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► To cite this version:

Lucas Drouhot, Patrick Simon, Vincent Tiberj. Religious diversity in France: intergenerational transmissions and practices by origins. *Références - INSEE*, 2023, pp.1-10. hal-04088692

HAL Id: hal-04088692

<https://hal.science/hal-04088692>

Submitted on 12 May 2023

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Religious diversity in France: intergenerational transmissions and practices by origins

In 2019-2020, 51% of the population aged 18 to 59 in metropolitan France said they had no religion. This religious disaffiliation has been increasing over the past ten years and concerns 58% of people with no migration background, 19% of immigrants who arrived after the age of 16 and 26% of the descendants of two immigrant parents.

While Catholicism remains the dominant religion (29% of the population declare themselves to be Catholic), Islam confirms its place as the second religion in France (10%). The number of people claiming another Christian religion is also increasing, reaching 9%. The frequency and intensity of religious practice varies by religious affiliation: only 8% of Catholics regularly attend a place of worship, compared to just over 20% of other Christians, Muslims and Buddhists, and 34% of Jews.

Processes of religious transmission between generations shape the religious landscape over the long term: 91% of people raised in a Muslim family follow the religion of their parents. This transmission is also very strong among Jews (84%), but less so among Catholics (67%) and other Christians (69%). All else being equal, growing up in a family of mixed religious or Catholic ancestry is a key factor in the secularization process among the descendants of immigrants.

The place of religions in France has considerably evolved since the end of the 1950s, following a double process of secularization (a reduction of the role of religions in the organization of social life and a decrease in the number of people who consider themselves affiliated with a religion) and religious diversification. The statistical landscape of religions in France is not well known, as this information is not collected in the Census and rarely appears in official statistics ► [insert 1](#). The *Trajectoires et Origines* survey is one of the rare data sources that is representative of the population residing in metropolitan France and that allows for the study of religious affiliations and practices ► [source](#). By covering different origins and immigrant generations, it makes it possible to study how immigrant families, families of immigrant descent, as well as the rest of the population, relate to religion and its transmission over generations.

Immigrants are twice as likely to affiliate with a religion compared to those without a migration background

In 2019-2020, 29 percent of people aged 18-59 identify as Catholic, 10 percent as Muslim, and 10 percent as having other religious affiliations, while the remaining 51 percent identify as having no religion. This distance from religion varies considerably depending on the link to migration: 58% of those with no migration background over two generations say they have no religion, compared to only 19% of immigrants who arrived after the age of 16 and 26% of descendants of two immigrant parents ► [figure 1](#). This general observation must be qualified according to origin: immigrants from countries with a Muslim tradition (Maghreb, Turkey, Sahelian Africa) are the most religiously affiliated, while those from predominantly Christian European countries or from Asia (especially China) are less likely to declare a religious affiliation ► [figure 2](#). Among the predominantly Christian countries, immigrants from Portugal and Central Africa are exceptions, with more religious affiliation (79% and 77% Christian, respectively). While Catholicism remains the dominant religion among Christian denominations in France, Protestant churches have been growing in Central Africa and are more present in many European countries; other Christian religions are thus overrepresented among immigrants from these regions. They are also gaining ground among people from French overseas territories, with 18% of overseas natives (38% Catholic) and 18% of their descendants residing in metropolitan France

(33% Catholic). Muslims now represent 10% of the population in metropolitan France, but are much more present among immigrants (44%) and the descendants of two immigrant parents (48%). 14% of the descendants of immigrants from mixed couples and 1% of the population without migratory ancestry claim a Muslim affiliation.

► **Insert 1 – Measuring Religion and Religious Practices in Quantitative Surveys**

Religious affiliation and religious practices are not generally measured in official statistical sources. Although data relating to religion are considered “sensitive” under the terms of law no. 78-17 of January 6, 1978 on information technology, files and freedoms, their processing is authorized “for scientific or historical research or statistical purposes”, for purposes determined and made explicit by the CNIL (*Commission Nationale de l’Informatique et des Libertés*), and if the data collected is adequate, relevant and not excessive in relation to its purposes.

A question on religion appeared in the census until 1872 and was abandoned thereafter (except in Alsace *concordataire* - outside the purview of secularism law - until 1962¹). However, some surveys collected information on religion, such as the ERFI survey (Survey on Family and Intergenerational Relations, INED, French component of the European Gender and Generation survey, 2005-2011) or the EPIC survey (Study of individual and marital paths, INSEE-Ined, 2013-2014). Questions on religion are often present in election studies relying on surveys produced by various political science laboratories in France, but also in other European countries and in the United States, since religion is one of the constituent variables of the sociological models of voting developed in the 1960s and 1970s. They are also collected in several European surveys such as the European Social Surveys (ESS) and the European Value Studies, the latter dating back to the early 1990s.

In the *Trajectoires et Origines* survey (TeO), religion is declared by respondents in response to the question “Do you have a religion today?”, and another open-ended question (without a list of religions provided) asks which one. This wording follows that used in the ESS. Several questions then describe religious practices and their frequency, making it possible to measure the religiosity of the respondent and that of the family in which he or she grew up. Although responses to the survey are mandatory, interviewers inform respondents that responses to the religion section are optional: 1% of respondents did not wish to answer the question “Do you have a religion?”. The inclusion of questions on religion has been validated by the CNIL.

1 For a review of statistical sources on religion in the late 1980s, see Djider and Marpsat (1990).

► **1. Persons reporting no religion by migration background in 2008-2009 and 2019-2020**

in %

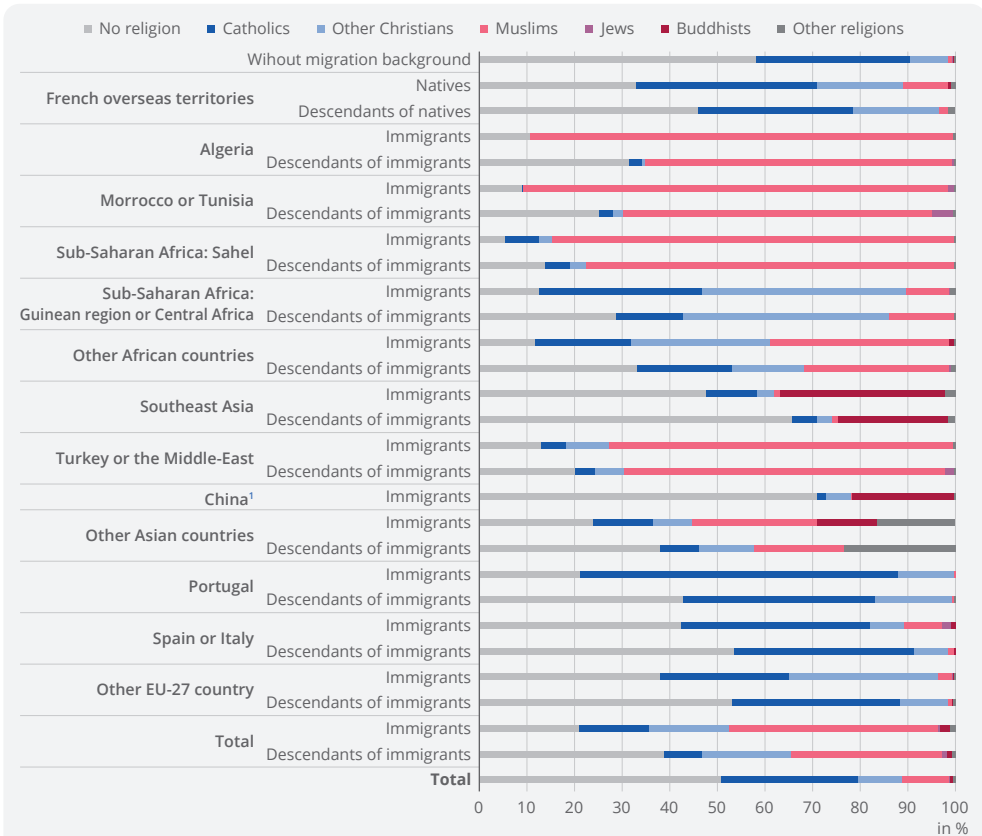
	Age 18 to 49		Age 18 to 59
	2008-2009	2019-2020	2019-2020
Immigrants who arrived in France after 16	16	19	19
Immigrants who arrived in France at age 16 or before	24	27	27
Descendants of two immigrant parents	23	23	26
Descendants of one immigrant parent	48	54	54
Neither immigrants nor descendants of immigrants	50	62	58
Total	45	53	51

Interpretation: 16% of immigrants aged 18 to 49 who arrived in France after 16 years of age declared themselves to be without religion in 2008-2009. They are 19% in 2019-2020.

Scope: Metropolitan France, persons aged 18 to 49 or 18 to 59 living in ordinary housing.

Sources: Ined-Insee, *Trajectoires et Origines* 2 (2019-2020) and *Trajectoires et Origines* (2008-2009) surveys.

► 2. Religious affiliation by migration background and origin



¹ Numbers to isolate the descendants of immigrants from China are insufficient.

Interpretation: 33% of overseas natives declare that they have no religion, 38% say they are Catholic and 18% have another Christian affiliation.

Scope: Metropolitan France, persons aged 18 to 59 living in ordinary housing.

Source: Ined-Insee, *Trajectoires et Origines 2* (2019-2020) survey.

More people without a religion since 2008

A comparison of the 2019-2020 results with those of the first TeO survey in 2008-2009 highlights how the secularization trend has continued [Simon and Tiberj, 2015]. In the age range common to both surveys, the 18-49 year-olds, the proportion of people who declare themselves to be without religion has increased from 45% to 53% in 10 years ► figure 1. This increase varies according to the migration background: it is very pronounced among people with no migratory ancestry (+12 points), but is only of 3 points for immigrants who arrived in France as adults. For the descendants of two immigrant parents, this share has not changed. These contrasting trends reflect very heterogeneous secularization dynamics across origin groups and religious affiliations.

Compared to 2008-2009, a relatively distanced relationship to religion can be measured through the place it occupies in people's identity. When respondents are asked to name up to four dimensions of their identity (gender, social class, level of education, family situation, nationality, etc.), in 2019-2020, 7% of people aged 18-49 cite religion ► figure 3, the same as in 2008-2009. This place of religion in identity is clearly greater for Jews (54%) and Muslims (30%) than for Catholics (6%), but it has declined in eleven years among Muslims.

► 3. Choice of religion as a dimension of identity, by religious affiliation, in 2008-2009 and 2019-2020

in %

	2008-2009		2019-2020	
	Religious affiliation	Religion as a dimension of identity	Religious affiliation	Religion as a dimension of identity
No religion	45	1	53	1
Catholics	43	8	25	6
Other Christians	2,5	10	9	16
Muslims	8	33	11	30
Jews	0,5	46	0,5	54
Buddhists	0,5	20	0,5	26
Total	100	7	100	7

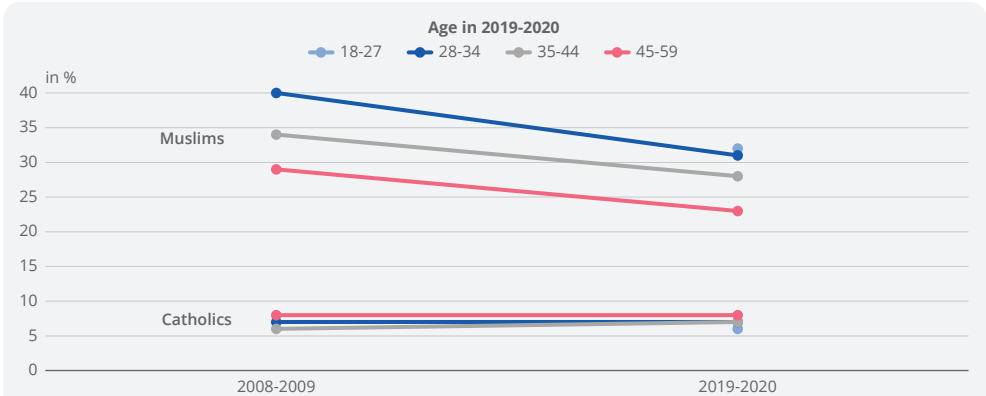
Interpretation: in 2019-2020, 6% of people declaring themselves to be Catholic cite religion as a constitutive dimension of their identity.

Scope: Metropolitan France, persons aged 18 to 49 living in ordinary housing.

Sources: Ined-Insee, *Trajectoires et Origines 2* (2019-2020) and *Trajectoires et Origines* (2008-2009) surveys.

Such a variation in religious identity can also be measured by pseudo cohorts between 2008-2009 and 2019-2020, that is, by reconstructing the age group of 2008-2009 respondents by subtracting 11 years from those in 2019-2020. This allows us to distinguish between age effects (the relationship to religion varies according to age, and thus the evolution of the age composition of the population could explain the variation in religious identity) and generation effects (the differences between age groups could actually express specific behaviors of generational groups linked to their religious socialization). The decline in the declaration of religion in the identity of Muslims occurs regardless of the cohort being considered: the stronger religious identity observed eleven years ago among those under 30 years of age compared to those over 30 years of age did not amount to a generation effect bound to continue. Rather, it was the result of an age effect observed again in 2019-2020 ► [figure 4](#). Religious identity thus decreases with age among Muslims, while it is stable for Catholics.

► 4. Proportion of individuals who cited religion as a significant part of their identity, by age cohort in 2008-2009 and 2019-2020 and by religion



Note: age cohorts are indexed to 2019-2020. Therefore, subtract 11 years for age in 2008-09 (the 28-34 age cohort in 2019-2020 was 17-23 in 2008-09).

Interpretation: 34% of Muslims aged 24-33 in 2008-2009 cited religion as a dimension of their identity. Eleven years later (in 2019-2020), 28% of Muslims aged 35-44 cited it as a dimension of their identity.

Scope: Metropolitan France, persons aged 18 to 59 living in ordinary housing.

Sources: Ined-Insee, *Trajectoires et Origines 2* (2019-2020) and *Trajectoires et Origines* (2008-2009) surveys.

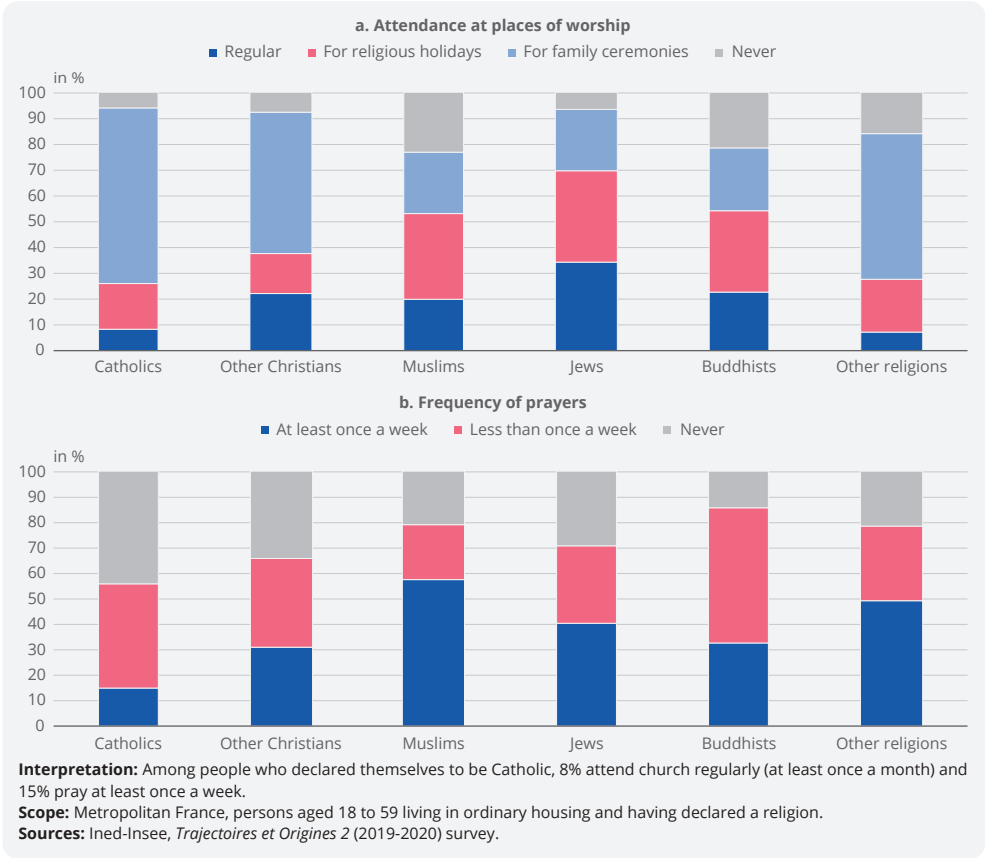
Catholics are less consistent in their religious practices, while Muslims are more active.

The study of religious practices in France has long focused on Catholicism, the dominant religion, and religious attendance has been important for distinguishing regular from occasional churchgoers, non-practitioners, and even “cultural Catholics,” who express a family tradition rather than a religious attachment per se.

In 2019-2020, 8% of Catholics regularly attend their place of worship ► [figure 5a](#). This is the case for just over 20% of other Christians, Muslims and Buddhists, and 34% of Jews. Within the same religion, practices differ according to migration background: 6% of Catholics with no migration background go to mass regularly, compared to 15% of immigrants of Portuguese, Spanish or Italian origin (the rate is only 5% among their descendants), 24% of Catholics from overseas who have migrated to metropolitan France, and up to 55% of immigrants from Central Africa. Attending the mass is more widespread among non-Catholic Christians: 62% of Central African immigrants are regular churchgoers.

Places of worship have a different role in Islam, where private practices, at home or in daily life, are much more frequent. Attending the mosque is not one of the five pillars of Islam, and only 20% of Muslims attend it regularly. Variations by migration background and origins are rather small.

► 5. Religious practices by religion



The dissociation between religious attendance and the declared importance of religion in one's life shows that the former is a poor measure of Muslims' religiosity. Thus, 76 percent of Muslims say that religion is very or somewhat important to them, compared to 27 percent of Catholics and 39 percent of other Christians. However, while 47 percent of Catholics and 76 percent of other Christians for whom religion is very important regularly attend a place of worship, only 34 percent of Muslims who consider religion very important do so. Among Muslims overall, 19% combine the importance of religion with regular attendance at places of worship, while 57% consider religion to be important in their lives but never go to the mosque, or only for holidays or special ceremonies.

Conversely, Catholics who attend church and consider religion important are 7% of all Catholics while those who consider religion important without attending religious service are only 20%¹.

For Muslims, the dissociation between mosque attendance and religiosity is strongly linked to gender: 30% of Muslim men and 10% of Muslim women regularly attend the mosque, while the latter declare slightly more often (78%) than the former (73%) that religion is important in their lives. Among Catholics, 8% of men and 9% of women attend mass regularly.

► Insert 2 – Who wears the veil?

The wearing of the veil by Muslim women is an important aspect of public debates on the visibility of Islam and gender equality. The TeO survey provides a measure of this practice: 26% of Muslim women between the ages of 18 and 49 say they wear a headscarf ► **figure**. Among them, nine out of ten say they always wear it. This practice varies greatly between immigrants of one origin and descendants of that same origin; it concerns 36% of Muslim immigrant women and 17% of second-generation descendants. The practice is most common among Turkish and Middle Eastern immigrants (46%).

Wearing of the veil among Muslim women, by migration background and origin

		in %	
		2008-2009	2019-2020
Maghreb	Immigrants	23	37
	Descendants of immigrants	12	16
Sub-Saharan Africa	Immigrants	12	28
	Descendants of immigrants	11	17
Turkey and the Middle East	Immigrants	39	46
	Descendants of immigrants	18	24
All origins	Immigrants	22	36
	Descendants of immigrants	13	17
Total		18	26

Interpretation: in 2008-2009, among immigrant women from the Maghreb who declared themselves to be Muslim, 23% declared that they wore the veil.

Scope: Metropolitan France, women aged 18 to 49 living in ordinary housing who declared they were Muslims.

Sources: Ined-Insee, *Trajectoires and Origines 2* (2019-2020) and *Trajectoires et Origines* (2008-2009) surveys.

While veiling is more common among immigrant women after the age of 35 (30% among 18-24 year olds and 42% among 35-44 year olds), it is among 25-34 year olds that veiling is most prevalent among the descendants of immigrant (20%, compared to 17% among 35-44 year olds). Compared to 2008-2009, the wearing of the veil has become more frequent for all origins and all generations. These increases primarily reflect changes in practices in the countries of origin, which is visible for immigrant women, and a smaller increase for second generation women. Muslim women in couples are wearing the veil more often. This is the case for 42% of immigrant women of North African origin in couples, compared to 24% of those living alone. Wearing the veil is more common among inactive Muslim women: 56% among immigrants and 39% among descendants of immigrants. Finally, the wearing of the veil differs greatly by professional category: from 13% for Muslim women in management and intermediate professions to 38% for working-class women.

¹ Among those who say religion is important in their lives, Tiberj (2020) distinguishes "private Muslims" from "mosque Muslims": the former are no less religious than the latter, but are distinctive in their lower or non-existent attendance at places of worship. This distinction can be applied by extension to "private Catholics" and "church Catholics."

Religiosity outside of religious institutions manifests itself in the practice of prayer and the observance of various obligations, including dietary and clothing obligations ► [insert 2](#). Muslims pray most frequently: 58% at least once a week, while only 21% never pray ► [figure 5b](#). Buddhists have the fewest believers who never pray (15%), but only 32% pray at least once a week. Finally, prayer is much less common among those who identify as Catholic: 44% never pray and only 15% pray at least once a week. In Catholicism and other Christian denominations, the attendance of church service and the practice of prayer are closely linked: among Catholics, 64% of those who go to church regularly pray at least once a week, compared to 5% of those who do not go to mass. This correlation is weaker in the Muslim religion, for which the observance of prayer is a requirement: while 58% of Muslims pray at least once a week, this is still the case for 35% of those who never go to the mosque.

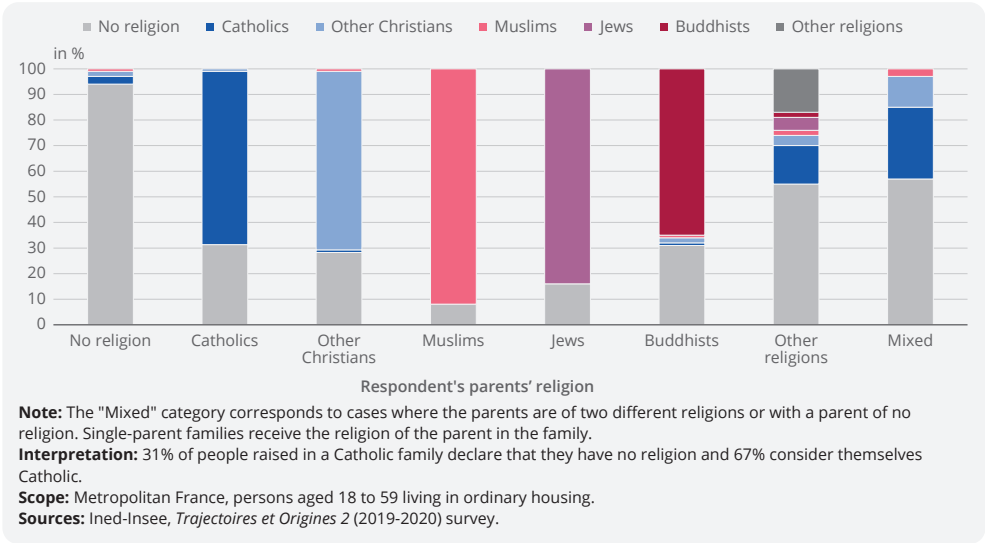
Not all religions advocate dietary restrictions, but fasting periods exist in most religions (the Lent fast, Ramadan, Yom Kippur or Pesach, the invitation to eat lean on Fridays). Fasting practices have practically fallen into disuse in Christian denominations: only 3% of Catholics and 5% of other Christians say that they strictly respect the fasting periods of their religion and 13% respect them “more or less”. The few Christians who still practice fasting are immigrants from Central Africa (in this group, 20% practice it strictly). In contrast, 75% of Muslims observe the fast strictly and 15% “more or less”.

A stronger transmission in Muslim and Jewish families

Immigrant arrivals contribute to increasing religious diversity in France. Over the long run however, the religious landscape is primarily shaped by processes of religious transmission between generations. Transmission dynamics depend on the motivation of immigrant parents to socialize their children in their religion. Meanwhile, incentives for secularization are relatively strong in France.

Religious reproduction within the family is strong in Islam and Judaism: 91% of those raised in Muslim families and 84% in Jewish families continue to identify with their parents' religion ► [figure 6](#). Christian families transmit their religion at a lower rate: 67% of those raised by Catholic parents and 69% by parents of other Christian denominations retained their parents' religion. These [transmission rates](#) by religion also vary by origin group.

► 6. Religious affiliation by parents' religion



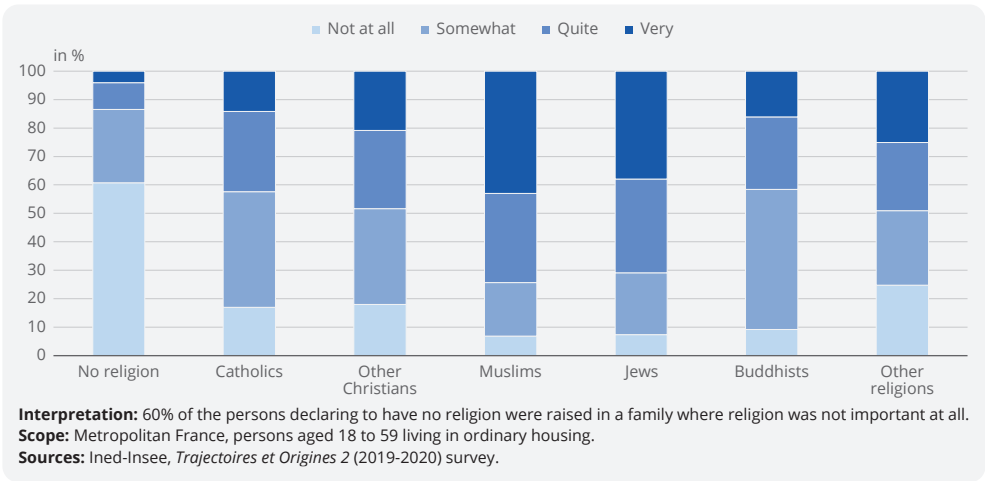
In Catholic families from overseas territories, transmission rates are higher (71% for the second generation) than that observed in families with no migratory ancestry (66%). Similarly, Muslim families from the Maghreb transmit their religion slightly less (89%) than those from Turkey/the Middle East or Sahelian Africa (97%).

The majority of those who did not follow their parents' affiliation left religion altogether rather than adopt another. The "exit rate" from religion is particularly high (57%) among those whose parents have two different religions or those in which one parent has no religion. Such parental religious mixing occurs among 16% of both the second generation and the population without a migration background. It amounts to 14% of second-generation Catholics and only 6% of second-generation Muslims.

Religiosity mainly depends on parental religious socialization

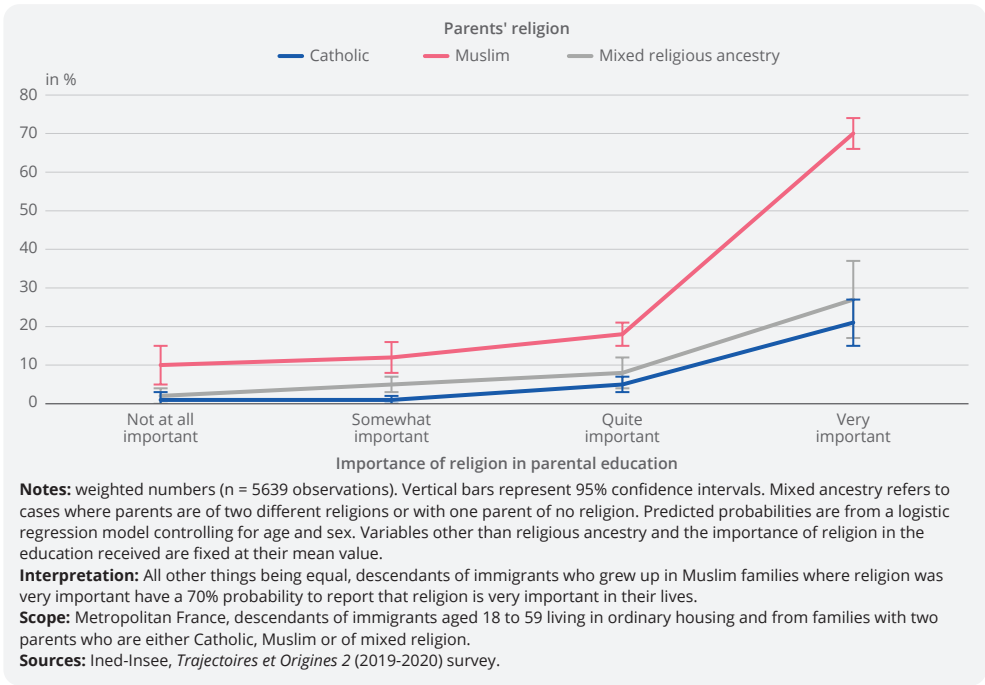
Like religious affiliation, religiosity is strongly influenced by family socialization. 60% of those with no religion report having received a parental upbringing in which religion was not important ► [figure 7](#). More than half of Catholics, other Christians, and Buddhists responded that it was of little or no importance in their childhood. Parental religious socialization is significantly more consistent for Muslims and Jews, as nearly three-quarters of them say it was somewhat or very important.

► 7. Importance of religion in the family during childhood, by respondent's religion



To provide a better understanding of the link between religious socialization and religiosity in adulthood among the descendants of immigrants born and raised in France, we adopt a "all other things being equal" statistical approach. As in the case of the transmission of affiliations, Muslim religious socialization stands out through the strength of its reproduction [[Drouhot, 2021](#)]: the descendants of Muslim immigrants who grew up in families with strong religious socialization (42% of Muslim families) have a high probability (70%) of declaring that religion has a very important place in their lives ► [figure 8](#). This remains true when differentiating by gender. In contrast, descendants of immigrants who grew up in Catholic families with strong religious socialization (13% of Catholic families) have only a 21% chance of reporting that religion is very important in their lives. Regardless of the parent's religious affiliation, respondents with mixed religious ancestry show a low likelihood of declaring religion to be important (27%). Parental religious mixedness is thus a powerful secularization force.

► 8. Predicted probabilities for the reported importance of religion, by parental religious ancestry



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► Source

Co-produced by INED and INSEE, the *Trajectoires et Origines 2* (TeO2) survey, collected in 2019-2020, directly builds up on the TeO1 survey (2008-2009). It follows the main principles of the first edition: 60% of the questions are identical and the sampling strategy is similar [Beauchemin *et al.*] The TeO2 questionnaire provides information on the migration history of the respondents and/or their parents, describes their educational and professional backgrounds, their family history, their marital life, their children, their housing conditions, their health, and the transmission of languages and religion. It comprehensively examines the access of individuals to social resources (school, work, housing, services, health care, etc.) as well as the discriminations that may hinder it. The scope of TeO2 is individuals aged 18 to 59 living in ordinary housing in metropolitan France. The survey was carried out among approximately 27,200 people, with the aim of executing detailed analyses of the main population groups that have direct or indirect experience of migration to metropolitan France. Immigrants and overseas natives, as well as their children born in metropolitan France, were therefore over-represented. The sample also includes individuals representative of the rest of the population. Since the TeO1 sample did not provide adequate coverage of the descendants of immigrants aged 50-59, the temporal comparisons made here only concern those aged 18-49.

► Definition

The **affiliation transmission** rate is the share of people who retained their parents' religious affiliation.

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