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# Socioeconomic Advantage or Community Attachment? A Register-Based Study on the Difference in National Lutheran Church Affiliation Between Finnish and Swedish Speakers in Finland

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*Secularization theory has been challenged by research showing religious persistence and upswing in contexts across the world. In Europe, particularly in highly secular and historically religiously homogeneous Nordic settings, there has been little research, and representative data for minority groups are rare. We offer a pioneering study using national register data to study religious changes over the past five decades in Finland, where the two native ethnolinguistic groups—Finnish and Swedish speakers—offer a unique study context. We use register data with yearly information on every individual's religious affiliation to compare the two groups, exploring the mechanisms behind any differentials. Swedish speakers are found to be consistently more affiliated with the National Lutheran Church than Finnish speakers. This finding contradicts the expectation of modernization theory because the Swedish-speaking population is, in some aspects, socioeconomically advantaged in Finnish society. The higher affiliation level of Swedish speakers can be partly explained by lower levels of internal migration, which is possibly driven by stronger community attachment. Our results suggest that community cohesion may help preserve the religious tradition of a minority group, even in the absence of socioeconomic disadvantages or threats from the majority.*

**Keywords:** register-based research on religion, divergence of secularization, modernization, community attachment, Swedish-speaking Finns.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, the research on secularization and postsecularization trends in the West has been extensive. On the one hand, it is generally believed that most European societies have reached or are approaching stable secularity, with the Nordic countries being the most secular, with very low levels of religious beliefs and practices (Voas 2008; Voas and Doebler 2011).

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On the other hand, there has been increasing criticism of secularization theories because they tend to depict secularization driven by modern education, economic security, or individualization as a trend that will be expressed similarly across different contexts (De Graaf 2013; Stolz 2020). On the contrary, research has often shown differences that do not confirm such a generalized pattern both across or within countries, where religiosity has been persistent or even sometimes rising over time (Stolz and Voas 2023; Wallis and Bruce 1992).

One key factor in resisting religious decline is the desire to maintain religious identity under social, political, and cultural threats, which is also often the case for denominational, ethnic, and regional minorities in the population that remain relatively more religious; notable examples include Muslim immigrants in Europe and Catholics in Canada (Müller 2020; Stolz 2021; Wilkins-Laflamme 2016). Ethnic or religious minorities have retained stronger religious traditions during growing secularization because religion can play a vital role in maintaining a community's identity, cultural symbols, and practices (Brown, Taylor, and Chatters 2013; Taylor et al. 1996; Wilkins-Laflamme 2016). However, it is also usually the case that the same groups are socioeconomically more marginalized groups and face discrimination, such as African and Hispanic Americans and Muslim immigrants in Europe (Cadge and Howard Ecklund 2007; van Tubergen 2007; Voas and Fleischmann 2012). In this regard, the role of cultural identity in maintaining the religiosity of minority groups is often intertwined with socioeconomic disadvantage, early socialization in the country of origin, and discrimination. Beyond these interrelations, the literature has primarily focused on comparisons of natives and immigrants in Europe or native-born populations from different religious traditions, such as White and African Americans in the United States or Protestants and Catholics in European countries. From a European perspective, data limitations are a crucial factor that has undermined such studies. Most European countries are highly secular and, until recently, ethnically homogeneous. Thus, the religiosity of minority groups can hardly be covered in an accurate and representative way using regular surveys, which generally have limited sample sizes. The literature is even more scant when comparing the religiosity of native groups with minority groups, especially for native minorities, who share similar religious traditions with the majority population.

In the present article, we take advantage of the particular context of Finland to investigate the religious affiliation of two ethnolinguistic groups: Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking Finns.<sup>1</sup> Finnish and Swedish are co-official languages in Finland and are completely linguistically unrelated to each other. Around 5 percent of the population are registered as having Swedish as their unique mother tongue. In addition, Swedish speakers hold a strong ethnic minority identity that differs from that of the Finnish-speaking majority (McRae et al. 1999). For both groups, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (referred to as the National Lutheran Church in the text) is the predominant religious denomination.

In terms of socioeconomic status, Swedish speakers in Finland have some educational and labor market advantages over Finnish speakers (Saarela 2006; Saarela and Finnäs 2003a), which could lead to the expectation that they would be more secular, at least according to the modernization argument in the secularization theory (Inglehart 1997; Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009). However, it is also known that Swedish speakers have strong cohesion in and attachment to their ethnic community (Nyqvist et al. 2008; Reini and Saarela 2017), which may predict that they could be more active in the religious community (Berger 2011 [1967]; Wilkins-Laflamme 2016). Hence, this case is exceptional in that we can compare two ethnic groups that are both native and share the same religious tradition and where the minority is not socially or economically deprived. Moreover, we deploy the unique religious affiliation register available in Finland, which documents the religious affiliation of each resident of the entire population from 1971 to 2020.

<sup>1</sup>English usage of these terms have generally been inconsistently applied. In the current study, Finns refer to all nationals in Finland, Finnish speakers to the ethnolinguistic group registered with Finnish as their unique mother tongue, and Swedish speakers to the ethnolinguistic group registered with Swedish as their unique mother tongue.

These data provide a comprehensive picture of the religious dynamics in highly secular Finland and can account even for small minority groups. To the best of our knowledge, the present study is the first to use population-level administrative data to study trends in religious affiliation.

We present the trends of religious affiliation for Swedish and Finnish speakers in Finland, further examining the trends by denomination, cohort, region, and socioeconomic status. We show that, despite their socioeconomic advantage, the Swedish-speaking minority population has constantly had higher levels of religious affiliation compared with the Finnish-speaking majority over the past five decades, and the difference has even increased over time. The affiliation levels are higher among Swedish speakers than Finnish speakers in all socioeconomic groups, which can mainly be attributed to a higher affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church among Swedish speakers. We argue that Swedish speakers' stronger attachment to their home community, as shown in their low intensity of internal migration, explains part of their higher affiliation level with the National Lutheran Church, although this mediating effect is modest. Community cohesion can be important for a minority group to maintain its religious tradition, even when there is no socioeconomic or cultural deprivation.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### Ethnicity and Religion in Finland

The Swedish-speaking community in Finland has a long history dating back to the Swedish rule over Finland that started in the 13th century. For a long period, Swedish was the administrative language spoken among the elites, but it was also the everyday language of a substantial part of the population living in the western half of contemporary Finland. Finland became part of Russia in 1809, and after the country's independence in 1917, both Swedish and Finnish have been designated as the official languages in Finland. Although bilingualism is common, particularly among registered Swedish speakers, a number of institutions have been established for preserving the Swedish language. From a comparative perspective, there are few political or other conflicts between the two ethnolinguistic groups (McRae et al. 1999; Obućina and Saarela 2020). The Swedish-speaking population in Finland has always lived concentrated on the western and southern coasts—as well as on the semiautonomous Åland Islands (Saarela 2021). Ethnolinguistic identity has persisted over generations. Inter-marriage between the groups has been frequent, and during the past four decades, interethnic couples have been more likely to register their children as having a Swedish mother tongue rather than Finnish, especially when the mother is a Swedish speaker (Obućina and Saarela 2020; Saarela, Kolk, and Obućina 2020).

Since its independence, Finland has had two co-official national churches: the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Orthodox Church of Finland. They are equivalent to state churches in other Nordic countries, enjoying privileged status and holding important ceremonial and administrative roles, such as marriage and taxation. This is especially the case for the National Lutheran Church, to which the majority of the country's population still belongs. From the perspective of religious market theory (Stark and Finke 2000), the National Lutheran Church can be regarded as a "religious monopoly," which is the state-sponsored privilege and dominance of one religious denomination. Such monopoly is often considered to impose an oppressive negative image on the denomination, making it decline drastically once the privilege is weakened by individualization deregulation and religious pluralization (Stark and Finke 2000). The Orthodox Church, representing only about 1 percent of the population, does not have such monopoly status, despite being a conational church. The Swedish-speaking minority has its own diocese within the National Lutheran Church, which operates across the Swedish-speaking regions (Holm 1991).

Like the other Nordic countries, Finland is highly secular, with only 30 percent of the population believing in God and less than 10 percent attending services regularly (Taira 2017), and numbers are still declining (Kääriäinen 2005). Since 2003, the previous religious education in

primary and secondary schools has been reformed to nonconfessional classes covering general knowledge about religions. According to data from the European Social Survey, religious membership and self-rated religiosity in Finland have remained high in recent years, while religious attendance is low and the frequency of praying is at an intermediate level (Figures A2.1–A2.4 in the Appendices of the Supporting Information). The share of the population affiliated with the National Lutheran Church has decreased from over 90 percent in the 1980s to less than 70 percent by 2020. Many are nominal members with substantive self-rated religiosity but low religious practice, so instead, it is likely that members find more meaning in the traditions that the church represent (Iversen 2006). The main reasons for people leaving the National Lutheran Church include not sharing values and beliefs, dissatisfaction with the church's position on morality issues, and avoidance of paying church taxes<sup>2</sup> (Äystö et al. 2022; Niemelä 2015). The Orthodox Church declined until the 1990s at a similar rate as the National Lutheran Church before rising later with the influx of immigrants. At the same time, many minority religions have remained stable and have even grown somewhat in size. A growing number of minority religions reflects increasing international migration to Finland but also the potential that people with strong religious beliefs often find their identity within smaller denominations characterized by greater religiosity among their members when compared with those in the National Lutheran Church.

### **Socioeconomic Differences and Religious Affiliation**

European societies have drastically secularized in the postwar era (Voas 2008; Voas and Doebler 2011). The most widely acknowledged explanation for secularization is found in the broad set of sociological theories that together can be referred to as modernization theory. In premodern societies, religion was often an omnipotent institution that not only provided moral and spiritual guidance, but also dominated people's worldviews and social relations. With modernization, many of the functional needs that religion fulfilled in traditional societies have been gradually replaced by modern science, the market economy, and the welfare state (Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009). People who grow up in economic security and prosperity are less likely to be shaped by traditional and religious norms that regulate interpersonal relations (Inglehart 1997). Similarly, the modern educational system undermines the legitimacy of religion as a source of one's worldview (Hungerman 2014; Norris and Inglehart 2004). However, evidence on modernization leading to secularization has been mostly limited to between-country comparisons (Stolz 2020). Although people living in more educated and wealthy countries tend to be more secular, the effect of individual-level socioeconomic status on religiosity is rather mixed and is often still small when in line with modernization theory's expectation (Höllinger and Muckenhuber 2019; Molteni 2020; Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009). The weak impact of socioeconomic status in decreasing religiosity on the individual level suggests that modernization theory may be operating on the society level; that is, people rely less on religion under modern social institutions and norms in society overall or may be confounded by the fact that the societies have undergone very different paralleling historical processes of modernization and secularization (Höllinger and Muckenhuber 2019; Stolz 2020).

Together with other Nordic countries, Finland is, in nearly all aspects, a highly modernized society. The people in Finland largely embrace the values and institutions associated with modernization, living in a society with high levels of economic development, a strong universalistic welfare state that provides social benefits and free education, gender-egalitarian values, and a high level of trust in public institutions, experts, and the natural sciences, all of which correspond to a high extent of secularity (Furseth 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Ruiter and van

<sup>2</sup>Church tax is levied by the national churches at a flat rate of 1 percent to 2 percent, depending on the parish.

Tubergen 2009). However, it is unclear how socioeconomic factors explain religious differences at the individual level and how this contributes to ethnolinguistic differences.

Previous research has documented that the Swedish-speaking population has a socioeconomic advantage over the Finnish-speaking population, particularly in terms of education, but to some extent also in the areas of employment, income, and wealth, even though the regional variation is considerable (Härtull and Saarela 2021; Saarela 2006; Saarela and Finnäs 2003a, 2003b, 2004).<sup>3</sup> These ethnolinguistic differentials can be partly related to inheritance from previous generations as a legacy of the historical Swedish-speaking elite. If modernization theory holds at the individual level in Finland, we should see the Swedish speakers as being more secular because they have a higher socioeconomic position than Finnish speakers, as well as broader access to higher education.

### Community Cohesion and Religious Affiliation

Besides the inconsistent findings on the role of individual socioeconomic status, another major challenge to modernization theory is the counterevidence of religious persistence or revival, even in some high-income countries. Notable deviant examples are Ireland, Poland, and the United States, where religion has maintained a strong public presence under socioeconomic development, as well as immigrants who have stayed religious after migrating to a more secular society (Stolz and Voas 2023; Wallis and Bruce 1992). These situations are often because of the importance of ethnoreligious identity reacting to the perceived or actual threats outside the community, for instance, the role of the Catholic Church in resisting communist repression in Poland (Stolz and Voas 2023). Similarly, in more secular Western countries, ethnic, racial, or religious minorities such as African Americans, Canadian Catholics, and Muslim immigrants in Europe also maintain higher levels of religiosity because religious tradition is integrated as a part of the community's cultural preservation (Brown, Taylor, and Chatters 2013; Voas and Fleischmann 2012; Wilkins-Laflamme 2016). Religiosity has also been argued to be reinforced among native religious fundamentalist groups in Western societies because they may feel threats from secularization (Schnabel 2016). Having a unique identity alone does not necessarily ensure the preservation of religion. Mutual reinforcement between religious communities and group cohesion is a classic theme in the sociology of religion. Researchers such as Durkheim have suggested that religion contributes to a "moral community" that helps form within-group identification and maintain group cohesion and norms (Durkheim 1965 [1912], 1979 [1897]). Furthermore, group homogeneity may strengthen religiosity in the community, suggesting that religion is an overarching "sacred canopy" that grounds itself on established authority (Berger 2011 [1967]). When a group or society becomes increasingly diverse, this authority will be damaged, which may lead to dissolution (Berger 2011 [1967]; Olson et al. 2020).

Group identity and community cohesion may also be relevant to any potential ethnolinguistic differences in religious affiliation in Finland. Many dimensions of the Swedish-speaking population in Finland have been related to an expansive civil society. With a distinct identity, combined with well-functioning private, public, and third-sector infrastructures, Swedish speakers have maintained a strong and cohesive cultural community. It has also been argued that Swedish speakers have richer social capital than Finnish speakers in terms of civic participation, close contact, and generalized trust (Hyypä and Mäki 2001; Nyqvist et al. 2008). They have lower divorce and separation rates (Finnäs 1997; Saarela and Finnäs 2014), lower internal migration rates (Saarela 2006), and stronger intergenerational transmission of their ethnolinguistic identity (Obućina and Saarela 2020; Saarela, Kolk, and Obućina 2020), which is also true in mixed unions.

<sup>3</sup>We also present the trends of socioeconomic differences between Finnish- and Swedish-speakers in Finland until recent times in Figures A3.1–A3.4 in the Appendices (Supporting Information).

The advantage of community cohesion has been argued to contribute to better overall health and lower mortality (Nygqvist et al. 2008; Saarela and Kolk 2021). In this sense, the more strongly self-identified and cohesive Swedish-speaking community in Finland may have a higher church affiliation, especially in light of the fact that they maintain their own diocese within the umbrella of the National Lutheran Church (Holm 1991). Arguments linking cultural cohesion with religion may be particularly salient in a Nordic context, where membership in the national church plays an important part in coming-of-age ceremonies such as confirmation and life course transitions such as weddings and funerals. These are all contexts that may be more strongly linked to social and cultural capital than church membership as a marker of deep personal religiosity and faith. The fact that Swedish speakers maintain their own Swedish-language services through the National Lutheran Church may contribute to maintaining their identity through church affiliation.

Hence, community cohesion should predict a higher level of religious affiliation among Swedish speakers when compared with Finnish speakers, while socioeconomic advantage would predict a lower level of religious affiliation. In light of these two contrasting theoretical expectations, we propose two competing hypotheses regarding ethnolinguistic differences in religious affiliation in Finland:

*Hypothesis 1. Swedish speakers have a lower religious affiliation compared with Finnish speakers in Finland, which can be explained by their higher socioeconomic status.*

*Hypothesis 2. Swedish speakers have a higher religious affiliation than Finnish speakers in Finland, which can be explained by the stronger community cohesion.*

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

### The Administrative Data on Religious Affiliation in Finland

We use national administrative register data on religious affiliation collected by the government of Finland. The data are administrative records of each individual's congregation for the entire Finnish population, which has been provided by Statistics Finland. In Finland, all registered religious communities have the legal obligation to annually report a list of their members to the state authority. This is not limited to the two national churches but also minor denominations, such as Islam, Catholicism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and so forth, that have ever registered under the Ministry of Education and Culture. Membership registration is crucial for the community to obtain state funding, which depends on the size of the community. Registration is also important for people who wish to be engaged in denomination-related activities, such as state-provided education on religious knowledge in public schools for the children. The registered information is longitudinal, measuring the religious affiliation of all individuals at the end of each calendar year. Our data cover the period from 1971 to 2020 and have been linked to other administrative data sources for information on mother tongue, socioeconomic status, mortality, the municipality of residence, demographic variables, internal and international migration, and so forth. To the best of our knowledge, these are the first and only comprehensive national panel data with individual-level information on religious affiliation across a diverse set of religions over several decades. Finland is unique among other northern European countries in that it maintains high-quality administrative registers on each individual's religious denomination beyond the state/national church.

Our data contain the full population at the individual level and include sensitive information, especially on religious and ethnolinguistic affiliation, meaning that high-standard ethical practices in the field of registered-based research need to be followed.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>The data are fully anonymized and deidentified, stored by Statistics Finland, and only accessible for researchers via a remote-access platform protected by secure VPN and multilevel password system. Analyses and presentation of the

## Measurements

*National Lutheran Church affiliation.* The outcome variable in focus here is individual-level religious affiliation (or nonaffiliation). The raw data document affiliation with detailed denominational information. For parsimony, we categorize them into the following: (1) National Lutheran Church, (2) nonaffiliated, and (3) other denominations. The National Lutheran Church affiliation, which is coded as a dummy, is the main focus of the present article because it is the predominant denomination for both Swedish and Finnish speakers. The current study primarily focuses on members of the National Lutheran Church and nonaffiliated people.

In our data, religious attendance, beliefs, or values cannot be captured, which is problematic from the perspective that the vast majority of the members of the National Lutheran Church are nominal and only a few attend church weekly or monthly. However, we argue that affiliation in the state church can be an indication of cultural belonging to the national or ethnic community and is a valuable outcome to inquire about, even if distinct from, religiosity (Iversen 2006). Affiliation with the National Lutheran Church means that a person pays more taxes, which will accumulate to quite large sums over one's life, particularly for high-income earners. In fact, dissatisfaction with the church tax is one of the main reasons why Finnish people withdraw from the church (Niemelä 2015). The choice to exit the national church is also a minority choice (most individuals remain members), and individuals who make this choice are likely to be genuinely more secular and less religious than individuals who remain in the national church. For other denominations, affiliation likely reflects deeper personal religiosity to a greater extent because membership is then often a conscious choice. To provide a more comprehensive picture of the religiosity of Finnish- and Swedish-speaking Finns, we complement the study with statistics from European Social Survey data 2010–2020 (Figures A2.1–A2.4 in the Appendices of the Supporting Information).

*Ethnolinguistic affiliation.* Another unique administrative source that we utilize is ethnolinguistic—or language—registration in Finland. To provide all citizens with services, each person must be registered with one unique “mother tongue” (the term used in Finnish statistics), which is usually decided by parents recently after birth, and the information is updated annually. Thus, the mother tongue is a strong indicator of ethnicity, especially for the Swedish-speaking community with its high levels of intergenerational transmission of ethnolinguistic identity (Obućina and Saarela 2020). In line with previous research (Reini and Saarela 2017; Saarela and Kolk 2021), we code individuals into Swedish speakers if they have ever been registered as a Swedish speaker and into Finnish speakers if they have ever been registered as a Finnish speaker and never as a Swedish speaker. Others, who predominantly are foreign-born or children of foreign-born immigrants, are coded as having any other mother tongue and are not the focus; they are excluded from the analysis. Because few people change their registered mother tongue over their life course, alternative coding schemes would end up in almost similar results.<sup>5</sup>

*Socioeconomic status.* The socioeconomic indicators include educational level (primary, secondary, and tertiary) and individual income (adjusted with the consumer price index and divided into four quantiles with no income as a separate category), both of which have been derived from administrative registers.<sup>6</sup>

results are regulated, and researchers are not allowed to investigate or reveal information about single or small groups of individuals. Our study is covered by ethical approval from Statistics Finland (TK-53-1370-17).

<sup>5</sup>We show a comparison of mother tongue affiliation using raw data and our categorization in Table A2 in the Appendices of the Supporting Information.

<sup>6</sup>These variables are available quinquennially from 1970 to 1985 and annually starting from 1987. Information for religious affiliation is available annually from 1971 to 2020. The year 1975 is consequently the first time point when both these variables can be analyzed together.



*Community attachment.* We proxy attachment to one's home community with internal mobility, which measures whether a person currently lives in their municipality of birth.<sup>7</sup> The results are consistent if we repeat the analysis measuring mobility at the region level (available upon request).

*Other variables.* Birth cohort, urban/rural residence, sex, and age group are included as basic demographic control variables in the multivariate models. Region fixed effects are included in all models to account for regional differences in socioeconomic, political, and cultural situations, and demographic composition.

## Analytical Process

We begin by displaying the trends of religious affiliation over the past five decades, which is done by comparing Finnish and Swedish speakers at the national level. This analysis is further broken down by age and cohort, educational level, and income.

Further, we use logistic regression models with robust standard errors to test how different individual-level characteristics contribute to the difference in religious affiliation between the two ethnolinguistic groups. The results are presented as average marginal effects to facilitate more straightforward interpretations. Hence, the estimated coefficients in the model would represent the change in the probability of the outcome, here conditioned on one-unit change for the dependent variable across all observations (Mood 2010).

We repeat the analysis for three different periods and, thus, can see if the socioeconomic determinants of affiliation have been stable over time. We first estimate the bivariate models for the ethnolinguistic difference in religious affiliation level and then include the control variables for socioeconomic and community attachment characteristics to examine how they may explain the main effect of ethnolinguistic groups. The analysis is carried out by comparing affiliation in three different years: 1975, 1997, and 2018. We also estimate linear probability (OLS regression) models to assess the robustness of the findings.

## FINDINGS

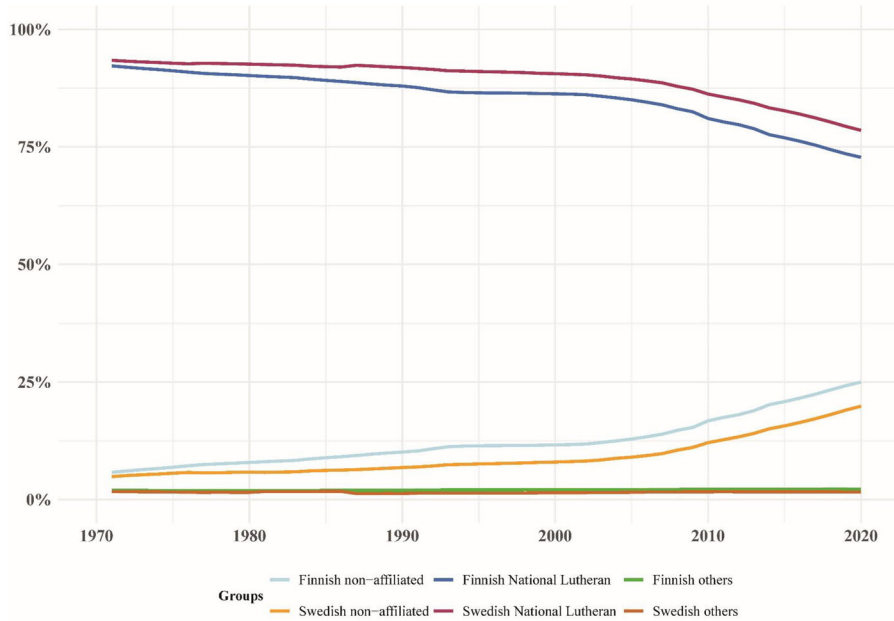
### Descriptive Results

Figure 1 presents the trends in affiliation levels over the past five decades in Finland for Finnish speakers and Swedish speakers. Overall, Finland underwent strong secularization during the period, with a strong increase in the proportion of the population not affiliated with the church. Both Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking Finns are primarily affiliated with the National Lutheran Church. When examining ethnolinguistic differences, Swedish speakers have at all time points been more affiliated with the National Lutheran Church and less nonaffiliated than Finnish speakers. This pattern is striking because it suggests that the higher educated and more economically advantaged Swedish-speaking minority is more religiously affiliated, which runs counter to Hypothesis 1. Thus, this is in contrast to the modernization theories linking educational and economic attainment to secularization (Inglehart 1997; Ruiters and van Tubergen 2009).

The National Lutheran affiliation level for Finnish speakers has dropped from 92 percent in 1971 to 73 percent in 2020. For Swedish speakers, it has dropped from 93 percent to 79 percent.

<sup>7</sup>Municipality refers to the second-level administrative division in Finland, which is *kunta* in Finnish and *kommun* in Swedish. Region refers to the first-level administrative division in Finland, which is *maakunta* in Finnish and *landskap* in Swedish.

Figure 1  
Affiliation level by ethnolinguistic groups, 1971–2020. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jscr.12906)]



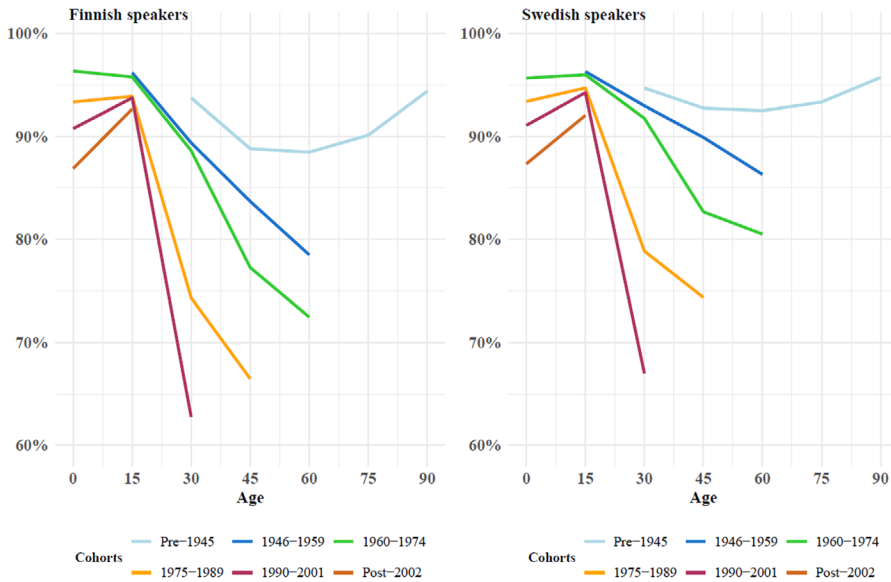
For both groups, the decline corresponds with a growth in the share of nonaffiliated people. Affiliation levels with other minor denominations have slightly increased for Finnish speakers and decreased for Swedish speakers but remain at very moderate levels. A large share of people with other mother tongues are nonaffiliated immigrants, and a couple of thousand belong to the Sami minority. Figure A1 in the Appendices of the Supporting Information presents how the affiliation levels in 2020 of the two main ethnolinguistic groups differ across geographic areas that have both Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking settlements, here following a standard classification scheme (cf. Saarela [2021] in Table A1 in the Appendices of the Supporting Information). In all of these areas, Swedish speakers have a higher affiliation level than Finnish speakers. In the municipality group with all other municipalities, which contains only about 5 percent of all Swedish speakers in Finland, the pattern is reversed, albeit smaller. This may indicate that people are assimilated into the norms of the other ethnolinguistic group if they do not reside in their “own” community, particularly for Swedish speakers.

In the following figures, we further explore the Finnish–Swedish difference in religious affiliation (for any denomination). In Figure 2, nonaffiliation of both groups is presented across birth cohort and age groups; it reveals that secularization has progressed substantially both between and within cohorts (cf. Inglehart 1997; Stolz 2020). For both groups, the affiliation levels have declined over cohorts and with age within cohorts (apart from people born before 1945). This within-cohort development is most likely attributed to life course influence. The life course effect of disaffiliation also tends to have grown stronger in later birth cohorts. Although Swedish speakers are more affiliated than Finnish speakers in all cohorts, the difference is fairly modest in the first years of life, even among the latest cohorts. This suggests that Swedish speakers, to a lesser extent than Finnish speakers, have been influenced by the life course effects of secularization.

Figure 3 demonstrates how religious affiliation level is associated with ethnolinguistic affiliation and income quantile for the working age population (aged 25–60 years) in 1975, 1997, and 2018. Across all three periods, there is no clear income gradient in the religious affiliation level for either Finnish or Swedish speakers, which does not match modernization theories. Instead,

Figure 2

Affiliation level by ethnolinguistic group, age, and birth cohort, 1971–2020. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



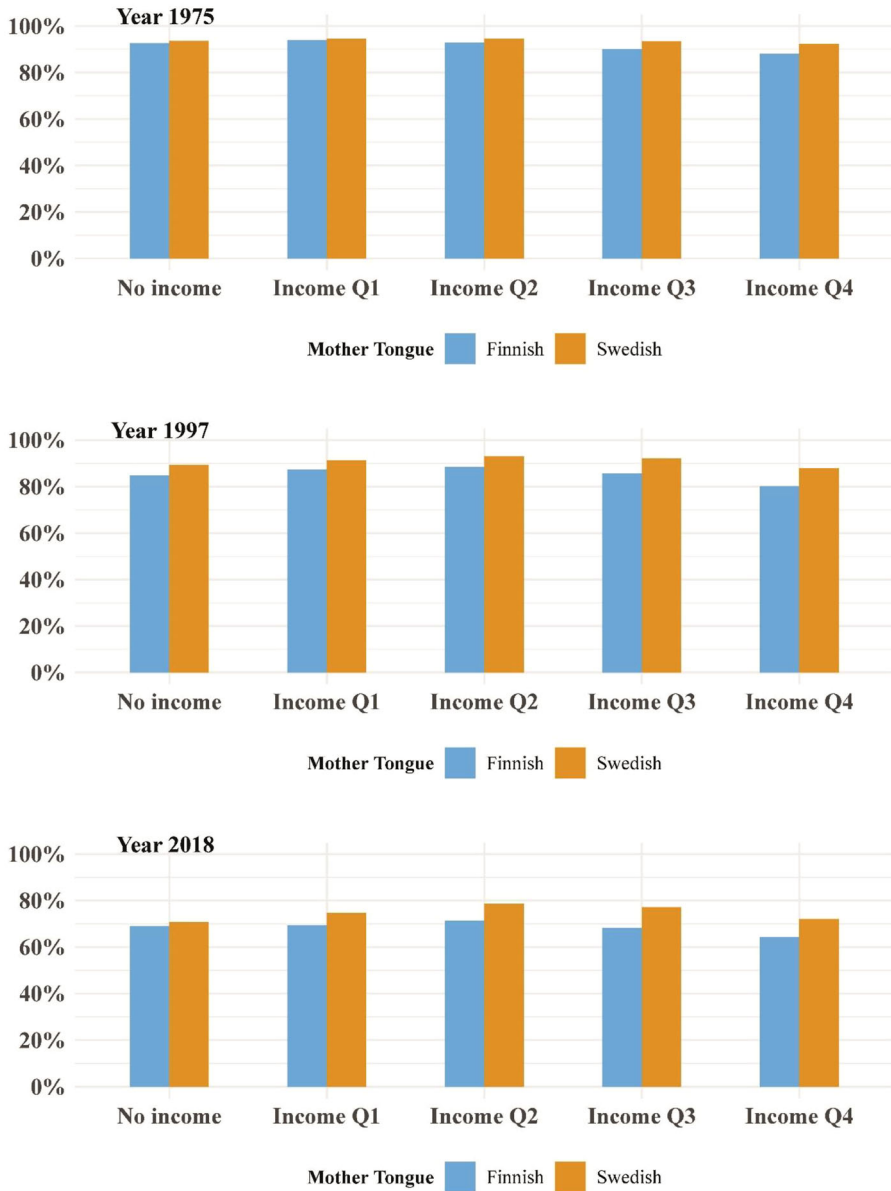
both groups show inverted U-shaped distributions of religious affiliation across income, and the differences have enlarged over time. Within each income group, the ethnolinguistic difference in religious affiliation was also higher in 2018 than in earlier years. For both ethnolinguistic groups, the middle-income categories are the most religiously affiliated. For Finnish speakers, the highest income group is the least affiliated, but for Swedish speakers, the least affiliated group turns out to be those without an income. The differences among socioeconomic groups are substantially small within the ethnolinguistic category.

Starting with the year 1975, Figure 4 shows how educational level is associated with nonaffiliation. For Swedish speakers, the tertiary-level educated are notably less religiously affiliated than the lower educated. For Finnish speakers, differences in religious affiliation by education are smaller but have grown during the past two decades. Swedish speakers with a tertiary-level education are consistently more affiliated than Finnish speakers with or without a tertiary-level education. Thus, the Swedish-speaking community seems to be less impacted by secularization during the modernization process.

### Regression Results

After presenting descriptive results we use logistic regressions to examine how the ethnolinguistic differences in National Lutheran affiliation are associated with different factors in 2018. Because the previous descriptive findings have shown that the major difference is that Swedish speakers are more affiliated with the National Lutheran Church compared with being nonaffiliated, we have restricted the analysis to members of the National Lutheran Church versus nonmembers. The descriptive statistics of individual-level variables across ethnolinguistic affiliations are shown in Table A3 in the Appendices (Supporting Information). The Swedish-speaking population consists of more men, are older, more rural, have higher educational and income levels, show greater affiliation with the National Lutheran Church, and are less likely to have migrated out from their home municipality. All models have controlled for region fixed effects. First, we estimate logistic models, with the regions controlled for. Results are presented in average marginal effects,

Figure 3  
 Affiliation level by income group: 1975, 1997, 2018 (age 25–60 years). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

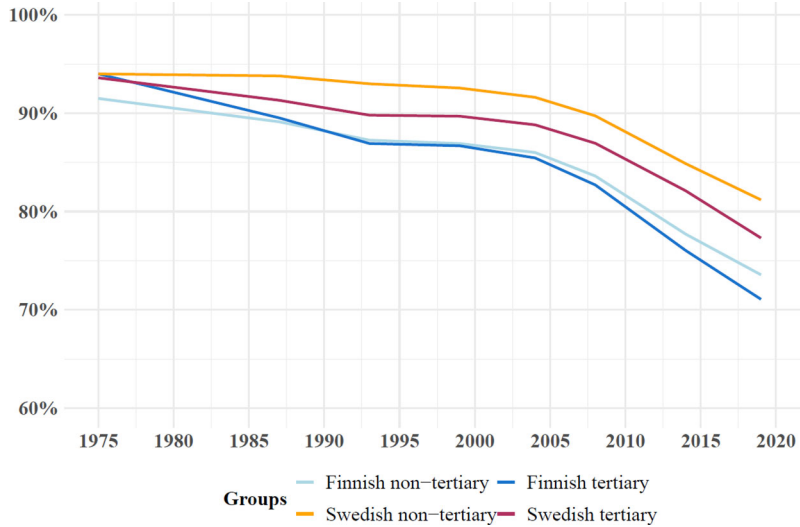


so the estimated coefficients show the average change in the probability of the outcome (National Lutheran Church affiliation) across the study population, conditioned on one-unit change for the dependent variable.

In Model 1 in Table 1, we provide the bivariate relationship, which shows that Swedish speakers are more affiliated with the National Lutheran Church. In our bivariate regressions, the effect size is a little over 7 percentage points. In Model 2, we additionally control for demographic characteristics, including gender, age group, and urban/rural division. Women, rural people, and older people tend to be more affiliated with the National Lutheran Church, which is in line with our

Figure 4

Affiliation level by education and ethnolinguistic group 1975–2019 (age  $\geq 25$  years). [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jssr.12906)]



descriptive results. The coefficient for being a Swedish speaker decreases from 0.072 to 0.069, meaning that roughly 04 percent of the ethnolinguistic difference in affiliation level can be explained by these characteristics. Swedish speakers are more rural and older than Finnish speakers.

In Model 3, we include socioeconomic variables. The affiliation level is associated with income levels in the form of a reversed U-shape. People with a secondary-level education turn out to be the least affiliated, followed by tertiary-level and primary-level education. These patterns are not consistent with a clear link between education and secularization. The coefficient for Swedish speakers is 0.068, which is almost the same as in Model 2. This suggests that socioeconomic differences, where Swedish speakers have a relatively higher income and education than Finnish speakers, is not the explanation for higher affiliation among Swedish speakers. This is related to the fact that both income and education only have a very modest effect on religious affiliation. Overall, the findings contradict Hypothesis 1. Even if the Swedish speakers are socioeconomically better off, they are more strongly affiliated with the National Lutheran Church than the Finnish speakers, and in the Finnish context, affiliation level does not clearly decrease with higher socioeconomic status. In Model 4, we enter the variable that reflects community attachment—that is, whether a person lives in or has moved back to their municipality of birth. The introduction of this variable reduces the estimate for being a Swedish speaker by an additional 9 percent to 0.062. People who live in their municipality of birth are more likely to be affiliated with the National Lutheran Church than those who do not. Therefore, what plays a mediating role in the ethnolinguistic difference in religious affiliation is that Swedish speakers are more likely to stay in the region of birth, thus refraining from migrating to Finnish regions. Therefore, Swedish speakers' attachment to the community of origin seems to retain their higher affiliation level with the National Lutheran Church, although the part explained by living in the region of birth has only a modest effect. In sum, our findings partly support Hypothesis 2, which states that Swedish speakers are more religiously affiliated than Finnish speakers, which is because of their stronger attachment to their own community, but residing in the birth place can only explain a small part of the higher affiliation among Swedish speakers.

We have also estimated the same models for 1975 and 1997 to compare the results (see Tables A5–A6 in the Appendices of the Supporting Information). Similarly, we find that, over time, Swedish speakers have been more affiliated with the National Lutheran Church than Finnish

Table 1: Average marginal effects of National Lutheran affiliation in 2018, based on logistic regression models

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Swedish speaker</b>	0.072*** (0.001)	0.069*** (0.001)	0.068*** (0.001)	0.062*** (0.001)
<b>Finnish speaker</b>	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
<b>Woman</b>		0.099*** (0.000)	0.095*** (0.000)	0.097*** (0.000)
<b>Man</b>		Reference	Reference	Reference
<b>Primary-level education</b>			0.031*** (0.001)	0.030*** (0.001)
<b>Secondary-level education</b>			Reference	Reference
<b>Tertiary-level education</b>			0.020*** (0.001)	0.024*** (0.001)
<b>No income</b>			-0.018*** (0.001)	-0.017*** (0.001)
<b>Income quantile 1</b>			-0.009*** (0.001)	-0.009*** (0.001)
<b>Income quantile 2</b>			Reference	Reference
<b>Income quantile 3</b>			-0.013*** (0.001)	-0.013*** (0.001)
<b>Income quantile 4</b>			-0.031*** (0.001)	-0.029*** (0.001)
<b>Rural/suburban</b>		Reference	Reference	Reference
<b>Urban</b>		-0.067*** (0.001)	-0.066*** (0.001)	-0.065*** (0.001)
<b>Age 25–34</b>		Reference	Reference	Reference
<b>Age 35–44</b>		0.000 (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)
<b>Age 45–54</b>		0.033*** (0.001)	0.037*** (0.001)	0.037*** (0.001)
<b>Age 55–64</b>		0.056*** (0.001)	0.058*** (0.001)	0.059*** (0.001)
<b>Age 65+</b>		0.142*** (0.001)	0.140*** (0.001)	0.144*** (0.001)
<b>Lives in municip. of birth</b>				0.040*** (0.000)
<b>Not in municip. of birth</b>				Reference
<i>N</i>	3,667,517	3,667,517	3,667,517	3,667,517
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.0013	0.0496	0.0505	0.0522
<b>AIC</b>	4,244,032.03	4,039,052.65	4,035,149.11	4,028,027.62
<b>BIC</b>	4,244,045.14	4,039,393.64	4,035,568.79	4,028,460.42

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; region fixed effects are controlled for.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

speakers. However, the bivariate effect was 0.042 in 1975 and 0.065 in 1997, indicating that the ethnolinguistic gap in affiliation to the National Lutheran Church is increasing over time. There are divergent patterns across socioeconomic groups over time. In 1975, the affiliation level to the National Lutheran Church increased with educational level, whereas it was U-shaped in 1997 (the lowest affiliation level being those with secondary education). The differences across income groups had a reverse U-shaped pattern in 1975 and 1997, with the highest affiliation at intermediary income levels. Community attachment also had a mediating role in 1997, although the effect sizes were smaller compared with 2018. In 1975, the effect of residing in the municipality of birth was small and negative, possibly because internal migration was less frequent. In general, we find little evidence that any kind of demographic composition change in the Finnish population has been important for explaining the broad and general secularization we observe over time. Rather, it seems to be the case that secularization has happened across ethnolinguistic and socioeconomic groups at relatively similar paces, despite that the composition of the Finnish population in socioeconomics terms have changed very much over our time period.

In sum, Swedish speakers show a higher religious affiliation than Finnish speakers. To a minor extent, this can be explained by sociodemographic characteristics, particularly age and urbanization. We find socioeconomic patterns that are not consistent with modernization theories for income or education, and the differences are modest. The higher religious affiliation of Swedish speakers persists in all our regression models, and higher socioeconomic attainment is not an important explanatory mechanism. Thus, it is traits directly related to the Swedish-speaking identity that explain their higher affiliation. The higher connection to the home community among Swedish speakers explains this gap. In other words, our results are more consistent with our second hypothesis, emphasizing cultural factors, such as community cohesion, as an explanation for higher religious affiliation among Swedish speakers.

We have also conducted robustness analyses with linear probability models, which produce similar results (Table A4 in the Appendices of the Supporting Information for results for 2018).

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In the current study, we have investigated the ethnolinguistic differences of religious affiliation of the Finnish population by comparing Finnish and Swedish speakers. The Swedish-speaking Finns have better economic circumstances, better access to education, and a larger civil society; and have been described as having a more tightly knit community (Hyypä and Mäki 2001; Nyqvist et al. 2008; Saarela and Finnäs, 2003a, 2014). These would derive contradictory expectations regarding their religious affiliation levels according to the modernization theory (Inglehart 1997) or the moral community theory (Berger 2011 [1967]; Durkheim 1965 [1912]). Our results show that modernization theory on socioeconomic status and religion does not explain ethnolinguistic group-level differences as well as within-society socioeconomic differences in Finland, though modernization theory is consistent with the general trend of increasing secularization over time. We further add doubt regarding the modernization framework because it explains the within-society variation of religiosity by socioeconomic status rather poorly (in contrast to between-society variations), which has also been noted in previous studies (Höllinger and Muckenhuber 2019; Molteni 2020; Stolz 2020).

We demonstrate that the Swedish-speaking population in Finland is consistently more affiliated with religious denominations, primarily with the National Lutheran Church, when compared with the Finnish speakers. We interpret this is because that Swedish speakers are more strongly attached to their own communities in terms of lower internal mobility rates. This is in line with previous arguments stating that Swedish-speaking Finns have a stronger community identity and social capital (Holm 1991; Hyypä and Mäki 2001; McRae et al. 1999; Nyqvist et al. 2008). The findings are consistent over a long period, from 1975 to 2018. The ethnolinguistic differences in

the level of religious affiliation and contribution of community attachment have even increased over time. Although both groups have undergone secularization in the past five decades, this has been weaker among Swedish-speaking Finns. This is possibly because religious identity serves as one aspect of the ethnolinguistic community and helps in maintaining the stability and cohesion of identity. The conclusion can also be supported by the fact that Finnish speakers are more affected by secularization based on life course dynamics and across socioeconomic status, while Swedish speakers are more likely to be nonaffiliated if they are residing in regions where Swedish is not widely used.

Interestingly, we find that the socioeconomic differences in religious affiliation are also inconsistent with the modernization argument, especially in the early periods, when people with lower socioeconomic status were less affiliated and the relationship was U-shaped. A speculative explanation that may contribute to the pattern of socioeconomic differences in religious affiliation in the 1970s, and to a lesser extent later, is the early 20th century history of Finland, in which class divisions were stark, eventually leading to the civil war in 1918. During the war, the White Guards, supported by the elite, had the support of the National Lutheran Church against the secular and communist Red Guards, supported by the working class (Kääriäinen 2005). To a larger extent, Swedish speakers also supported the White Guards during the civil war.

The present study offers a unique case that sheds light on the divergent trends of secularization around the world (Berger 2014; Hatun and Warner 2022; Reed 2007; Stolz and Voas, 2023; Voas 2008). Although Finland is a highly secular society, the National Lutheran Church affiliation level has remained high, though declining. Despite being the socioeconomically better-off group, the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland has a higher affiliation level to the National Lutheran Church than the Finnish-speaking majority. This echoes previous findings showing ethnic or religious minorities secularizing slower than the majority group in secular contexts, such as Catholics in English-speaking countries (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016) and Muslims in Europe (Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk 2012; Voas and Fleischmann 2012). The main explanation is that those groups are more likely to retain religion as an integral part of identity and tradition, which could be at risk when being the minority (Stolz and Voas, 2023; Wallis and Bruce 1992). However, other factors, including early socialization in the country of origin, discrimination in the host society, and deprived socioeconomic status, could also play important roles in the lower levels of secularization of those minority groups. In contrast to Finland, in previous research on religious minorities it is also often the case that the majority and minorities have separate religious traditions. Therefore, the Finnish context should not be directly generalized to other social, cultural, and religious circumstances.

Thus, our case is unique in that we have compared two ethnolinguistic groups that are both natives, sharing close historical experiences and the same religious traditions. Most Swedish speakers and Finnish speakers in Finland are members of the National Lutheran Church, which means that their religious traditions are largely shared. The Swedish speakers have their own diocese, but it is administratively at the same level as the other region-based, Finnish-speaking dioceses, and it only weakly holds the characteristics of an “ethnic church.” However, our analysis shows that it potentially plays a role in the community and identity building of the Swedish-speaking group in Finland. Moreover, the Swedish-speaking minority holds a somewhat more socioeconomically advantaged status, and its language has a constitutionally official language status. Thus, one cannot regard the Swedish-speaking minority as being at risk of marginalization by the majority.

Yet our results are consistent with previous studies on the religiosity of minority groups, such as Muslim immigrants in Europe or African Americans (Brown, Taylor, and Chatters 2013; Voas and Fleischmann 2012), in that identity and community attachment is crucial in maintaining the minority group’s relatively higher level of religiosity compared with the majority population in the same society. Moreover, our case is special because the Swedish speakers in Finland are not only part of Finnish society and have deep historical roots, but they are on average higher educated. Still, in this highly secular context, they have maintained substantially higher levels of religious affiliation than the Finnish-speaking majority. Our results should be interpreted in



light of membership of the National Lutheran Church in Finland being related to a general sense of belonging with the nation, tradition, local community, and, perhaps, civic engagement more broadly, on top of being linked to religious beliefs that are only a salient part of membership for some individuals. This may partly explain the higher affiliation among Swedish speakers and may be relatively more important than differences in personal religiosity. We contribute to the literature suggesting that a minority group can be more likely to retain its religious tradition to strengthen its ethnic identity, even when it is not under any immediate threat (McRae et al. 1999).

We have introduced the use of longitudinal register data in studies on religion, which has been uncommon in social science research in this field. Previous research on the religion of native minorities has been largely hampered by the unavailability of representative data for small groups. By capitalizing on the unique religious affiliation registry in Finland, we have provided novel contributions to advancing the field. Further research could focus on how religious affiliation is determined by individual and contextual socioeconomic and sociocultural factors and the outcomes of religious affiliation on the domains of mortality, labor market outcomes, family behavior, and so forth, which are facilitated by these detailed and high-quality register data. It will also enable analysis of the causal inference on the determinants and consequences of religious affiliation. That being said, it is also worth noting that the data bear the limitation of including only administrative religious affiliation, which often does not reflect strongly felt religious beliefs and practices, especially for the National Lutheran Church. Such studies would require other types of data and research collaborations from other methodological approaches by utilizing surveys and ethnography.

Our study is limited to the case of the ethnolinguistic situation in Finland and may not be generalizable to other societies. Nevertheless, there are cases in other countries that resemble the ethnolinguistic division, with a shared religious belonging among the native population in Finland. For instance, Catholicism is the majority religion for both Flemish-speaking and French-speaking Belgians, where the Flemish population has a larger population and higher socioeconomic status but has historically lacked political power. Switzerland is another example where ethnolinguistic identity and religious tradition can both differ and overlap. Studies on these countries have often been concerned with regional variation (Lesthaeghe 1977; Stolz and Chaves 2018). Our findings could tentatively be related—and in a greater explorative manner—as a way to provide a more comprehensive picture of divergent global secularization (Müller 2020; Stolz 2020). Thus, we encourage more studies comparing religiosity across ethnic groups in other contexts and the underlying mechanisms, along with more research on religion that makes use of national register data.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The study is based on individual-level administrative data, derived from contemporary Finnish registers (containing detailed information on the complete current population of Finland). This has been approved for an ethical review (TK-53-1370-17), and made available by Statistics Finland. Due to the very sensitive nature of these data (information regarding ethnicity and religion of the complete population of Finland), this cannot be shared with other researchers without an application to Statistics Finland and its ethical review agency. As such the underlying microlevel data cannot be made directly available in a public depository. We will be helpful in providing access to our data, for researchers that have ethical permission to use the underlying data. We hope you can understand that such a sensitive and unique data source forces the relevant Finnish public authorities to pose additional restrictions on data usage.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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### SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Online Appendix