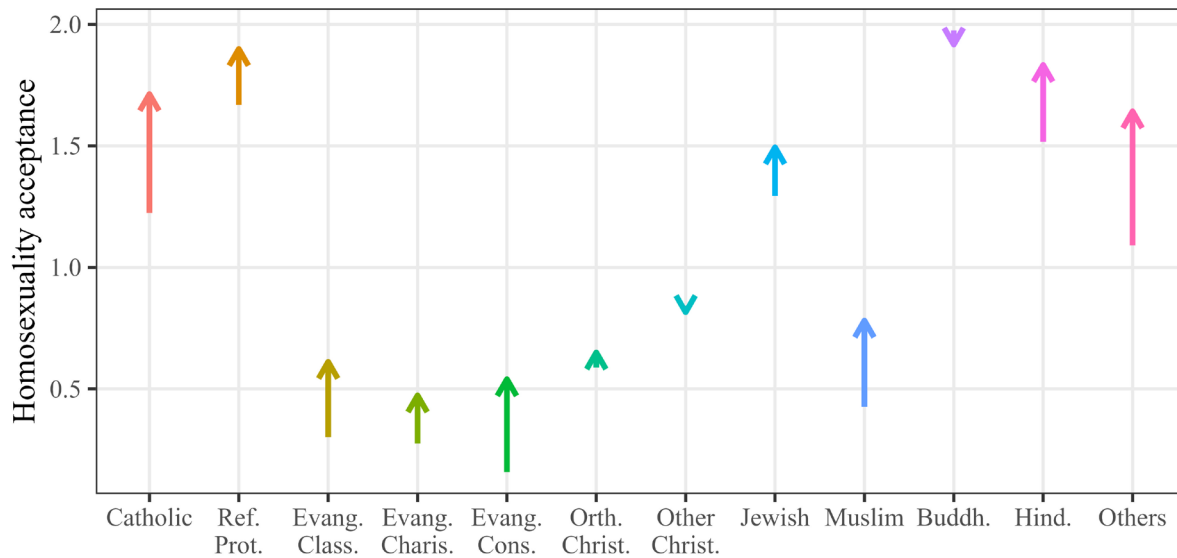
3. More openness to female religious leadership and homosexuality

Between 2008 and 2022 local religious groups have on average become more open to female religious leadership in principle and in practice. The percentage of local religious groups allowing women in principle to preach at the main service has increased from 66% (2008) to 77% (2022). The percentage of local religious groups allowing women in principle to act as their main religious leaders has increased from 47% (2008) to 54% (2022). The percentage of local religious groups led by women in practice as increased from 12.4% (2008) to 15.2% (2022).

The acceptance of homosexuality is slower in many religious groups than in society in general, especially if the group uses a literalist interpretation of its sacred texts (Chaves et al. 2021). That being said, local religious groups in Switzerland have on average become more inclusive of homosexual people. In 2008, 63% of groups allowed homosexual people to be fully accepted members in their community, a rate which increased to 75% in 2022. Likewise, the percentage of local religious groups allowing homosexual people to be volunteer leaders has increased from 36% (2008) to 55% (2022).

The acceptance of homosexuals has increased across nearly all religious traditions, though starting from very different levels in 2008. Figure 2 shows the changes for the different religious traditions. The value on the vertical axis is the mean of a variable ranging between 2 (the congregation accepting both homosexual full-scale members and volunteer leaders), 1 (the congregation only accepting homosexuals as either members or leaders), or 0 (the congregation not accepting homosexuals as either full-scale members or leaders). The base of the arrow represents the situation in 2008 and the top shows the situation in 2022. The arrows are pointing upwards – signifying greater inclusion of homosexual people – in almost all religious traditions. The change is particularly evident in the Catholic, Evangelical Conservative and Muslim, traditions. Buddhist and Reformed Protestant communities remain the most open.

Figure 2. Evolution of inclusivity towards homosexual people, by religious tradition (2008 and 2022)

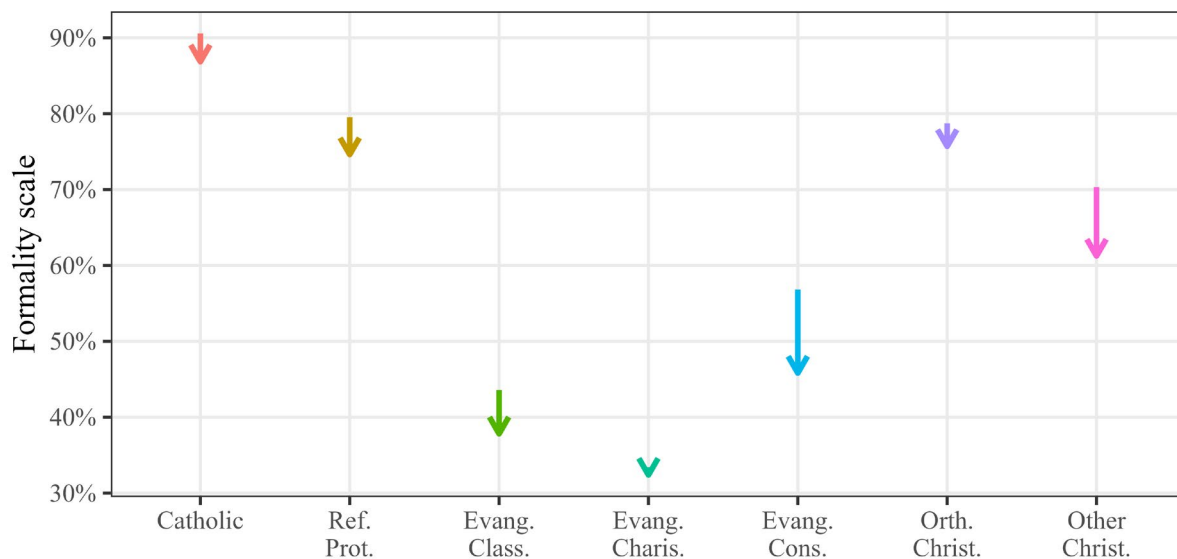


Notes: (1) Base of the arrow: percentage in 2008; top of the arrow: percentage in 2022.
 (2) Changes are significant at < 0.05 level except Orth. Christ, Other Christian, Jewish, Buddh., and Hind.

4. More informality in rituals

One of the most noteworthy and clear trends among Christian groups in the United States is a shift towards more informality in the worship services (Roso, Holleman, and Chaves 2020). In the United States, this declining formality is reflected in the fact that an increasing number of participants are jumping, laughing or playing the guitar during worship, and fewer communities play the organ or use a hymnal when singing. Does the same trend exist for Christian groups in Switzerland? We created a scale which combines ritual elements standing for formality (choir group, organ, singing with hymnals, silent prayer, reading together, ritual gestures, leaders in robes) and elements standing for informality (drums, guitars, laughter, jumping and shouting, spontaneous prayer, speaking in tongues, and overhead projector). Figure 3 shows that the trend towards informality is taking place in all Christian traditions. Note that the decline in formality is especially strong among conservative Evangelicals and Other Christian groups. We only conduct this analysis for Christian groups since some of our elements of worship used to measure formality are generally absent from non-Christian groups (e.g. organ, speaking in tongues).

Figure 3. Level of formality in worship services, by religious tradition (2008 and 2022)



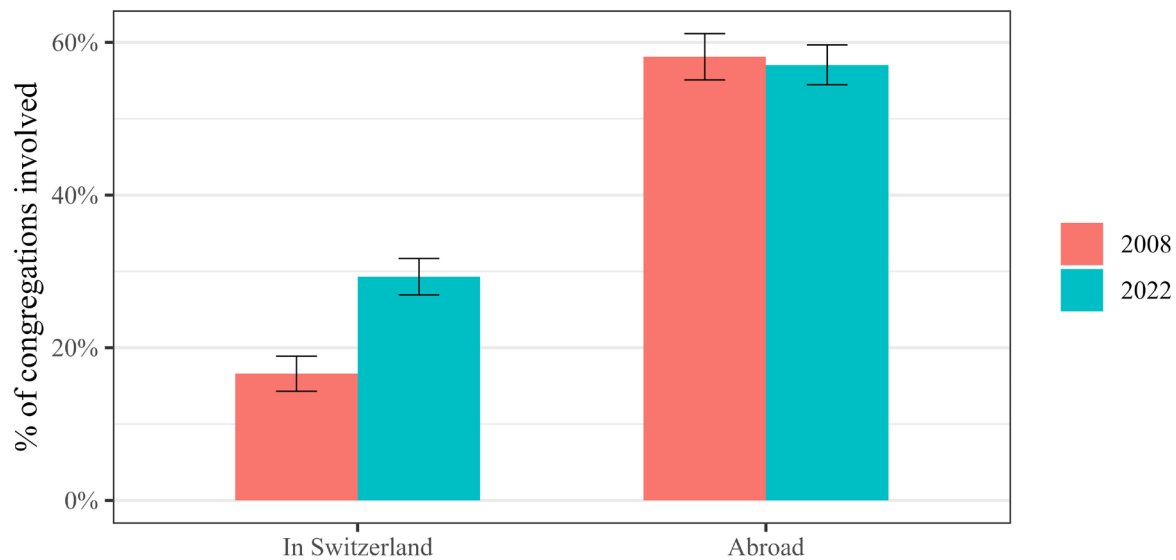
- Notes: (1) Only Christian groups.
 (2) Base of the arrow: percentage in 2008; top of the arrow: percentage in 2022.
 (3) Changes are significant except at < 0.01 level except Evang. Charis. and Orth. Christ.

5. More domestic charity work

Local religious groups engage in both domestic and international charity work (Marti, Kraft, and Walter 2010). Apart from creating social bonds among members, it is here that the social function of religious groups is often perceived. Between 2008 and 2022, the proportion of communities saying that they are involved in any charity work increases somewhat from 64% to 68%. The aid abroad for humanitarian projects is stable (58% to 57%), but charity work in Switzerland increases strongly (17% to 29%) (Figure 4). This pattern is visible in almost all religious traditions.

One plausible explanation for the strong rise in domestic charity work is the temporary influence of the COVID pandemic. In response to the pandemic, local religious groups significantly increased food distribution operations, shelter initiatives and financial aid (Berset 2020). It remains to be seen whether the rise in the percentage of local religious groups engaging in domestic charity work is just a temporary upswing caused by the pandemic or part of a longer trend.

Figure 4. Percent of local religious groups involved in charity work (2008 and 2022)



Note: Error bars show 95% confidence interval.

6. More ecological awareness

A recent line of research has hypothesized that religions were "becoming green" (Köhrsen 2015). During the observation period, many local religious groups seem to have started to raise ecological awareness among members during religious celebrations or teachings. In 2008, 6% of communities that collected signatures for a political cause did so in favor of the environment. This proportion rises to 15% in 2022. Among the 2022 communities, 41% had a religious celebration that focused on the environment, 61% highlighted environmentally friendly religious arguments and 80% encouraged a lifestyle in this sense. It is urban local religious groups, especially belonging to established Christian churches that are more often environmentally engaged than others. Further factors favoring environmental commitment are high congregational income, an elevated number of personnel, theological and political progressivism, and, for non-recognized communities, a high proportion of young members. It remains to be seen whether our finding of relatively high ecological awareness in local religious groups represents only a temporary upswing or a part of a longer trend of the "greening of religions".

Conclusion

This study has presented six key findings regarding changes in the religious landscape on the level of local religious groups:

- (1) The overall number of religious groups and overall participants at religious rituals every weekend has declined.

- (2) The average age of both leaders and members has increased.
- (3) Local religious groups have become more open to female leadership and homosexuality.
- (4) Religious services use an increasingly informal style (only in Christian groups).
- (5) Religious groups are more invested in domestic charity work.
- (6) Ecological awareness in religious groups has increased.

Some findings are as expected and are in line with the results of previous studies. It is, for example, not surprising that we find a continuing secularization of Swiss society, visible in the decline of the number of groups and the ageing of leaders and members. It is also in line with expectations that local religious groups react to and go with general social trends. As expected, we therefore see that religious congregations are on a path towards more equality regarding female leadership and homosexuality, and ecological awareness.

But other findings are more surprising. We did not expect to find secularizing tendencies also in non-established Christian, and non-Christian groups. We were surprised to see such a rise in acceptance of homosexuality across the religious spectrum. Other than expected, especially conservative Christians seem to be on a moderating trend in different dimensions. Finally, we had not anticipated to see the rise of domestic charity work (probably because of COVID) so clearly.

Of course, this study only looks at changes at two points in time. It remains to be seen whether these changes point to temporary disturbances or consistent trends over a longer period of time.

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Appendix

Note on the counting of groups

The definition of local religious groups was applied similarly in 2008 and 2020. Its application, however changed in two specific instances. We decided in 2020 to also count the language groups of Jehovah's witnesses and the Catholic missions as local religious groups of their own. To remain consistent, we therefore had to readjust the count for the 2008 data.

Note on religious traditions

We use a 12-level religious tradition variable. It has the following categories: (1) Roman Catholic; (2) Reformed Protestant; (3) classical Evangelical; (4) charismatic Evangelical; (5) conservative Evangelical; (6) Orthodox Christian; (7) other Christian; (8) Jewish; (9) Muslim; (10) Buddhist; (11) Hindu; (12) "Others". In this categorization, "Catholics" are exclusively Roman Catholics. Christ Catholics, a very small but recognized group, are coded as "Other

Christians”. Evangelicals are divided along theological boundaries. Neo-Pietist congregations, most of which were founded in the 19th century, are referred to as “classical Evangelicals”. Literalist/fundamentalist congregations are called “conservative Evangelicals”, and charismatic and Pentecostal groups are called "charismatic Evangelicals". We have merged the Sikhs with the Hindus for practical reasons, as there is only one Sikh congregations in the entire survey dataset. Our religious tradition variable does not entail the same level of specificity for all religions, since religions, traditions, and sub-traditions have widely different numbers of congregations, both in our survey samples and in the censuses populations.

Funding

Both waves of the National Congregation Study Switzerland have been funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

First wave FNS grant number: 4058-115719

Second wave FNS grant number: 100015_192499 / 1

More results ...

... concerning changes with regard to the increasing environmental engagement of congregations, increasing domestic charity work, and changes in ritual style can be found on www.congregations.ch.