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## Youth, Religion, Socialization<sup>1</sup>. Changes in youth religiosity and its relationship to denominational education in Hungary

**Abstract** The aim of this paper is to explore the main characteristics of religious change among the Hungarian youth and to assess the impact of the denominational schools compared to that of the religious upbringing in the family on their religiosity. Previous empirical studies have found a considerable level of unchurched in Hungary affecting first and foremost the membership of the highly institutionalized traditional churches. Recent scholarly literature emphasizes the significance of age explaining secularization process by age-, cohort- as well as life-cycle effects, therefore pointing to the importance of socialization agents. Based on a secondary analysis of the databases of three waves of Hungarian national youth surveys (Ifjúság, 2000, 2008; Magyar Ifjúság, 2012), we compare the religious commitment and religious behaviour of consecutive cohorts studied in different rounds. By linear regression analysis we aim to scrutinize the significance and the extent to which religious upbringing and attending religious schools mattered in the development of youth religiosity. We show that while the considerable drop of religiosity is a result of both within- and inter-cohort changes, the impact of upbringing in a religious family is significantly stronger than that of attending a denominational school.

**Keywords:** youth, religion, socialization, denominational schools, unchurched, age-cohort-period effect

### Introduction

Youth religiosity in Europe and especially in the Central and Eastern European countries nowadays has become a more and more significant issue. Young people currently attending secondary school, being engaged in higher education, or entering the labour market may, within a few years, constitute a considerable part of active church membership (Ziebertz & Kay, 2006, 2008; Ziebertz, Kay & Riegel 2009). For churches in the post-socialist countries this is even more pressing to consider as volunteer service and donations are becoming indispensable also for traditional highly institutionalized churches which, during the communist regimes, have been deprived of their estates and are now depending on government subsidies. However, since a large part of their membership being retired now, it is undoubtedly of high necessity to carry over the young generation.

Thus, well-known demographic and unchurched trends are quite alarming. While the Hungarian population, parallel to most European societies, has been ageing, the age composition of the membership of Hungarian churches also shows striking disparity contrasted to the total society. According to the 2001 Census data

(Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2002), the youth and middle-aged has been under-represented and the older generations have been over-represented among those having a denominational affiliation. Moreover, apart from some methodological uncertainties regarding the religiosity data, the first 2011 Census results suggest that these trends have been continuing throughout the past decade (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2013). The predictable tendencies for the next decades seem to be even less promising. Tomka (2010) asserts that deceased church-goers, especially in rural areas, have not been replaced by the youth because of having weaker religious commitment. Therefore, membership of all major denominations has been declining. Moreover, Tomka concludes that the traditionally elderly and rural profile of the churches is soon to disappear, that is, looking at a national level, the age structure is gradually becoming more balanced. Tomka adds as well that active engagement of the diminishing membership based on a personal commitment gradually takes the place of the traditional church membership. It can be raised, however, that this spread of religious belief based on a conscious choice will not necessarily benefit the traditional churches (Hátori, 2011), and the recent and prospected demographic trends may turn the apparently balanced age structure transitional.

While this pattern is not unique in Europe, Hungarian results are surprising compared to some other Eastern European post-socialist countries – especially considering that after 1990, practicing religion in an institutionalized framework became considerably freer. What is more important, early sociological studies on religiosity showed a slightly increasing religiosity from the beginning of the 80s, and this trend has continued for a while even after the political transition (Tomka, 1998a, 1999). The reasons for this have been certainly complex. Besides the historical background, the political and institutional environment, the effectivity and institutional structure of the churches themselves might also have played a role (Hátori, 2011; Tomka, 2009). Underlying these trends, micro-level (individual) factors can also be assumed, as religious commitment is arguably influenced by complex socialization processes. Thus, changes in the historical context will result in different socialization influences for different generations. Although religious commitment may become altered through the lifetime, it can be assumed that, in principle, religiosity of successive generations will mirror the different socialization context<sup>2</sup>.

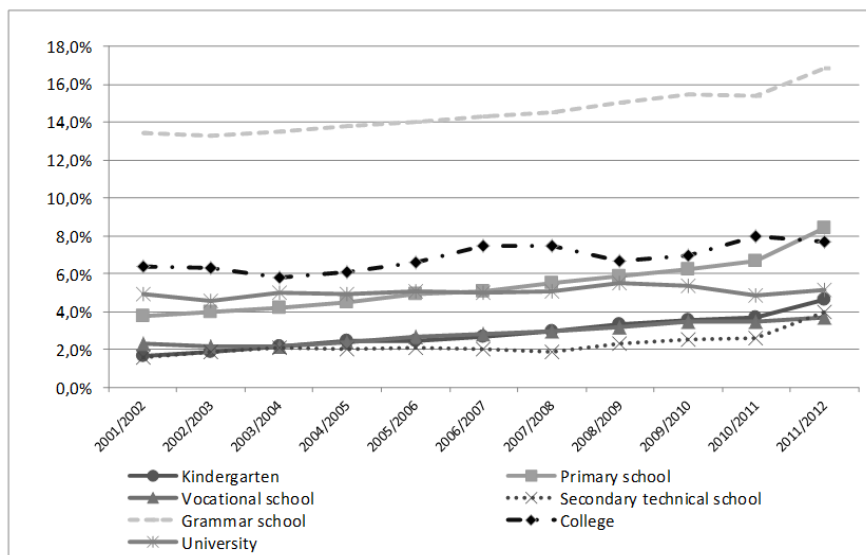
## **Denominational Education in Hungary**

A significant change in the environment of religious socialization has been that denominational pre-primary, primary, secondary and higher education institutions previously confiscated by the state have been re-established after the political transitions around 1990. In addition, a significant number of denominational

educational institutions were newly established, too (Pusztai, 2006, 2012). The extent of the enlargement of denominational education system is illustrated by the fact that while before 1990 a total of 10 denominational educational institutions existed in the whole country, nowadays the Hungarian Catholic Church maintains 570 pre-primary, primary, secondary and 10 higher education institutions, and the Reformed Church in Hungary has 210 educational institutions (Katolikus Pedagógiai Szervezési és Továbbképzési Intézet, 2013; Magyarországi Református Egyház, 2011).

Since 2000 the proportion of the attendees of church-run schools has increased at all educational levels. The rate of denominational school students is the highest among grammar school pupils: in the 2011-2012 academic year about every sixth young people went to a denominational grammar school. However, the rate of growth was stronger at lower levels of education: the rate of children going to denominational kindergarten or primary school has more than doubled in a decade (Figure 1). Taking every level of education into consideration, 155,690 pupils and students attend an educational institution run by a church, which amounts to 7.4% of all pupils and students in Hungary (Oktatási és Kulturális Minisztérium, 2012).

**Figure 1.** Proportion of those attending church-maintained institutions at different levels of education, 2001-2012



Source: Nemzeti Erőforrás Minisztérium, 2010, 2011, 2012, Oktatási és Kulturális Minisztérium, 2007, 2008, 2009; own calculations.

Although these schools have performed public functions as well and they have been open to all regardless of their denominational background, from their start they were seen as institutions having a missionary task, and to contribute to the reproduction of

religiously committed intellectuals. (Bacskai, 2008; Kopp, 2007; Krafcsik, 2000) Although relatively short time has passed since the re-establishment of these institutions, it is questionable whether they functioned sufficiently or to what extent they have met these expectations. That is, the question is to what extent they are capable of coping with generational change and the socialization pressure of family background.

The religiosity of the students of denominational secondary schools in Hungary has been studied the most intensively by Pusztai (2006). The results of her studies at the turn of the millennium suggested that among the parents of denominational secondary school pupils those who were religious according to the teachings of the church were clearly over-represented as compared to those measured in the parents' age group at the national level. However, pupils from these families were not in the majority in denominational secondary schools. Besides those who were religious on their own way, there were a considerable number of students who came from non-religious families, too (Pusztai, 2004). A more recent survey of hers covering not only regions in Hungary but also border regions in the Ukraine and Romania also found that only slightly more than half of the denominational secondary school students came from a family that showed some form of active religious characteristics (Pusztai, 2007).

Pusztai observed a much higher proportion of various forms of religious practice among the denominational secondary school pupils than the proportion typical for this age group in Hungary. However, she also pointed out that the students coming from non-religious families were in all regards less religious than their counterparts who received religious upbringing. This difference was bigger among boys than among girls (Pusztai, 2004).

Pusztai's research underlined that the most significant contextual effect on the religiosity of denominational secondary school students was the frequency of praying of the parents, which was actually an indicator of the religiosity of the family. In addition, the presence of religious friends and active participation in small religious communities were also important correlates of the self-reported intensity of religiosity. The impact of a denominational school on the religiosity of its students was primarily manifested not through the religious programmes it provided, but as an environment that might have provided a homogeneous system of values and norms.

Thus, family background evidently plays an important role for the religiosity of denominational secondary school students. In the paper below, we make an attempt to separate the impact of these socialization factors not only for current pupils, but also for young adults.

## **Theoretical background: secularization and age-period-cohort analysis**

Although its theoretical foundations are highly debated and it is often questioned if one can think about it as a coherent theory at all, secularization thesis has been one of the most influential interpretations of contemporary religious decline for a long time<sup>3</sup>. Although it can hardly be generalized to all contemporary countries let alone the whole of Europe, the case of present-day Hungary can actually be regarded as an empirical evidence to secularization thesis.

An explanation of the gradual unchurched from the aspect of socialization is that consecutive cohorts are exposed to different kinds of religious socialization. Many scholars agree that the level of religiosity is apparently quite stable within cohorts (Crockett & Voas, 2006; Voas & Doebler, 2011; Wolf, 2008). Thus, if consecutive cohorts experience a decreasing religious socialization, the rate of religious people will be declining.

Another phenomenon having an impact in the opposite direction is the effect of age, often described as life-cycle effect. As a consequence of this, an increasing religiosity can be observed in all age groups as people are getting older (Tomka, 2010). This means that the overall decline of religious sub-population is slowed down by the older cohorts becoming more and more religious<sup>4</sup>. However, when looking at the youth, a different kind of life-cycle effect can be assumed. People in the age of post-adolescence often turn to be less religious, which can be explained by the fact that the impact of basic agents of socialization (especially that of the family and the school) weakens.

Secularization thesis is often criticized for assuming that the disappearance of religion is an irreversible process. In contrast, one can easily observe temporary religious upsurges. Such fluctuating changes can be explained by period-effect or historical effect. From this aspect, changes in religiosity are resulting from historical events which have the same impact on all cohorts. Undoubtedly political transition in the post-socialist countries was exactly of this kind. However, as it has been pointed out above, freedom of conscience did not necessarily result in growing religiosity (Müller, 2011).

Following a religious upsurge during the late 80s and early 90s, religiosity has been declining for the past two decades in Hungary. At the same time some indicators of individual religiosity such as belief in God have evidently risen. Thus, religious change in Hungary can be well characterized by the theories of religious individualization and religious privatization (Rosta, 2008, 2011, 2012). Considering the adult cohorts a decline of church religiosity can be explained by cohort effects, whereas growing individual religiosity can be the result of within-cohort changes

(Rosta, 2007). As for the cohorts growing up after the political transition, a freer environment for religious practice and religious education as well as the growing number of denominational schools make a positive cohort-effect plausible<sup>5</sup>.

Considering the above, we try to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the main characteristics of religious change among the Hungarian youth? Is there a similar pattern of slightly declining church religiosity like that of the whole adult population? (2) Is there a lifecycle-effect of religious change among young people, resulting in (a) significantly higher church religiosity among the youngest age-groups compared to the older ones, and in (b) significantly higher church religiosity of young people still in secondary school compared to the same birth cohorts at a later point of time? (3) Are there cohort-specific differences concerning the level of religiosity? Are the younger cohorts socialized under the circumstances of religious freedom more religious than the older ones? (4) How can we assess the impact of the denominational schools on the religiosity of the youth?

To answer these questions we make a secondary analysis of the data of the Hungarian National Youth Study waves 2000, 2008, and 2012 (Ifjúság, 2000, 2008; Magyar Ifjúság, 2012)<sup>6</sup>. The Hungarian National Youth studies have been based on representative samples of Hungarian young people between 15 and 29 including 8000 respondents in each wave in every fourth year since 2000. The study has been based on standardized survey and its samples has been representative to national, regional and county level, domicile type, age groups, as well as gender. In 2008, certain questions on religiosity were asked only to representative sub-samples of 4000 (in some cases 2000). Though the Hungarian Youth study has not been a research into the sociology of religion, yet all waves included a set of questions of religiosity.

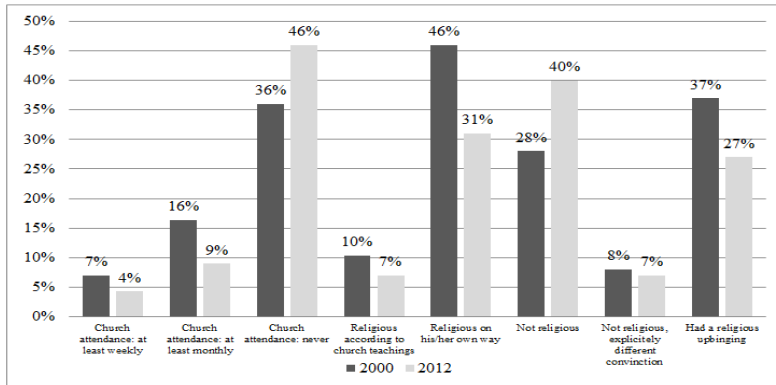
## **Changes of church religiosity**

Results of the Hungarian Youth studies show that between 2000 and 2012 church religious identity significantly dropped among young people between 15 and 29 (Figure 2). The rate of those attending church service weekly or more frequently has almost been halved (from 7 to 4%), just like that of those attending church at least once a month (from 16 to 9%). Considering that the total number of this age group has also decreased by about 442 thousand since 2001 (Domokos, 2013, p. 14), one can conclude that the net decline is even higher. At the same time, the rate of those never attending church has raised from 36 to 46%.

The fact that the youth are turning their backs on religion is mirrored not only by church attendance but also by indicators of personal commitment. The rate of those having a religious persuasion according to the teaching of the church has been reduced from 10 to 7%. Somewhat surprisingly, at the same time, the share of people

religious “in their own way” has also decreased from 46 to 31%. Sided by a stable share of 7-8% of those having an explicitly anti-religious persuasion, only the rate of one single group increased significantly which is that of the group of those identifying themselves as “not religious”, thus distancing themselves from churches and expressing a disinterest in religion. The share of those claiming to be raised in a religious family has also dropped from 37 to 27%.

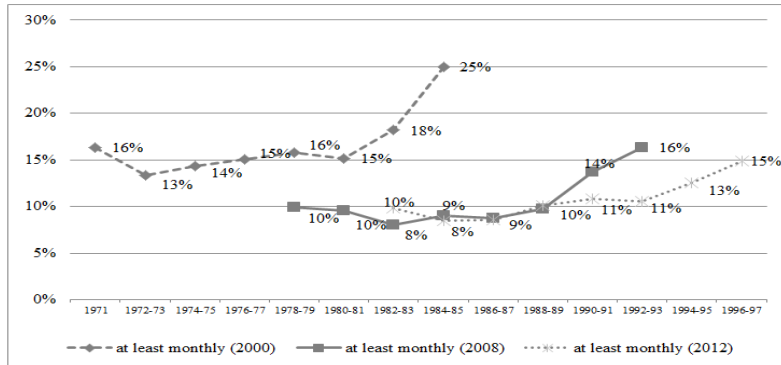
**Figure 2.** Change in church religiosity of youth aged 15–29<sup>7</sup>



Source: Ifjúság, 2000; Magyar Ifjúság, 2012

The question should be raised here whether it is lifecycle-effect or cohort-effect that is explaining these trends. As represented in Figure 3, the share of those attending church monthly or more frequently was the highest in the youngest age groups in 2000, in 2008 as well as in 2012, although these figures already show a declining religiosity of the youngest age groups (25%, 16% and 15% respectively). Contrasted to them, the older age groups were significantly less religious at each point of time, although the difference between them slightly diminished throughout the examined time period (7 percentage points in 2000 and only 2 in 2008 and in 2012). However, within-cohort decrease is astonishing. Considering the cohort born between 1984 and 1985, the drop of the share of those attending church at least monthly was as high as 16 percentage points between 2000 and 2008, a really outstanding decline even though the trend was the same in all other age groups as well. Between 2008 and 2012 similar changes with smaller intensity took place in the youngest age groups, but the share of frequent churchgoers remained stable in the older cohorts.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 3.** Frequency of church attendance by birth cohorts



Source: Ifjúság, 2000 and 2008; Magyar Ifjúság, 2012

In summary, although a significantly higher level of religiosity can be observed in all three waves when examining the youngest cohorts compared to the older ones, these differences diminished throughout the time period. The cohort aged 15-16 in 2000, which appeared to be the most religious, turned away from religion when they became 23-24 in 2008 to such an extent that by then they were less religious than those aged 15-16 in 2008. Religious socialization apparently affects a shrinking share of young people, and even those having attended church services regularly as a child tend to turn their backs on the church in great numbers during their late teen ages<sup>9</sup>. Thus, declining religiosity among Hungarian youth is a result of both within- and inter-cohort changes.

### The role of the agents of socialization

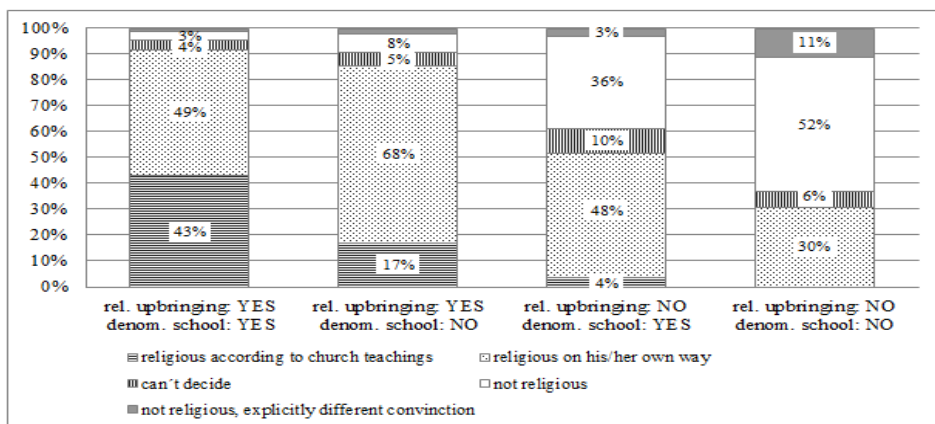
As it can be seen in Figure 2, the share of those claiming to have been raised in a religious environment has dropped from 36% to 26%<sup>10</sup>. In a previous paper, we already assumed that this might be due to the changing socialization environment (Hámori & Rosta 2011, p. 252). Of course, socialization process takes place not only in the family but also in other groups and institutions, such as peer groups, mass media and school. Although there were no measures of religiosity of the peers applied, we still have data on whether the respondent attended a denominational school by the time of the survey both from the 2000 and 2008 waves<sup>11</sup>. On the basis of this, it is possible to scrutinize closely the role of family background and denominational education in forming a religious commitment.

As it has been shown earlier in this paper, while denominational schools have an impact only on a marginal, though slowly increasing, part of youth, religious socialization within the family affects a much greater, though declining, part of young people. The question is what kind of an effect these mean together and what the role of each is for a youngster in becoming or remaining religious.

To answer the question we first divided respondents of the 2008 wave into four groups: (1) young people with religious upbringing and having attended a denominational school; (2) young people with religious upbringing only and not having attended a denominational school; (3) young people without religious upbringing, but having attended a denominational school; (4) young people with no religious upbringing and not having attended a denominational school.

We compare the religious identity of these four groups in Figure 4 (using the five-item scale developed by Miklós Tomka, see Tomka, 1973, 1998b), and the frequency of their church-going on Figure 5.

**Figure 4.** Religious self-assessment by religious upbringing and denominational school attendance.



Source: Ifjúság 2008

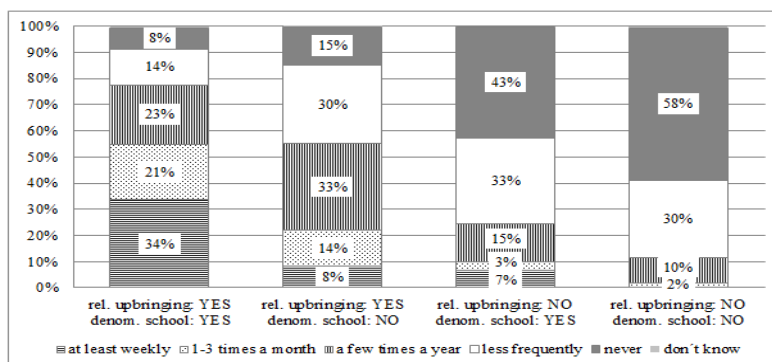
These figures show that the presence of the two socialization factors together can make the religious commitment the most probable. More than half of those who got a religious upbringing and studied at least one year in a denominational school attend church service at least monthly, whereas only 2% of those are regular church-goers who gained no similarly religious socialization previously. Looking at this latter group, more than two-third (69%) of them were uncertain about their religious identity or explicitly non-religious, while the same identity got only an 8% share of those who received religious incentives both from their family and the school<sup>12</sup>.

The two effects clearly reinforce each other, but it can be argued which is more significant. This can be explored by comparing the religiosity of the groups exposed only to one of these effects. Of those who attended a denominational school but gained no religious upbringing, only 4% are church religious and almost half of them (48%) are religious in their own way. Albeit both figures are higher than those of the group gaining no religious incentives at all (1% and 30% respectively), these

are considerably lower than those of the group having a religious upbringing yet attending no denominational school. Among them, 17% are committed believers according to the church's teachings, and they have shown the highest share of those believing in their own way (68%).

A similar tendency of the frequency of church-attendance is apparent in Figure 5. Although we can see an almost identical share of weekly church-going within those who were exposed to a religious socialization only either in their family or by a denominational school (7% and 8% respectively), the rate of those attending church service at least monthly is almost double (22%) within those having only a religious upbringing compared to those attending a denominational school only (10%).

**Figure 5.** Frequency of church-attendance by religious upbringing and denominational school attendance.



Source: Ifjúság 2008

Thus, as a preliminary assumption we can state that a religious family background has a more significant role in becoming religious, whereas the denominational school has been shown to have a significantly lower efficiency in providing a religious education which the young did not receive in the family. A linear regression model can help to separate the intensity of these effects within each age groups (See Table 1).

As explanatory variables of the model, we have built in age, gender, domicile and number of own children of the respondents, the father's highest level of education, and some indicators of living independently (being employed, living in an independent household). Of course, we included data on religious upbringing as well as studying in a denominational school, too. As outcome variable, we measured religiosity by an indicator of the frequency of church attendance.

As it has been clearly verified by the model, the two religious socialization factors had a significant effect both in the whole examined group (aged 15–29, last

column in Table 1) and in the three sub-groups (aged 15–19, 20–24, and 25–29). Moreover, religious family background had a higher positive impact in all three age-groups compared to the denominational schools. Both factors had the strongest effect on the youngest age group (15–19).

Generally, the effect of the other explanatory variables was far less significant. Practicing one's religion was unaffected by whether living independently. It seems only that with a father having a higher level degree, a more frequent church-attendance is more probable<sup>13</sup>.

Confirming our expectations, the negative effect of age is less salient than that of the sources of socialization. Dividing the sample into sub-groups by age, lifecycle-effect remains significant only in the youngest group, which results in a decreasing religiosity by the age advancing.

**Table 1.** Explanatory models of the frequency of church attendance by age groups, 2008 (standardized linear regression coefficients)

	age group			
	15-19	20-24	25-29	15-29
Sex (1 = man, 2 = woman)	n.s.	.040	.053**	.038**
age	-.055**	n.s.	n.s.	-.033*
settlement type = Budapest	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
settlement type = city with county rights	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
settlement type = 5000 or more inhabitants	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
settlement type = 2000-4999 inhabitants	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
father's highest level of education = skilled worker	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
father's highest level of education = high school	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.030*
father's highest level of education = higher education	.055*	.062*	.081**	.070**
number of own children	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
has worked for at least 3 months	n.s.	-.050*	n.s.	n.s.
doesn't live with parents	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
<i>number of years attended a denominational school</i>	<i>.231**</i>	<i>.163**</i>	<i>.165**</i>	<i>.192**</i>
<i>had a religious upbringing</i>	<i>.343**</i>	<i>.277**</i>	<i>.285**</i>	<i>.303**</i>
<i>Adj. R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>0.212</i>	<i>0.128</i>	<i>0.127</i>	<i>0.158</i>

reference categories: settlement type = 0-1999 inhabitants, father's highest level of education = primary school

\* sig.  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*sig.  $p < 0.01$ , n.s.: non-significant

## Conclusions

Indicators of church religiosity measured by the Hungarian youth studies in 2000, 2008, and 2012 have shown a significant drop in a relatively short period of time. In contrast, it has not been the share of respondents religious in their own way or having an anti-religious identity that has grown but that of those being indifferent towards religion. Though the youngest group aged 15-16 seems to be more religious compared to the older ones, the difference between them was better-marked in 2000 than in 2008 or in 2012. Looking at the older cohorts, however, one can hardly find

a significant difference.

Comparing cohorts examined both in 2000 and 2008, a huge decline in religiosity is apparent in the youngest one. There is a diminishing trend in the older cohorts too, but to a lesser extent. Similar trends are to be witnessed in 2012 too. Considering that no comparable decline has been observed in the adult cohorts so far, we can assume that this within-cohort change was due to a life-cycle effect typical for young ages rather than a period-effect.

Comparing the effect of different socialization factors examined by the Hungarian youth studies, it seems that the impact of family background is significantly stronger than that of the denominational schools. The effect of this socialization background appears to be somewhat weaker in the older cohorts. There is a higher probability of church religiosity in the case of youngsters getting both a religious motivation from the family and the denominational school. However, on the basis of the existing survey data it cannot be decided whether it is because denominational school reinforces the effect of religious upbringing or because highly religious families tend to enrol their children to denominational schools. In any case, these schools can hardly fulfil the expected re-evangelization function for children from non-religious families. Although a lifecycle-effect is evidently present in the surveyed age-group, the effect of becoming independent from the parental household on religiosity is barely detectable.

If we combine our results on the importance of religious upbringing in the family with the declining share of those who receive such socialization, a further decline of religiosity among the Hungarian youth seems fairly probable.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the paper presented for the panel session on the sociology of religion at the annual conference of the Hungarian Sociological Association (Budapest, 9 November 2012).

<sup>2</sup> More on generational differences and age effects, see Földvári (2003), Rosta (2007), and Tomka (2010).

<sup>3</sup> We already attempted to briefly overview secularization thesis and some of the counter-arguments on it in a previous paper (Hátori, 2011, pp. 16–17). Tomka (2011) provides an exhaustive summary of the topic.

<sup>4</sup> As it was pointed out in the introduction, despite this the number of believers in Hungary is falling. The reason for this according to Tomka (2009, 2010) may be that cohort-effect is greater, that is, the declining religiosity of successive cohorts, than lifecycle-effect. Moreover, in the most recent period it was just the most religious elderly population that passed.

<sup>5</sup> A possible interpretation of this controversial process is that a different kind of religiosity may exist in the age groups. Consequently, the direction and pace of change is also different. The older generations are still attached to a more traditional folk religiosity, and changes among them can be characterized as secularization process. Religiosity of younger cohorts is more typically based on personal choice, thus religious changes can be modelled as “religious market” of churches competing for the faithful (Hátori 2011).

<sup>6</sup> In the 2004 wave, the majority of the questions on religiosity were raised to a special subsample, which made the comparison of the results of this wave meaningless.

<sup>7</sup> 100% = all respondents.

<sup>8</sup> The overall share of those without a valid answer (“don’t know”/refusal) has slightly increased from 6% (2000) and 3% (2008) to 9% (2012) of all respondents. In order to ignore possible effects of the increasing number of missing answers, Figure 3 shows percentages of valid answers.

<sup>9</sup> Evidence for similar age effects among young adults on the basis of adult samples were shown by Nagy (2010).

<sup>10</sup> The rate of non-respondents was 8,8% in 2000 and 8,1% in 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the 2012 wave of the study did not contain questions on the type of school that was attended by the respondent.

<sup>12</sup> On the basis of the current research, it cannot be decided whether a religious educational institution should be regarded as a cause of stronger religious commitment, or the religion brought from home is the reason both for current religiosity and the choice of school.

<sup>13</sup> This is another evidence for a trend of elitisation of the religious part of the society. For

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more literature on this process among the youth see Hámori & Rosta (2011), and Rosta (2002, 2013).