

Secularization and inclusivity. How local religious groups have changed in Switzerland, 2008 – 2022

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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. The method consisted in counting all local religious groups on the Swiss territory and conducting an interview with a representative sample of spiritual leaders about attributes and activities of their local religious group. This paper shows two results. We find, first, a continuing secularization: the number of local groups in Switzerland has declined and the mean age of leaders and followers has increased significantly. Second, we find an overall growing inclusivity among local religious groups with a higher acceptance of homosexuals and a higher acceptance and practice of female religious leadership. There are, however, important differences between religious traditions and several exceptions to the general trends.

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". Since local religious groups are institutions providing values, meaning, and social support for many citizens, it is useful to know how the religious field changes over time, notably with respect to two current debates.

There is a debate about secularization in Switzerland and in Europe in general. Some have argued that there is an overall secularization of society (Bruce, 2011; Stolz, 2020; Stolz et al., 2022). But others have maintained that we do not see secularization, but rather religious change (Cipriani, 2017; Gauthier, 2020; Müller, 2020). According to one argument of the latter group of scholars, religious

decline is mainly about the large recognized Christian churches (Reformed, Catholic); whereas not recognized Christians (e.g., Evangelicals, Orthodox), and non-Christian spiritual groups are supposed to be stable or even growing. As a result, according to this argument, modern society should not so much be described as secularizing but as showing increasing religious diversity (Griera, 2018; Martinez-Arino, 2018; Vertovec, 2007). Our results contribute to this debate by showing that there is a trend of secularization in the religious field in general, not just among recognized Christian groups. There are exceptions, with certain religious traditions even growing over time, but these cases cannot compensate for the overall secularizing trend.

Another debate concerns the inclusivity of different religious traditions. Post-industrial societies have in the last decades moved very quickly towards greater inclusivity regarding female leadership and acceptance of non-traditional sexual lifestyles such as homosexuality (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Many religions have in this context appeared as "backwards" since they take more patriarchal positions than the societal mainstream (Poushter & Kent, 2020; Stolz & Monnot, 2019; Tausch, 2025). While it is undisputed that there are very large differences regarding inclusivity between the societal mainstream and various religious traditions, it is useful to also observe the *trends* among local religious congregations of different religious traditions regarding inclusivity. For example, it may be that religious traditions are relatively less inclusive, but that they move towards more inclusivity. Our results contribute to this debate by pointing out a relatively slow overall trend towards more inclusivity regarding the acceptance of homosexuality and a sequential trend towards more acceptance and practice of female religious leadership also among local religious groups in Switzerland. There are, however, important differences between religious traditions regarding such changes.

This study thus addresses the following *research question*: How have the attributes and activities of local religious groups in Switzerland changed between 2008 and 2022? We focus on two main findings: secularization and inclusivity of local religious groups. However, more results can be found on www.congregations.ch.

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).

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.

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%).

Secularization: less groups and less participants

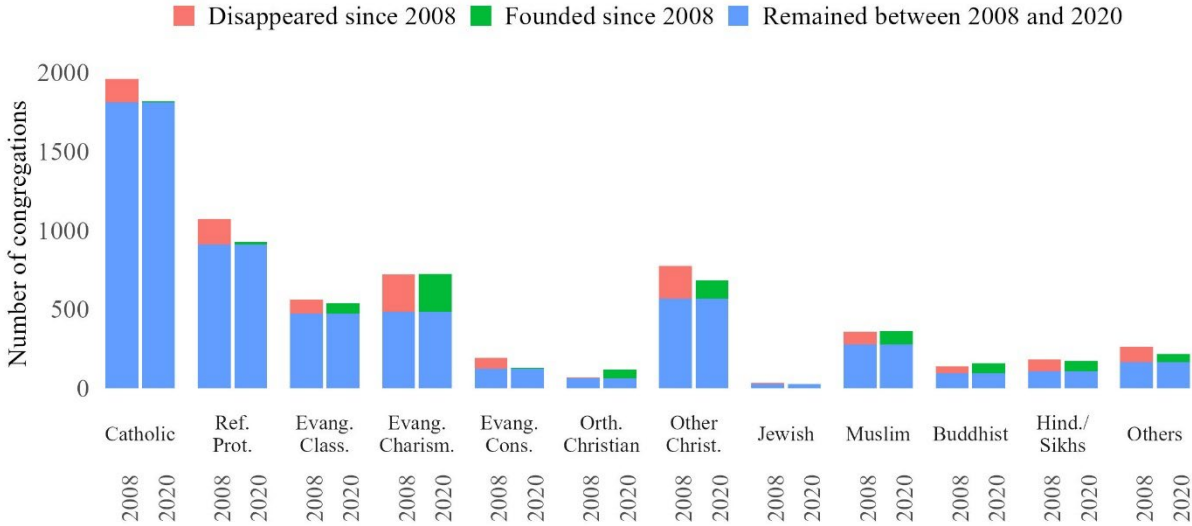
Between 2008 and 2020, the total number of local religious groups as well as the number of regular participants in religious rituals has decreased. The number of local religious groups has decreased from 6,341 to 5,883 groups (Senn et al., 2024). This represents a decrease of 7.2%. With the increase 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.

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. Note that

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'.

these numbers are based on the estimations of regular participants by the key informants.

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



Note: Census data, 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.

First, 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.

Second, the situation is very different for the Evangelical Charismatic (or: Pentecostal) tradition. This tradition is worldwide growing (Zurlo et al., 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 be explained by the fact that it is quite difficult for Muslims to find spaces for new mosques (Monnot, 2013).

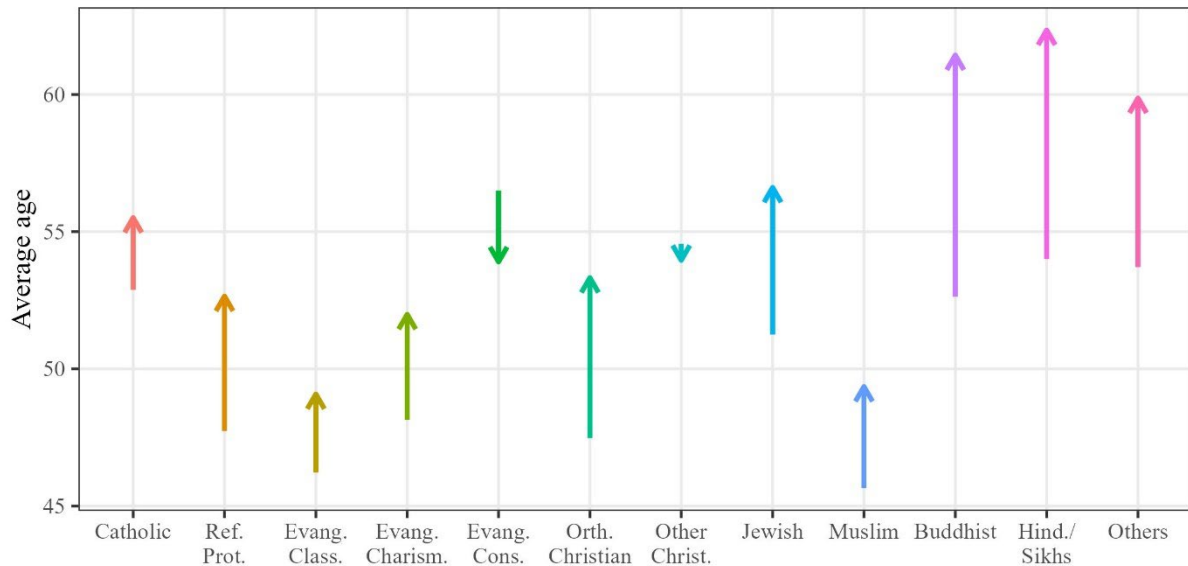
Secularization: Higher average age of leaders and regular participants

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 (Appendix Figure A1). 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. When judging the percentages of regular participants, we have to remember that they are not based on counts but on estimations made by the key informants.

Figure 2. Average age of spiritual leaders, by religious tradition (2008 and 2022)



Notes:

- (1) Start of arrow: percentage in 2008; end of arrow: percentage in 2022.
- (2) Changes are significant at least at < 0.05 alpha level except for Evang. Cons., Orth. Christian, Other Christian, Jewish and Muslim.

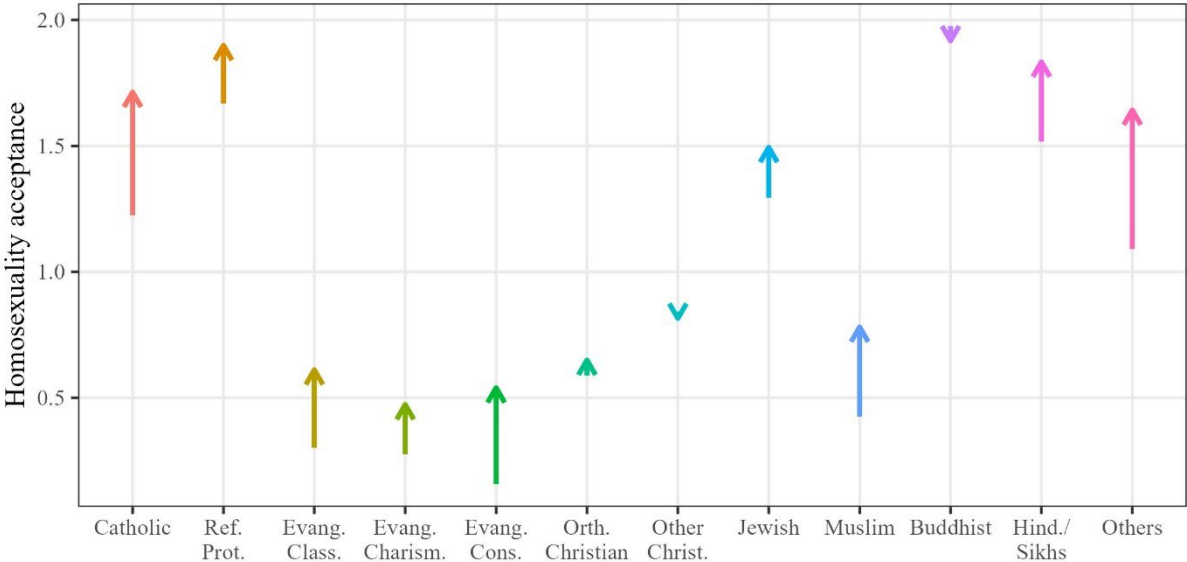
Inclusivity: More openness to homosexuality

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 increase in the acceptance of homosexuals can be found across the religious spectrum but starting at very different levels. Figure 3 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 3. Evolution of inclusivity towards homosexual people, by religious tradition (2008 and 2022)



Notes:

- (1) Start of arrow: percentage in 2008; end of arrow: percentage in 2022.
- (2) Changes are significant at < 0.05 level except Orth. Christian, Other Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Hind./Sikhs.

Inclusivity: More openness to and practice of female religious leadership

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 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). These general changes are not very large, but they are statistically significant.

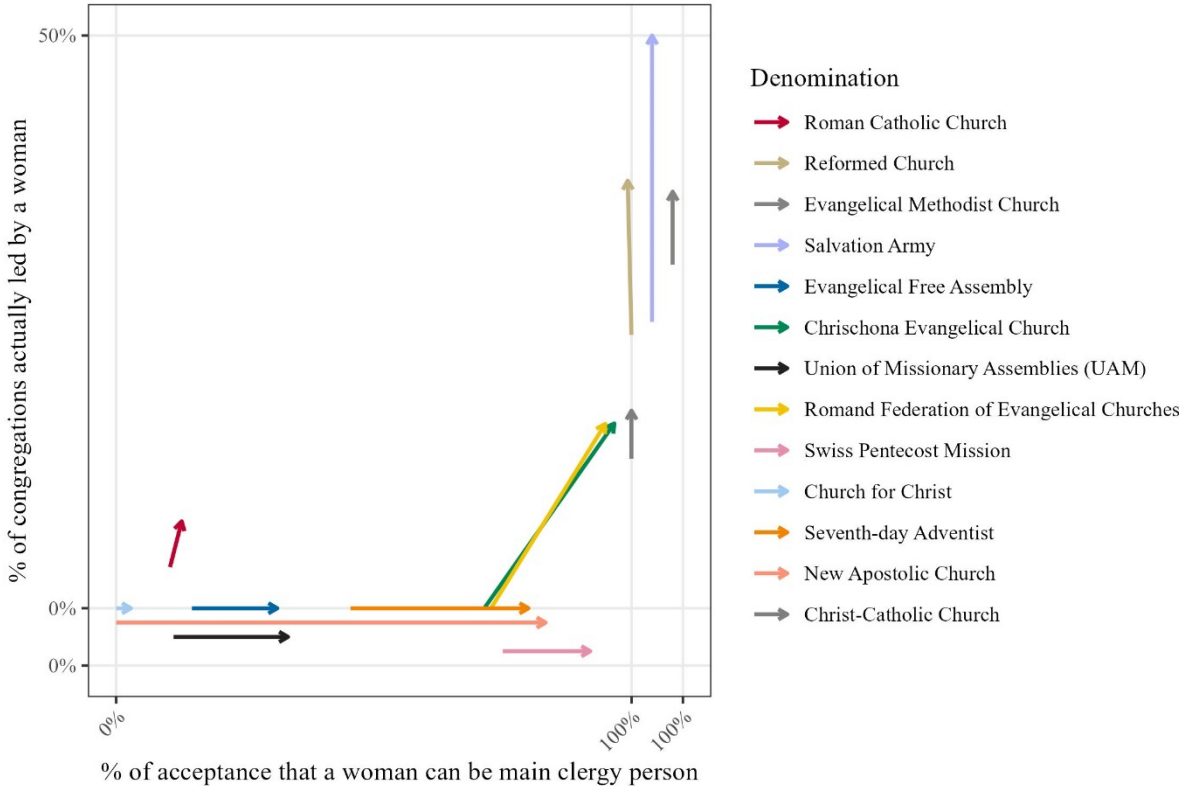
However, these small overall changes are created by developments only in some of the religious traditions. In fact, the higher acceptance of female religious leadership is mainly due to changes among Classical Evangelical, Conservative Evangelical, Other Christian, and Others. The higher female leadership in practice is mainly due to changes among Reformed Protestant, Evangelical

Classical, and Buddhist. Several religious traditions show little, no, or even negative changes in the acceptance of female religious leadership in principle or practice. This is the case of Conservative Evangelicals, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Hindu/Sikhs (Appendix Figure A1 and Figure A2).

The religious traditions that have mainly changed the principle of female religious leadership are not the same as those that have mainly changed the practice. How can this be explained? To see the answer to this riddle, we observe denominations/federations separately (selecting only congregations from denominations with more than 7 observations).

Figure 4 shows a very clear *sequential pattern*: First, the percentage of congregations in a denomination that say a woman can in principle be a religious leader rises; in a second step, the number of actual female religious leaders rises. This means that it takes time for congregations united in a federation to come to a common view that women can be religious leaders; only when this view is shared among congregations can the process of filling positions with women leaders begin - and this in turn takes time.

Figure 4. Normative openness to female leadership and actual female leadership, by denominations (2008 and 2022)



Notes:

(1) Only denominations with at least 8 observations for each axis are displayed.

- (2) Start of arrow: percentage in 2008; end of arrow: percentage in 2022.
(3) We have extended the 100% value on the x-axis and the 0% value on the y-axis to small ranges to improve readability.

Conclusion

This study has presented two key findings regarding changes in the religious landscape on the level of local religious groups in Switzerland.

First, there is a continuing secularization trend not just among recognized Christian Churches (Reformed Protestant and Catholic), but across the religious field. The overall number of religious groups and overall participants at religious rituals every weekend has declined. The average age of both leaders and members has increased - more so than comparative groups in society in general. Surprisingly, this phenomenon can be found not only among the recognized Christian churches (Catholic, Reformed-Protestant), but also among non-recognized Christian groups and among non-Christian groups. This result contradicts the idea that secularization is only a phenomenon of recognized large churches. It has to be noted, however, that exceptions exist (e.g., Orthodox churches are growing). The larger significance of these findings is that the forces of secularization seem to impact the religious field in general more than was previously thought.

Second, there is a trend towards more inclusivity. Local religious groups have become on average more open to the possibility of having homosexual members and leaders and to the possibility and practice of female leadership. These trends are significant, but only visible for certain religious traditions. Focusing on denominations (federations), we find a clear sequence: In a first step, denominations become over time more open to female religious leadership. Once the principle has been recognized, they take a second step by "filling up positions" with women. The larger significance of these findings is that there is clear evidence of movement towards more inclusivity in the religious field, even among religious traditions that are seen as conservative, even if these changes are slow.

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

Other 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.

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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.

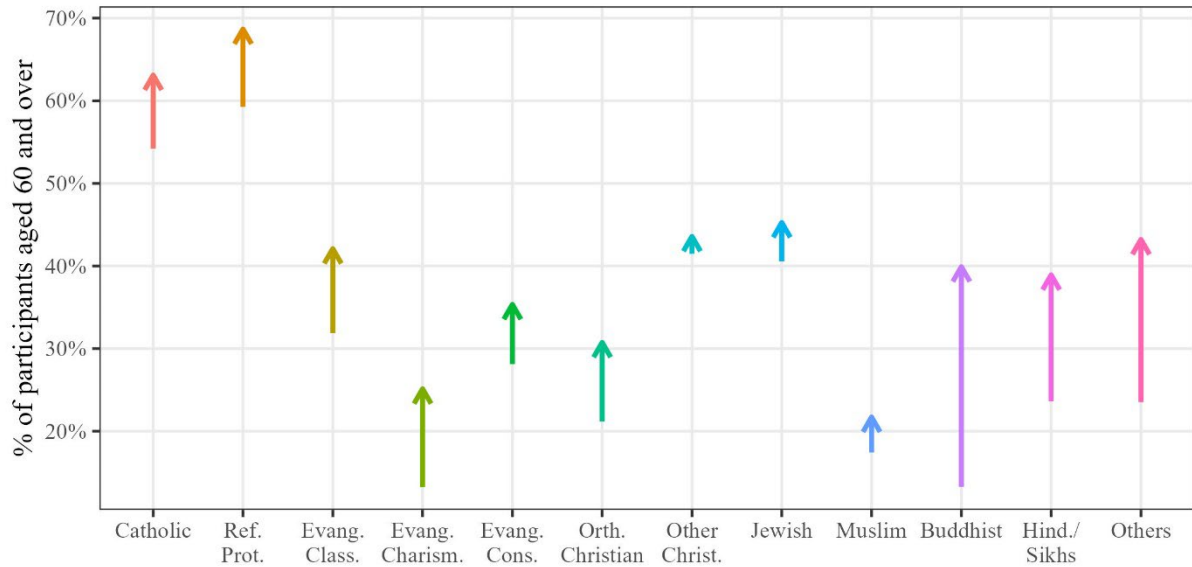
Note on religious traditions

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/Sikh; (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.

Additional Figures

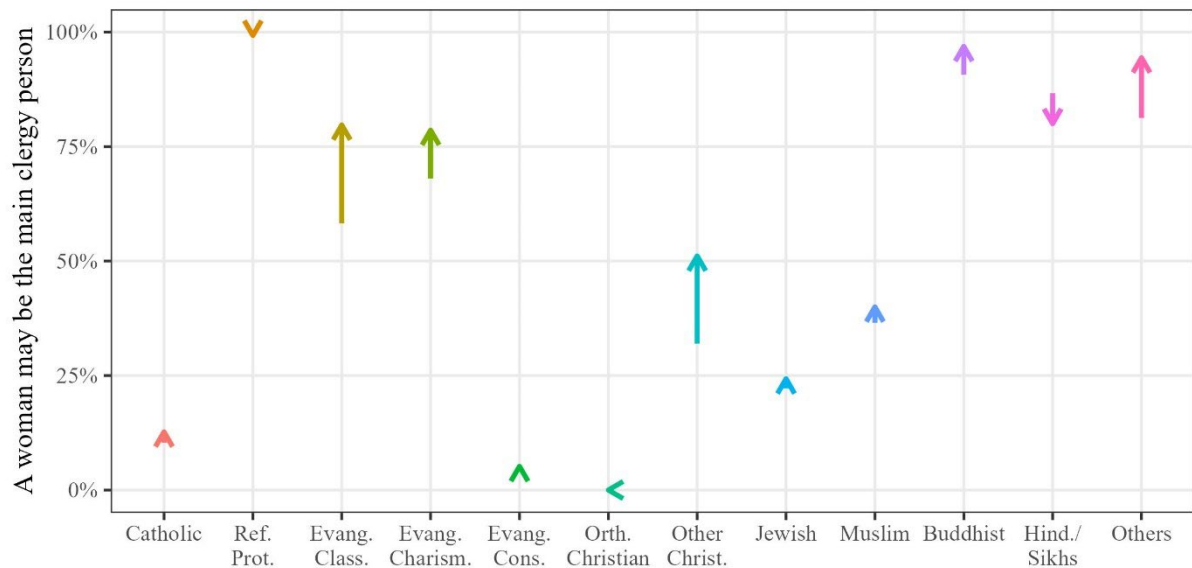
Figure A1. Estimated percentage of regular participants aged 60 and over, by religious tradition (2008 and 2022)



Notes:

- (1) Start of arrow: percentage in 2008; end of arrow: percentage in 2022.
- (2) Changes are significant at least at < 0.05 alpha level except for Evang. Cons., Orth. Christian, Other Christian, Jewish, and Muslim.

Figure A2. Normative openness of female religious leadership in different religious traditions (2008 and 2022)

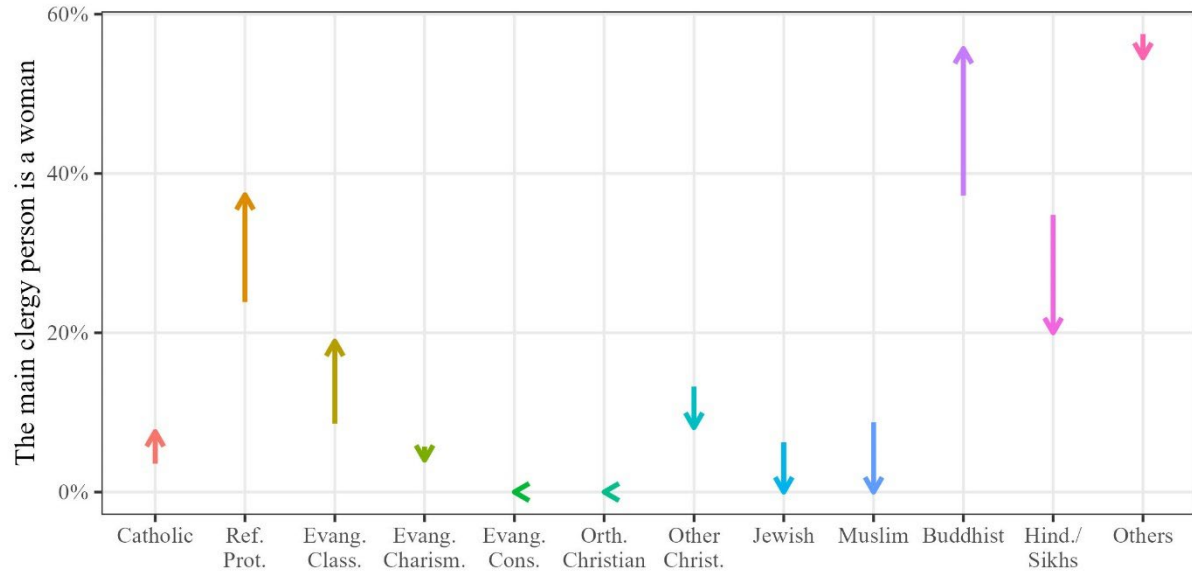


Notes:

- (1) Start of arrow: percentage in 2008; end of arrow: percentage in 2022.

(2) Changes are significant at least at < 0.05 alpha level only for Evang. Class., Other Christ. And Others.

Figure A3. Practice of female religious leadership in different religious traditions 2008 and 2022



Notes:

(1) Start of arrow: percentage in 2008; end of arrow: percentage in 2022.

(2) Changes are significant at least at < 0.05 alpha level only for Ref. Prot. and Evang. Class., and Muslim.

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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.