

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 39 (2012)
Heft: 5

Artikel: Moving away from the churches
Autor: Herren, Matthias
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907480>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 22.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Moving away from the churches

The Swiss people's relationship with religion is undergoing significant change. There are twenty times more Swiss with no religious affiliation today than forty years ago. Faith also plays a less significant part in the everyday lives of most churchgoers. Yet, religion is an issue that receives widespread coverage in the media. However, the focus there is more on differentiation from Islam than on Switzerland's own tradition.

By Matthias Herren

In terms of church membership, the situation in Switzerland 40 years ago was similar to that in the Vatican State. Just 1.1% had no religious affiliation in 1970. Today, the figure stands at 20.1%, a fifth of the population. Both national churches are experiencing a major exodus. The Catholics have fared better thanks to immigration from southern Europe. Their numbers have fallen by 10% since 1970. Today, 38.8% of the Swiss population are Catholic, while the number of Reformed Protestants is down by 15% to 30.9%.

Over the past five years, the "Religions, the State and Society" National Research Programme (NRP 58) has analysed the reasons for this fundamental change in the religiosity of individuals and in the religious landscape through a wide range of projects. The evaluation of the results of NRP 58 confirms the continual decline in the importance of religion among the vast majority of the population for decades. A distanced position is increasingly commonplace (see box). The services provided by the churches are being used less and less. Even a large number of religious people do not believe that faith should be practised in an extreme fashion or propagated with missionary zeal. People also believe that religion belongs in the private domain. As their importance has declined, churches find themselves in a period of upheaval. This development is being intensified by immigration. Alongside the traditional faiths, foreign religions are suddenly gaining in importance, especially Islam, which has increased its share from 0.26% in 1970 to 4.5% today.

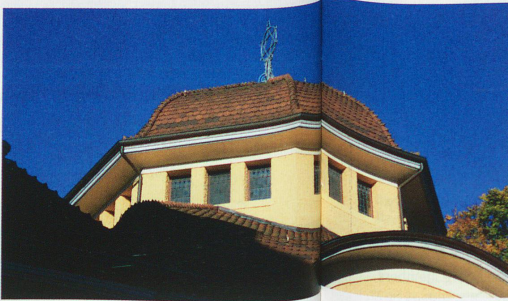
Religion as a means of differentiation

While the importance of religion has declined among the Swiss people in terms of providing individual guidance on values, media coverage of religion has increased in recent years primarily in the wake of global

political developments. Issues such as the ban on minarets and burkas have been the subject of intense debate in the media. But Christianity has also received attention. Politicians have strongly campaigned for the display of crucifixes to be allowed in public buildings, and the weakness of Christianity is lamented in light of the strength of Islam. NRP 58 points out: "Religious issues receive excessive media coverage, while religion is becoming less important in people's lives." Religion is frequently used in the media, but also in the schoolyard and in politics, to differentiate between "local" and "foreign" groups and often in references to violent behaviour. Islam, for example, is often associated with the repression of women. According to the report, this has more to do with the "origin and situation of the immigrants or with stereotypical perceptions" than with the religion. Conversely, mainstream society attributes positive values to Christianity, such as "equality between men and women". Yet, gender equality does not exist everywhere in the Christian world either: women are still excluded from the priesthood in the Catholic Church.

Diminishing influence of the churches

The major churches often find themselves on the defensive in the current period of upheaval. Some people level at them the criticism that they have been left behind in the shift to the modern age. Others believe the reason for their diminishing significance is that the churches have watered down their traditions and message too much and have adapted excessively to the times. A study carried out by Jörg Stolz, a Lausanne-based sociologist of religion, and his colleague Edmée Ballif shows that the major factor in the development concerns social megatrends rather than the approach adopted by the churches. The megatrends are global processes of social change over which the churches have little influence. They are quite



Places of worship in Switzerland:

Chapel near Vrin in the canton of Grisons

Abbey church in Romainmotier, canton of Vaud

Synagogue in Baden, canton of Aargau

Mahmud mosque in Zurich

Buddhist temple in Gretzenbach, canton of Solothurn

simply part of the prevailing circumstances with which the churches will have to contend in future.

The first megatrend identified by Stolz is the further separation of society from the churches. The presence of religious institutions in schools, hospitals and social organisations as well as their influence over politics and the law, which has lasted for centuries, are continually declining and will dwindle further, according to the sociologist of religion. In contrast, individualisation is on the increase. People's social class, faith or place of residence is no longer defined for the rest of their lives by their family background and gender. Another megatrend that Stolz observes is the declining significance of values such as discipline, loyalty and obedience in the Western world and the growing importance of the search for enjoyment, emotionality and spontaneity. In this environment, the churches will increasingly be faced with stiff secular competition. People are also finding a sense of community in sports clubs or choirs and are able to engage in spiritual activities as part of wellness, popular psychology and esotericism.

Churches seeking answers

The churches are responding in very different ways to these developments. Reactionary groups in the Roman Catholic Church are seeking to resist secularisation by ensuring their church keeps strictly to the Roman line. They are opposed to typically Swiss traits of the Catholic Church, such as democratic co-determination, ecumenical collaboration and the appointment of lay theologians. Instead, they call for the separation of Church and State, the denial of Holy Communion to those who remarry and the re-introduction of Latin mass.

Secularisation has also resulted in a significant decline in numbers among the next generation of priests. The number of Catholic priests has fallen by over 40% since 1970. To cope with the shortage of priests, parishes are being merged into religious welfare centres where the ordained are responsible for the administration of the sacraments and lay theologians undertake other pastoral duties.

The Reformed Protestant churches are also facing organisational changes. Parishes are being merged due to shrinking congregations. The church council in the canton of Zurich, for example, is aiming to reduce the 179 parishes to a third of this number. Nevertheless, the Reformed Protestant Church

is attempting to ensure its presence in heavily frequented places through new projects. In recent years, churches attracting large congregations have been founded, including some based on ecumenical collaboration, at airports, railway stations and shopping centres.

The Reformed Protestants are also trying to hone their profile in terms of substance. The introduction of a confession of faith is intended to clarify what Reformed Protestantism is all about. Yet, a social study reveals that the Reformed Protestant Church only appeals to a small segment of the population despite its claims to be a popular church. According to the study, out of ten social types it only appeals to the "traditional middle class", the "frugal traditionalists" and the "well-established". The church holds little to no appeal for other social groups, such as the "post-materialists", "consumerist working class", "modern performers" or the "mainstream". The Reformed Protestant Church hopes the study will help engender understanding and sensitivity among its employees and authorities regarding the diversity of lifestyles. The aim is to reach a wider segment of the population and to develop forms of participation for seven to eight social groups.

The free churches are faring much better than the large national churches in the changing religious landscape. However, major differences exist here. While traditional free churches, such as the Methodists and Salvation Army, have lost more members than the national churches in percentage terms, charismatic, missionary fellowships and trendy churches aimed at young people have grown significantly. The membership of the free churches has remained stable overall in the past 20 years. Nonetheless, secularisation is also presenting these churches with major challenges. In the 1980s, when religion had greater importance, the free churches were far more successful in attracting new members than they are today.

The shift in the religious landscape in Switzerland is also having an impact on the relationship between politics and the churches. Despite the fall in membership, both national churches are still extremely well integrated in most cantons. They can raise church taxes and obtain the personal data of their members from the resident

registration office. However, political pressure on the churches is growing. If they take a stance on political issues, they are regularly criticised by right-wing politicians, who call upon the religious communities to concentrate on "proclaiming the gospel and providing pastoral care". While the complete separation of Church and State is only being sought by individual splinter groups, such as the free thinkers and the young socialists, calls for the abolition of church tax for legal entities are becoming ever louder. The Federal Supreme Court has confirmed the legitimacy of church taxes for companies on several occasions. Parliamentary proposals for the abolition of these taxes have also been rejected in the cantons of Zug, Zurich and Fribourg in recent years. Currently, the Young Liberals in Zurich and Grisons are attempting to abolish church tax for companies through popular initiatives in their respective cantons. In Zurich, they are being supported by the

Free Democrat-Liberals (FDP) and the Swiss People's Party (SVP). Both conservative parties believe that church is a matter for the people but not for companies. The churches, however, highlight the social responsibility of companies and argue that they support educational, social and cultural services with taxes raised from companies. They claim that these services also benefit people from outside the church.

Recognised by society

The results of NRP 58 reveal that the churches still play an important role in society despite the major changes. Even 65% of people with no religious affiliation believe the churches are important for the socially disadvantaged in particular. A study by the NRP also indicates that the churches invest significantly more than the 500 million Swiss francs a year they receive from the public in projects from which the entire population benefits. The level of acceptance is accord-

ingly high. Non-members of the churches also recognise the benefits they provide and, according to the study, accept the use of state funding for these services.

The importance of the churches has declined significantly in recent decades for both individuals and in society and will continue to do so. They nevertheless remain among the most important non-governmental institutions with an almost 70% share of the population. This is also acknowledged by the vast majority of Swiss people even in an age of secularisation and pluralisation.

MATTHIAS HERREN is a theologian and freelance journalist. He lives in Stäfa.

THE FOUR RELIGIOSITY PROFILES

The NRP 58 researchers differentiate between four religiosity profiles. The group who **distance themselves** is the largest among the Swiss population (64%). Most of them are members of a church. They have certain religious beliefs but religion is of little importance to them generally and they only go to church on special holidays or for impor-

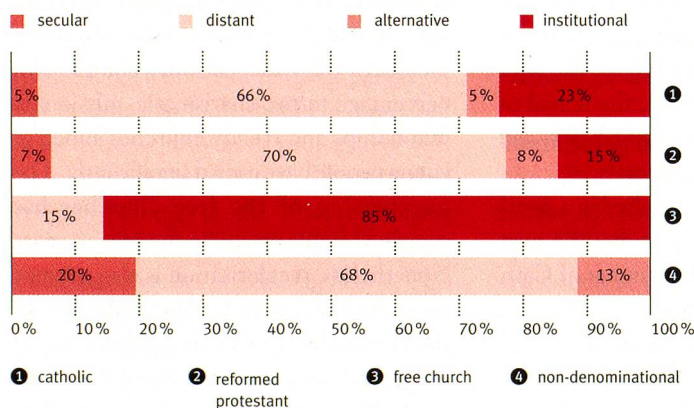
tant occasions (baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.). Researchers say that this group will continue to grow.

The **institutional** group has declined and today represents 17% of the population. The institutional group is made up of the active members of the national churches and the majority of free church members. They believe that life only has meaning through God and Jesus Christ and are extremely critical of laicist and atheistic viewpoints.

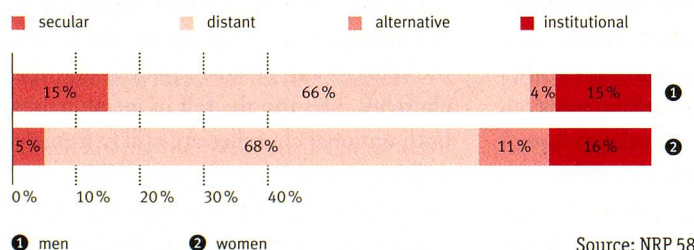
The **alternative** group has remained stable for years with a 9% share. Esoteric beliefs and practices, such as the belief in cosmic energy, angels and astrology as well as practices like Tai Chi, kinesiology, yoga and meditation, are important to the members of this group.

The **secular** group is of a similar size. The researchers divide the 10% of people in this group into those who are indifferent and those who are opposed to religion. While the indifferent category does not attach any importance to religion, church, faith or esoteric beliefs, the opponents of religion are consciously and often vehemently opposed to all of these. (he)

Graphic 1: Religiosity profiles according to denomination



Graphic 2: Religiosity profiles according to gender



Source: NRP 58

Religious affiliation of the Swiss population in percent (source: SFSO)

