

HAS ROMANIA BECOME A SECULAR SOCIETY?

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the question of secularization of Europe, and in particular of Romania, by using multiple international data sets. Secularization has been defined separation of the state government and religious authority resulting in a decrease in church attendance, a diminished trust in religious institutions, a lessening of religions' importance in society, an increase in religious diversity with a concomitant decrease in group cohesiveness, and the rise of situational ethics and moral relativism. Several theories of secularization are explored in an effort to determine the presence of a secular continuum. Although there may be an increase of secular behaviours in member states of the European Union, a claim of growing secularism in Romania is not supported by an examination of the multiple data sets.

Keywords: secular, secularization, church attendance, religiosity, scientific rationalism, Romania.

INTRODUCTION

Since the ground-breaking work of Harvey Cox (1965) there has been on-going discussion about the secularization of societies in Europe and North America. Cox defined secularization as a process in which religious faith, as embodied within religious organizations (churches), loses societal and cultural influence and relevance. These losses are to be understood on a continuum from the absolute of religion as the sole provider of political, cultural and societal dicta to the opposite extreme of total separation of state and religion in all matters political, cultural and societal in the wholly secular city.

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Cox (1965: 21–44) discussed this process as an historical event dating from the early Christian Church when rulers were accepted as divinely installed. When this divine authority was removed from governmental leadership the process of secularization commenced. Thus, the separation of church and state is the antecedent or first step on the continuum to development of the secular society. Even this antecedent is on a continuum. Although rulers may no longer be seen as divinely appointed complete separation of state from church is rare. Many nations have official state religions, recognize religious organizations with tax exemptions, state provided financial assistance, religious education, official public recognition of religion and god (*e.g.* prayer to open and close legislative sessions, swearing to God to fulfil governmental duties, and legal currencies with religious slogans, are but a few examples).

Secularization theory states that the need for religion decreases as a result of modernization. As science explains the natural world around us the need for supernatural understandings is lost. Scientific rationalism, which has brought forth the modern period, has replaced peoples' need for the "religious". (Berger, 1967; Martin, 1978; Bruce, 2002) Thus, secularism within a society may be measured not only by the degree of religious influence within the political arena; it may be gauged by decreasing church attendance, the rejection of institutionalized traditional morals or value systems, and the adoption of more individualized decisions about what is right and wrong behaviour. A consequence of this rejection of traditional morals and values leads to situational ethics and moral relativism while the boundaries of acceptable behaviour expand as the individual makes decisions without the guidance of an accepted authority or the social pressures of community. Group cohesiveness weakens as greater value is attached to the individual's values than to the societal collective. Diversity increases in religious expression as well as socially acceptable behaviour. Secularism, as defined in this manner, does not necessarily result in a lack of religious faith while it may witness a decrease in traditional religious practice. Cox has noted that much of the developed world has entered a new post-modern era in which secularization has accelerated. (Cox, 2009: 5) Characteristic of this post-modern era theory is not the growth of atheism, as might be expected, but a general lack of religious perspective and an unwillingness to judge one idea or value as superior to others.

The modern philosopher, Charles Taylor (2007) defines secularism as having three conditions. First is the institutional separation of the Church and the State with religions removal from the public space. Second is the decline in practice of religious rites followed by a change in the "condition of beliefs" and in the "social imaginary". By these terms Taylor means the individualization of religious ritual practice and the imagery both evoked by and found in the rituals. Taylor views secularization as a positive value promoting great diversity with its inherent movement towards a personal connection with religion with one's own expression of that relationship with one's unique social imagery.

Considerable attention has been given by theologians, philosophers, historians and sociologists in their attempts to define, understand, and articulate what is meant by secular and secularization. Furthermore, much has been written about the secularization of the nations of Europe as they move towards greater unity and homogeneity as members of the European Union (EU). Indeed a primary purpose of the creation of the EU was to foster unity of thought and behaviour resulting in an homogenous Europe in as much as such a goal is obtainable. (Rabier, 2008) This article seeks to test various definitions of secularization theory in relationship to Romanian society in the context of the EU in an effort to determine if and to what degree Romanian society has become secularized.

METHODOLOGY

The *Standard Eurobarometers* (EUB) provided an initial starting point for this inquiry into the religious practices of Romanians and other European peoples and the surveys provided useful information relevant to this study. However, several of the research waves did not include questions about religious matters. Therefore, in addition to the Standard Eurobarometer surveys significant information was also acquired from the *Atlas of European Values* (AEV) and the *Romania Institute for Evaluation and Strategy* (IRES) reports. Other multi-national and cross-national surveys, such as the *World Population Review* and the *International Religious Freedom Report*, were employed to provide further data. Various periodic reports derived from all of these surveys offered valuable insight and information useful to the current investigation as they had been developed from the primary data sources. Both original data from these sources and composite documents were drawn upon in a meta-analytic research design. Existing reports, complete with charts and graphs, were reviewed for topic relevant data and when needed, data from these sources were compiled to reveal previously unreported interpretations.

Each of the surveys and reports used was constructed upon different conceptual frameworks and system architectures containing different sets of assumptions and definitions. (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2010) The differential nature of conceptual frameworks is an inherent shortcoming in meta-analytic analysis which is more than compensated for by the aggregated data. The broader use of data from available resources aided in generating a more comprehensive, and ultimately, a more insightful description of current religious practices, and the beliefs and religious values held by Europeans in general and specifically of Romanians.

Several broad questions were examined in the context of three theories within the larger theoretical construct of secularization in an effort to address the principle query of secularism in Romania. These broad questions included: the issue of separation of the state and religious organizations (churches); Cox's statement that

religious faith loses societal and cultural influence, and relevance to people; and, scientific rationalism obviates the need for people to explain events and nature when science provides the answers.

Data are stated in simple percentage values accompanied by graphic representation for ease of comparison. When percentage differences of 3 or more points are found the difference can be considered statistically significant (SS) due to the sample size. Linear regression analysis was calculated to determine the interaction of gender, age, and education relative to church attendance in Romania.

THE STATE AND SECULARIZATION

Secularism is the condition in which the culture/society/people move away from formalized and institutionalized rituals established by church leaders as the only or right way to practice their beliefs. (Cox, 2009: 34) It is conceptualized as an historical process in which religious manifestations are removed first from the political arena. (Cox, 1965: 21–44) This, of course, is just the initial step on a continuum of behaviours towards a secular society. Cox maintains that secularization began when political leadership was no longer seen as divinely ordained and the head of state was no longer also the head of the religious faith. For Cox one measure of secularization is the degree to which the state and church are separate. Complete separation of state and church is rare if indeed at all possible. Most western and certainly European nations do not consider the head of state as the head of the church and, if this is the single measure of separation of the two then, in one sense they are secular. However, a closer look at the laws and governmental practices which, in many instances are widely accepted, may demonstrate a degree of integration of church and state. Several nations in Europe have officially recognized state churches, provide financial assistance by means of direct monetary disbursements or through preferential tax considerations and exemptions, require religious oaths at legal proceedings and induction into governmental positions, allow for the recognition of marriages by the church, and also recognize religious holidays nationally. Additional examples might readily be identified but the sample list serves as sufficient to support the argument of a continuum of separation.

Romanian law is quite specific in its recognition of religion. It has established a three-tier system of recognition: religious groups (Rom. *grupări religioase*), religious associations (Rom. *asociații religioase*), and religions (rom. *religii*). Religious groups are defined as groups of persons who share the same beliefs but are not legal entities and do not receive tax exemptions or support from the state. Religious associations, defined as groups of individuals who share and practice the same faith are recognized as legal entities and must be registered in a religious association registry. Registration as a religious association requires a

minimum of 300 citizen members. Religious associations do not receive government funding but receive limited tax exemptions. Religious associations are eligible to receive “religion” status only after 12 years of continuous activity and a minimum membership of 0.1 percent of the population, currently approximately 19,000 people. These criteria were adopted in 2006, and since then the number of religions recognized by the law has remained at 18¹. Groups recognized as religions under the law are eligible for state support based on their proportional representation in the census. They have the right to establish schools, teach religion classes in public schools, receive government funds to build places of worship, partially pay clergy salaries with state funds, broadcast religious programming on radio and television, apply for broadcasting licenses for denominational frequencies, own cemeteries, and receive tax-exempt status. Under the law, state-provided funding is determined by the number of adherents. (International Religious Freedom Report, 2014: 3)

CHARLES TAYLOR’S CRITERIA

The loss of reliance upon religion and the church can be measured, according to Charles Taylor’s criteria (Taylor, 2007) by a change in the conditions of beliefs and the social imaginary. Conditions of beliefs have been examined by researchers and include questions about the role of religion in society, trust in religion for guidance, belief in God, and belief that religious organizations have the ability to help people in need. The findings in these studies proved valuable in testing Taylor’s criteria.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN SOCIETY

Examination of responses to the EUB 66 (p. 42) survey question about the place of religion in society reveals that 46% of all Europeans think religion plays too large a role in society, while 48% disagree. Men are more likely to believe that the place of religion is too important, while a majority (51%) of women disagree. (*Figure no. 1*) These differences are statistically significant. Age is a key variable in this question, as is education, and again are statistically significant. The greater one’s educational level and age, the more likely one is to disagree with the belief that religion plays too important a role in society. Although these differences in the

¹ These include: the Romanian Orthodox Church, Orthodox Serbian Bishopric of Timisoara, Roman Catholic Church, Greek Catholic Church, Old Rite Russian Christian (Orthodox) Church, Reformed (Protestant) Church, Christian Evangelical Church, Romanian Evangelical Church, Evangelical Augustinian Church, Lutheran Evangelical Church, Unitarian Church, Baptist Church, Pentecostal Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Armenian Church, Judaism, Islam and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

overall European aggregated data vary by only a few percentage points, the differences between the twenty-five member states of the European Union (EU 25) varies from 20% to 81%. The average agreement percentage across the EU 25 stands at 46%. Romania, then not yet admitted to the EU, reported a 37% agreement. Hence, 49% of Romanians do not believe religion plays too big a role in society. The high agreement in Cyprus to this question may be explained by the conflict with the Muslim part of the island in which there is no separation of state and religion. Thus religion is involved in the political conflict. In Finland religion is integrated into the state, while religious freedom was denied under communist rule in Estonia and Bulgaria.

Agree/disagree	EU 25	Males/Females EU25	Romanians	High/low EU25 member
Agree	46%*	Males 49% Females 43%	37%	Cyprus 81% Estonia and Bulgaria 20%
Disagree	48%	Males 45% Females 51%	49%	Finland 74% Cyprus 17%
*Totals may not be equal to 100% due to "don't know" responses				

Figure no. 1 – Answers to the survey question: “The place of religion in our society is too important?”.

Source: EUB 66, tables, p. 459 pdf.

TRUST IN RELIGION

Another possible measure of movement towards secularism is the level of trust given to religious institutions. Theory states that as society becomes more secular, individuals trust increasingly on their own judgement and less on traditional institutions to provide behavioural guidance or to establish moral principles. Social conventions change while individual preference and personal values dominate the social landscape.

Between 2006 and 2008 (EUB 68: 54) the level of trust accorded to religious institutions increased by 2% points, from 44% to 46%, which is not considered statistically significant. (NS) (*Figure no. 2*) These numbers do not demonstrate a high level of trust throughout the EU. Romanians however, are very positive about their religious institutions with 77% expressing trust in them. This level of trust is unparalleled in Romania as its population does not place similar levels of trust in trade unions or political parties. The Danish people also rated their trust level at 77% with Austrians at 65%. Romania’s neighbour, Bulgaria, reported a trust level of only 26%, similar to that of Sweden, with a level of trust of 24%, the lowest in the EU.

Trust/Distrust	2006 EU25	2008 EU27	2008 Romania	2008 High/Low EU27 member state
Trust	44%*	46%	77%	Denmark 77% Sweden 24%
Distrust	45%	42%	16%	Slovenia 66% Denmark 16%
*Totals may not be equal to 100% due to the “don’t know” responses.				

Figure no. 2 – The level of trust accorded to religious institutions in the EU.

Source: EUB 68, tables, p. 221 pdf.

Additional data from the *Atlas of European Values* demonstrates a growing confidence in the church in the years from 1990 to 2008. (Figure no. 3)

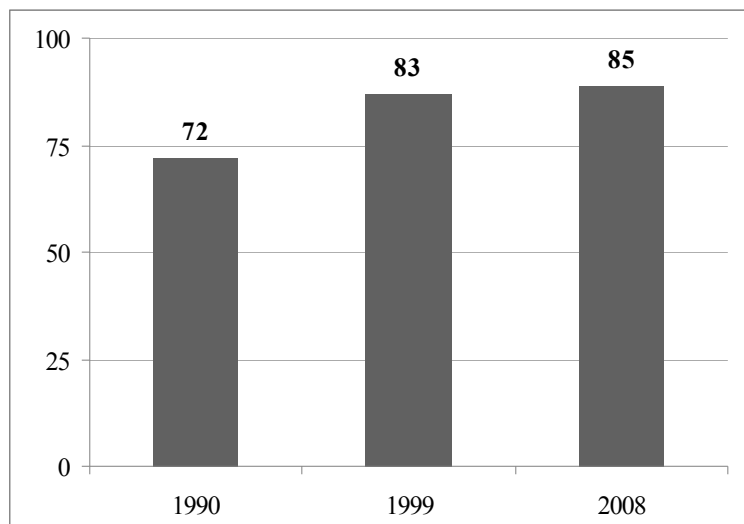


Figure no. 3 – Percentage of Romanians that have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the church.

Source: AEV,

<http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/new/europa.php?ids=205&year=2008&country=RO>
(last accessed 11 January 2016).

Trust in the church’s and religion’s ability to help can also be seen as a function of peoples’ belief that churches are giving adequate answers to people’s family problems and meeting their spiritual needs. According to the *Atlas of European Values*, in 2008, 61% of Romanians said that churches in their country were giving adequate answers to family problems

(<http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/new/europa.php?ids=116&year=2008&country=RO>). The Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES, 2013: 24 pdf) reported that 71% of Romanians believed their churches were providing adequate answers to family problems, 72% and 88% felt that the church was addressing moral issues and social problems respectively. This represents an increase from 53% in 1990 and a further increase from 2008 when a reported 61% of Romanians believed the church was providing adequate answers to family problems (<http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/new/europa.php?ids=116&year=2008&country=RO>). These increases are statistically significant. Further evidence of trust in the church is seen in the peoples' belief that the church is meeting their spiritual needs. Between 1990 and 2008 this belief grew 9% (*Figure no. 4*) which is also a statistically significant increase.

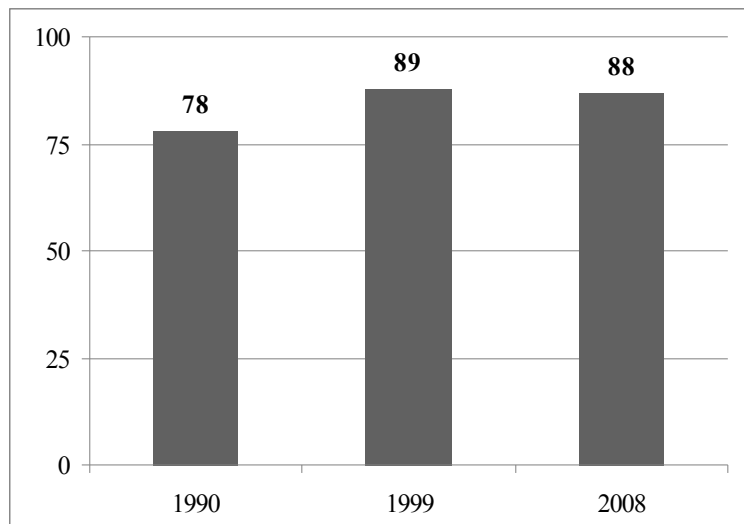


Figure no. 4 – Percentage of people that say churches in their country are giving adequate answers to people's spiritual needs, in Romania.

Source: AEV,
<http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/new/europa.php?ids=117&year=2008&country=RO>
 (last accessed 11 January 2016).

INCREASED DIVERSITY AND CHANGES IN BASIC RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Both Cox (2009: 54) and Taylor (2007) associate secularism with significant changes in the condition of beliefs. This change involves increased tolerance of a widening range of diverse beliefs and social imaginary, and has a positive correlation with a decrease in shared religious beliefs and social cohesion. If social

cohesion is evaluated, in part, by shared religious beliefs then indications that Romanian society has not become secularized can be seen in the *International Religious Freedom Report*. (2014, p. 2)

The Romanian Orthodox Church remains the dominant religious institution in the nation with 86% of the population claiming its membership. This represents approximately 18.7 million of Romania's approximately 21.7 million² inhabitants in 2014. In all totalled the national government has officially recognized 17 additional religious faiths (rom. *religii*) with combined memberships approaching 1.7 million people. Thus, the collective membership in organized religious institutions exceeds 94% of the Romanian population reflecting social cohesion and shared religious values. Further evidence of the continuation of shared religious beliefs is presented in *Figures 5* through *7* below.

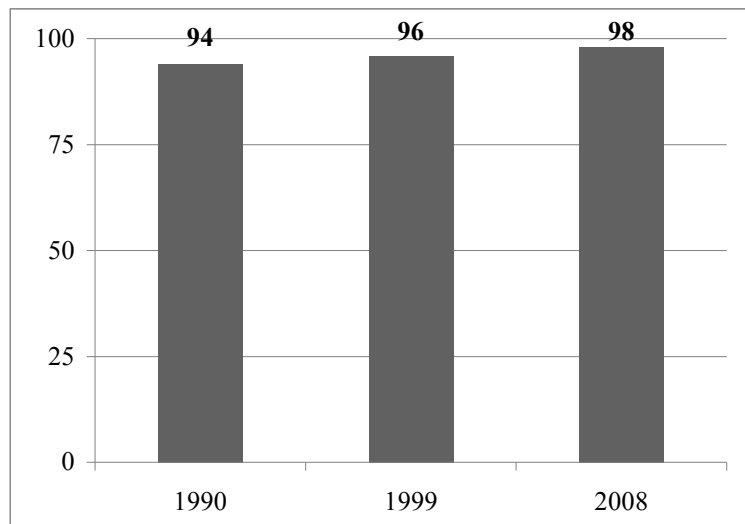


Figure no. 5 – Percentage of Romanians who profess a belief in God.

Source: AEV,
<http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/new/europa.php?ids=119&year=2008&country=RO>
(last accessed 11 January 2016).

² Total membership in Romanian churches has been decreasing as a function of the decrease in the Romanian population. The *World Population Review* published by the United Nations reports there are 1200 more deaths than births and 599 out migrations daily in Romania. In 2014 the officially stated population stood at 21 595 302. On 14 January 2016 the population was reported as 19,152,981 (<http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/romania-population/>).

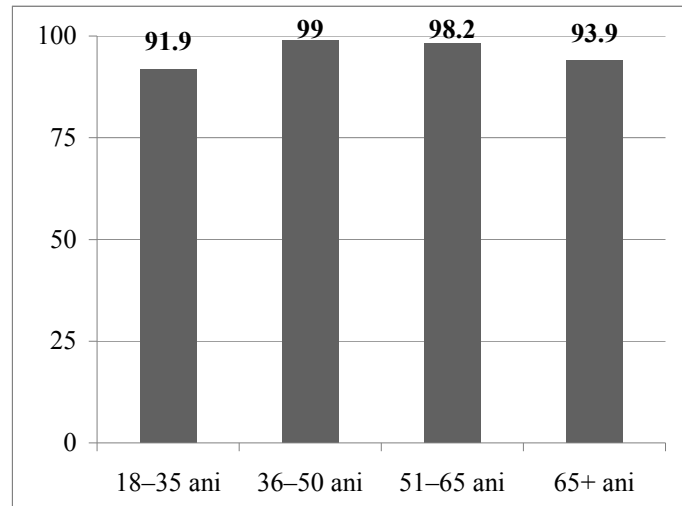


Figure no. 6 – Percentage of Romanians who profess a belief in God by age cohort.

(Note: average = 96.3%, male believers = 93.8%, female believers = 98.7%)

Source: IRES (2013), p. 28-29 pdf.

When Romanians were asked if they believed there was a God (see *Figure no. 5*, above) an overwhelming portion of people responded “yes” beginning with the first survey in 1990. These results were recently supported by the results published by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy. (IRES, 2013: 28–29 pdf) Analysis of belief in God by age and gender revealed that women at all ages are more likely to express a belief in God than are men. Of note is the youngest (ages 18–35) and oldest (ages 65+) age categories demonstrated statistical differences ($SS=.01$) by gender while individuals between these age categories revealed no difference. The average across all age categories for male expression of belief was 93.8% compared with 98.7% for females ($SS=.01$). Despite these differences which are statistically significant and not statistical artefact, one must be cognizant of the overwhelming percentages of Romanian believers in all categories by age and gender.

The average percentage of Europeans who expressed belief in God was 74%, with the Czech Republic reporting the lowest belief rate (36%) and Malta the highest rate (99%) (<http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/new/wereld.php?ids=119&year=2008>). It is important to note that significant differences in the belief in God were witnessed in the various age groups and by gender. Similar results were found in relation to belief in heaven: Romania, 84%; EU, 47% (<http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/new/europa.php?ids=122&year=2008>) and hell (<http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/new/europa.php?ids=121&year=2008>).

Belief in life after the death of the physical body was also measured. Seventy-four percent of Romanians believe in life after death compared with Malta (87%), Czech Republic (30%), and the average of the EU. (53%) (<http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/new/europa.php?ids=120&year=2008>) (Figure no. 7)

Country	Belief in God	Belief in heaven	Belief in hell	Belief in life after death
Romania	98%	84%	81%	74%
EU 27 average	74%	47%	35%	53%
Highest EU member state	Malta 99%	Malta 90%	Malta 85%	Malta 87%
Lowest EU member state	Czech Republic 36%	Denmark 20%	Denmark 9%	Czech Republic 30%

Figure no. 7 – EU member states societal religious beliefs in 2008.

Source: AEV, <http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/new/zieuropa.php?year=2008> (last accessed 11 January 2016).

DECLINE IN THE PRACTICE OF RELIGIOUS RITES

Cox (1965, 2009) and Taylor (2007) share the observation that secularization of society gives rise to a decline in the performance of religious rituals. It is concluded that people attend religious services less frequently, pray less often and cease in the performance of ritualistic behaviours (*e.g.* lighting candles, fasting, making the sign of the cross etc.). It is difficult to measure some of these behaviours, but church attendance, frequency of prayer and participation in pilgrimages to shrines and relics have been measured objectively and by field observation.

The question about the growth of secularism in Romania is confounded by the conjoining of church attendance with religious belief *i.e.*, “if one does not go to religious services one is not religious and does not value traditional moral principles”. In this model attendance at religious services has been considered an indicator of a ‘shared faith’ both within a family and in a community. However effective this model may be in the assessment of faith in Western Europe it is inappropriate in the context of Orthodox Romanian society where church attendance is not considered in the same strict obligatory manner one finds in other religious faiths in Western Europe. Church attendance rates are low in Northern and Western Europe, especially in the Nordic nations of Sweden, Denmark and Finland with an average of only five church visits annually. Romanian attendance rates are slightly less than the rates found in Poland, the Slovak Republic, Ireland,

and Northern Ireland where people attend church about 30 times a year. In Malta church attendance is recorded at nearly 60 times per annum. (Moore, 2014: 214–215)

Figure no. 8 below shows church attendance in Romania by gender, age and level of education through linear analysis. Low educational attainment is the control baseline against which middle and high educational levels are evaluated. Low educational attainment was defined as having completed the required years of schooling without further advancement. The Middle level included some advanced education without completion and/or a technical education. Higher education was everything beyond the Middle level. The analysis results show that the low-educated person attends church more often than people within the middle level of education at a rate of approximately 1.5 visits more per year. Given the assumptions of secularization one might expect such a finding. Further one would then likely predict that people with the highest levels of education would attend church services even less frequently than those in the Middle level of education. However, the highly educated person attends church at the same rate as the low educated person.

Variable		B	SE
Age		-0.121 (SS=.001)	0.033
Gender		1.179 (SS=.001)	0.187
Education level	Low (reference base)	0	0
	Middle	-1.498 (SS=.001)	0.246
	High	-0.296 (NS)	0.287

Figure no. 8 – Linear regression of yearly church attendance by gender, age and education.

Source: IRES (2013), p. 28–29 pdf.

Eighty-two percent of Romanians reported that prayer had a great or very great value for them. (IRES, 2013: 65 pdf) And additionally, pilgrimages to shrines and relics have been increasing in recent years. At least 26% of Romanians have gone on a pilgrimage, with 21% having done several pilgrimages (IRES, 2015: 17 pdf) and more and more travel agencies have special offers for religious tourism.

SCIENTIFIC RATIONALISM

Great thinkers of the Middle-Ages challenged religious doctrine and often defied church edicts and authority as they explored new understandings of the natural world. These individuals ushered in what was later named the Age of Reason. As the church lost more and more control of the political landscape the modern sciences began to flourish; mankind experienced a new freedom to question the structure of the physical world around them and eventually the social and moral conventions of culture. By the mid-19th century the advancement of science eroded much of the traditionally held beliefs about creation, the solar system and the natural order of the universe. One theory of secularization states that the need for religion is inversely related to modernization. As new scientific discoveries are made in the modern era there is less need for the supernatural to explain the natural. Scientific rationalism, which made the modern period possible, has replaced peoples' need for the "religious". (Berger, 1967; Martin, 1978; Bruce, 2001)

In keeping with the tenets of this secularization model the need for the supernatural is lost, or at the very least diminished, as scientific knowledge expands. The rationalism argument maintains that the greater the educational level the more rational the individual and the less reliant one becomes on religion. (Blau and Duncan, 1967) One measure of reliance on religion posited within secularization models is church attendance. Thus, one would expect individuals with higher levels of education to be least likely to believe in God, attend church or acknowledge the power of charms to offer protection. *Figure no. 8* above has already demonstrated this is not the case in Romania. Low-educated persons attend church more often than people within the middle level of education at a rate of approximately 1.5 visits more per year. However, the highly educated person attends church at the same rate as the low educated person.

Belief in the supernatural has not been lost in Romania, but expressions of this belief have been modified with modernisation and the introduction of new technologies. Religious icons, for instance, serve as an example of how modern technologies have altered but not lessened their use. Now, in addition to traditional icons, hand painted on linden wood according to specific instructions, there are the more popular and much less expensive mass produced plastified paper and photographic icons. Accessible to the public, these new types of icons are also very popular. Easy to get and to carry, they are a constant presence in many Romanians' lives today. These icons kept in wallets, purses or pockets, attached to the windshield of the car and hung on house walls.

Religion is very important for a large percentage of Romanians and continues to influence their daily lives. *Figure no. 9* below demonstrates the extent of belief and influence.

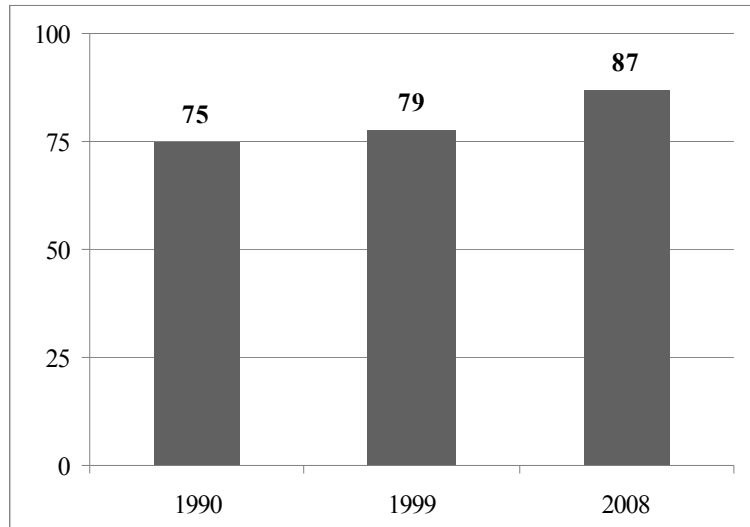


Figure no. 9 – Percentage of Romanians who say religion is very or quite important in their lives.

Source: AEV,

<http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/new/europa.php?ids=6&year=2008&country=RO>
(last accessed 11 January 2016).

CONCLUSION

While much of Western Europe appears to be largely secularized Romania seems to have, for now, avoided headlong movement along the continuum of secularization. As this paper investigated each aspect of several secularization theories the evidence failed to support the notion that Romania was greatly secularized. To be sure religious expression is changing but the criteria of secularization discussed herein provide scant evidence of the degree of secular changes witnessed in much of Western Europe. Europe has become secular but remains religious. This is because in multiple nations people no longer identify as church attending members, but they maintain that they have religious faith. (Halman, Sieben and van Zundert, 2011) Although the number of individuals who identify themselves as atheists has increased in recent decades (Voas, 2009: 155) in general, Europeans, whether church attenders or not, still advocate religious values. Romania is not alone in this maintenance of the more traditional values and behaviours of its religious heritage. It appears to be joined by Malta, Poland, Ireland, Turkey and Italy.

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