

Article

Women's Religious Belonging and Activism in Secularising Catholic Europe

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Abstract

This paper analyses changing patterns of women's religious belonging in secularising European societies. Drawing on European Social Survey (ESS) data and documentary analysis of three reform-oriented Catholic groups—Donne per la Chiesa, Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia, and We Are Church Ireland—it examines changing relationships with institutional religion in Italy, Spain, and Ireland. Across these countries, women's weekly attendance and Catholic affiliation declined over the period considered, with younger age groups less likely to attend. However, the selected cases show that institutional critique does not necessarily imply religious disengagement. Instead, the groups examined negotiate Catholic belonging through theological reflection, collective action, feminist critique, and demands for greater participation within the Church.

Keywords: secularisation; gender; Catholicism; European Social Survey (ESS); religious belonging; women's religious activism; documentary analysis

1. Introduction

Processes of secularisation have profoundly reshaped the religious landscape of contemporary Europe, transforming patterns of belief, affiliation, and institutional participation (Bruce 2011; Davie 2002; Voas and Chaves 2016). While a substantial body of sociological scholarship has documented aggregate indicators of religious decline and cohort replacement dynamics (Voas and Chaves 2016), comparatively less attention has been devoted to the gendered dimensions of these transformations and to the ways in which women's experiences illuminate broader shifts in the relationship between religion and society (Woodhead 2008; Trzebiatowska 2019). Existing research has frequently treated gender either as a variable within models of decline or as a separate field of inquiry, rather than as a structuring dimension of secularisation processes themselves. As a result, the reconfiguration of religious belonging through women's lived experiences remains insufficiently integrated into macro-level accounts of religious change (McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2022). A gender-sensitive perspective allows secularisation to be understood not merely as institutional contraction, but as a socially embedded and negotiated process shaped by everyday practices, relational roles, and cultural expectations (Ammerman 2014; Turco 2016; Zurlo 2024).

A gender lens also brings into focus a longstanding tension. Historically, women have occupied a pivotal position in the maintenance and transmission of religious life,



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particularly within Christian and Catholic societies (Trzebiatowska 2019). Across Europe, women have consistently displayed higher levels of participation in religious services and greater involvement in the intergenerational transmission of belief and practice (Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012). Changes in women's social position, including their increasing participation in paid employment and greater access to education, particularly theological education, have reshaped the context in which they relate to religion and religious institutions (Woodhead 2008; Sharma 2016; Kasselstrand and Kollmeyer 2025). These changes have made increasingly visible the gap between women's central role in Catholic life and their marginal position within institutional decision-making. This tension is increasingly addressed by Catholic women's movements through demands for greater recognition and participation, gender equality, and institutional reform (Giorgi and Palmisano 2020).

This article responds to the limited integration of a gender lens into macro-level accounts of secularisation by examining changing patterns of women's religious belonging alongside selected forms of reform-oriented Catholic engagement in secularising European societies. The analysis focuses on Italy, Spain, and Ireland, countries historically shaped by Catholic cultural dominance yet marked by distinct trajectories of religious transformation.

The study adopts a mixed-methods design combining secondary analysis of European Social Survey (ESS) data with documentary analysis of three reform-oriented Catholic organisations: *Donne per la Chiesa* in Italy, *Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia* in Spain, and *We Are Church Ireland*. The two components address different but complementary levels of analysis. ESS data are used to describe macro-level changes in women's religious attendance, Catholic affiliation and non-affiliation, as well as generational differences, providing the comparative national context for the analysis of the three cases. The documentary analysis focuses on how the selected organisations publicly define their relationship to the Church, gender inequality, institutional authority, and reform. They are examined as analytically informative examples of collective action, rather than as representative of Catholic women in general. The aim is to explore the combination of continued identification with Catholicism, reinterpretation, institutional critique, and demands for change. In this sense, the article contributes to debates on secularisation, gender, and religious agency by considering declining institutional involvement alongside selected forms of Catholic engagement.

The paper is structured in six sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 develops the theoretical framework, examining secularisation, gendered critiques of religion, and the concepts of lived religion and agency. Section 3 presents the data and methodology. Section 4 presents comparative ESS evidence on women's religious attendance, affiliation, non-affiliation, and generational differences in Italy, Spain, and Ireland. Section 5 examines how three reform-oriented Catholic organisations publicly articulate belonging, institutional critique, and collective engagement.

2. Theoretical Framework: Secularisation, Gender, and Agency

2.1. Gendered Critiques of Religion and Secularisation

Classical secularisation theory interpreted religious decline primarily as a macro-structural outcome of modernisation, rationalisation, and functional differentiation (Casanova 1994; Davie 2002; Bruce 2011). Within this framework, institutional religion was expected to lose normative authority as individual autonomy expanded and societal spheres differentiated. Yet this paradigm largely operated with an implicit model of the religious subject that was abstract, decontextualised, and, in practice, male-centred (Woodhead 2008). The gendered architecture of religious life—including women's disproportionate participation, their role in intergenerational transmission, and their positioning within regimes of moral regulation—remained analytically under-theorised.

The empirical “gender gap” in religiosity has historically complicated linear accounts of secularisation, since women have generally reported higher levels of religious participation and identification than men even within contexts of overall religious decline (Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012). Comparative research confirms that women tend to display higher levels of religiosity across diverse contexts, often in less dogmatic and more relational forms (Schnabel 2018). Cross-cultural analyses further show that both the magnitude and direction of the religiosity gender gap vary considerably across societies, suggesting that it is socially and institutionally mediated rather than biologically fixed (Vardy et al. 2023; Bussi and Lucchini 2027). Early sociological explanations framed women’s religiosity as derivative of structural location—proximity to family, care, and moral socialisation (Page and Yip 2013; Aune et al. 2017). However, such interpretations risk reproducing a functionalist logic that casts women primarily as transmitters of tradition rather than as reflexive actors capable of negotiating their own religious positioning. In the present study, the gender gap provides an important theoretical and comparative context, but the quantitative analysis focuses specifically on patterns among women rather than offering a systematic causal comparison between women and men.

Secularisation unfolds within specific gender relations and social arrangements concerning labour, family, sexuality, and moral authority (Connell 1987; Walby 1997). In historically Catholic societies, religious institutions have long functioned as important regulators of these regimes. As women’s educational expansion and labour participation have increased, religious authority has been challenged not only institutionally but also normatively (Woodhead 2008). Changes in women’s social roles and expectations are therefore central to contemporary processes of religious change. Attention to women’s social positions and institutional relationships also shifts the analysis towards dimensions of religion that have often remained marginal within classical secularisation theory (Neitz 2027).

Feminist scholarship has significantly reoriented debates on secularisation and religion by questioning liberal assumptions that identify autonomy and emancipation exclusively with resistance to, or exit from, religion (Mahmood 2005; Bracke 2008). Feminist theological scholarship has similarly demonstrated how critique can be articulated through the reinterpretation of religious traditions and authoritative texts from within Christian and Catholic frameworks (Ruether 1983; Schüssler Fiorenza 1983). Gender-sensitive approaches therefore direct attention to the different ways in which women interpret, negotiate, reaffirm, or contest religious norms within specific social and institutional contexts (Avishai 2008; Avishai et al. 2015). Changing norms concerning gender equality, sexuality, and personal autonomy have become particularly important in processes of religious distancing and institutional critique (Schnabel et al. 2022; see also Ruspini and Neitz 2027 for an overview of these issues). Nevertheless, neither continued belonging nor distancing should automatically be treated as evidence of agency; their analytical significance depends on whether women articulate interpretations, evaluations, claims, or collective actions in relation to religious authority.

2.2. *Lived Religion and Forms of Women’s Agency*

If feminist scholarship unsettles simplified notions of emancipation, lived religion approaches unsettle definitions of religion based exclusively on formal affiliation, doctrine, and institutional participation. They draw attention to everyday practices, narratives, relationships, and forms of situational meaning-making through which religion is interpreted and enacted (McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2014, 2022). In the present study, lived religion functions primarily as a sensitising theoretical perspective rather than as a directly operationalised empirical construct. The ESS does not capture the full complexity of everyday religious practice, while the organisational documents analysed in Section 5

provide access to public narratives and collective claims rather than to members' individual everyday experiences.

Avishai's (2008) formulation of "doing religion" underscores that religious belonging is actively produced and interpreted within specific social contexts. Bracke (2008) similarly argues that the categories of the "modern" and the "religious" are continually renegotiated in late-modern Europe. These perspectives shift the analytical question from whether women are religious to how religious norms, identities, and forms of authority are interpreted, accepted, contested, or reformulated.

In this article, agency is defined more narrowly as the articulated capacity to interpret, evaluate, and act in relation to religious norms and institutional authority (Mahmood 2005; Avishai 2008; Bracke 2008). Three analytically distinct forms are considered. Interpretive agency refers to the explicit reinterpretation of theological traditions, Scripture, or Catholic identity, including the use of religious language and authoritative sources to challenge established understandings of gender and participation (Ruether 1983; Schüssler Fiorenza 1983). Critical-discursive agency refers to the public articulation of evaluations and critiques concerning inequality, exclusion, authority, or institutional legitimacy (Avishai et al. 2015; Schnabel et al. 2022). Collective-institutional agency refers to organised initiatives, claims, and interventions intended to influence participation, governance, or reform within the Church (Neitz and Bradley 2023; Henold 2008). These forms may overlap, but they should not be conflated with religious change in general. Declining attendance, non-affiliation, ambivalence, or continued belonging are not treated as agency in themselves unless the available material shows an articulated process of interpretation, evaluation, or collective action.

Rather than conceptualising secularisation as the linear disappearance of religion, contemporary scholarship understands it as a transformation in the conditions of religious authority and belonging (Bruce 2011; Davie 2002; Voas and Chaves 2016). Longitudinal analyses confirm that religious decline in Western Europe is largely driven by generational turnover (Stolz et al. 2025). Within this process, gender provides an important analytical axis for examining how religious authority, participation, and institutional belonging are structured and contested differently.

Existing research suggests that the traditional female advantage in religiosity is neither static nor universal. Among younger cohorts in Western Europe, women are increasingly represented among those distancing themselves from institutional Christianity (Trzebiatowska 2019). Shifting norms around sexuality and gender equality have been identified in the literature as possible factors shaping religious disaffiliation, selective belonging, and ethical critique of religious institutions (Schnabel et al. 2022; Bullivant 2022). These studies provide an interpretative context for the empirical analysis that follows, but the ESS indicators used in this article do not directly measure respondents' motivations for participation, affiliation, or disengagement.

Italy, Spain, and Ireland provide relevant comparative contexts because Catholicism has historically shaped public culture, family life, gender norms, and religious authority in all three countries, while their trajectories of religious change differ substantially. In Italy, the notion of "diffused religion" captures the persistence of symbolic Catholic identification beyond regular institutional participation (Cipriani 2017; Garelli 2020; Palmisano and Todesco 2019). Spain's secular transition illustrates the progressive disentanglement of Catholicism from national identity and public authority (Martínez-Ariño 2017; Pérez-Agote 2022). Ireland, by contrast, has experienced a particularly rapid weakening of Catholic institutional authority in a context marked by public controversy, declining trust, and changing norms concerning gender and sexuality (Ganiel 2016). These national literatures

provide context for interpreting the comparative ESS patterns; they do not establish the individual motivations of the women represented in the survey data.

Lived religion approaches provide a necessary extension of this framework. They emphasise practice, narrative, and situational meaning-making (McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2014, 2022). Hervieu-L  ger’s (2000) notion of religion as a “chain of memory” further suggests that religious traditions may remain available as symbolic resources even when institutional participation weakens. Concepts such as selective belonging, attachment without full compliance, and critique without complete rupture therefore provide useful interpretative categories for the analysis. The empirical sections, however, examine these questions at two distinct levels. Section 4 uses ESS data to describe patterns of attendance, affiliation, non-affiliation, and generational difference among women. Section 5 examines how three selected organisations publicly articulate theological reinterpretation, institutional critique, and collective claims for reform. The study does not infer individual lived experiences from organisational documents, nor does it treat the selected organisations as representative responses to secularisation.

3. Data and Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining secondary data analysis with documentary analysis of selected reform-oriented Catholic organisations. The quantitative component draws on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), a biennial cross-national survey employing harmonised questionnaires and probability sampling procedures across participating European countries. The analysis focuses on female respondents in Italy, Spain, and Ireland and draws on ESS Rounds 1–11 (2002–2023). The tables present data for three periods: 2002–2004 (Rounds 1–2), 2010–2012 (Rounds 5–6), and 2020–2023 (Rounds 10–11), where available, corresponding to the early, middle, and most recent phases of the survey¹. These periods are used to illustrate broad trends in women’s religious attendance, Catholic affiliation, and non-affiliation across the three countries. The ESS data are used descriptively to identify cross-national and longitudinal patterns of institutional religious participation and affiliation. The survey does not provide direct information on respondents’ motivations, everyday religious practices, or forms of collective engagement; these dimensions are explored separately through the documentary analysis presented in Section 5.

Although the ESS does not follow the same individuals over time, the harmonised structure of the survey allows for comparisons over time and across countries. The quantitative analysis focuses exclusively on women because the study does not aim to compare women and men, but to examine patterns of women’s religious involvement and provide context for the analysis of the three cases (Section 5). Three indicators of institutional religious involvement available in the European Social Survey are analysed. The first one is weekly religious attendance, which refers to respondents who reported attending religious services at least once a week, apart from special occasions. Responses indicating attendance less frequently than once a week were classified as non-weekly attendance. Catholic affiliation identifies respondents who declared that they belonged to the Roman Catholic denomination. Finally, non-affiliation identifies respondents who reported having no religion or denomination. For each indicator, respondents with missing, refused, or “don’t know” responses were excluded from the calculation. Percentages were computed separately by country and survey period among female respondents aged 18 and over. For comparisons by age, respondents were divided into three groups: 18–34, 35–64, and 65 years and over. These indicators capture formal religious participation and denominational identification. They do not directly measure religious belief, spirituality, private religious practice, motivations for participation or disengagement, or forms of institutional critique. While the ESS analysis provides a comparative overview of women’s institutional

religious involvement across the three countries, the second part of the study examines three reform-oriented Catholic groups: Donne per la Chiesa (Italy), Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia (Spain), and We Are Church Ireland. The three cases were purposively selected for several reasons. They combine continued Catholic belonging with demands for women's equality and institutional reform; they also have public visibility, continuity over time, and accessible documentary sources. The corpus comprises manifestos, programmatic documents, official websites, and records of public activities. We examined these sources through a comparative interpretative approach, focusing on how the organisations define themselves, articulate their principal claims, and present their work.

4. Women and Religion in Italy, Spain and Ireland

Building on the theoretical framework outlined in Section 2, this section examines comparative patterns of women's institutional religious participation and affiliation in Italy, Spain, and Ireland. It focuses on changes in weekly attendance, Catholic affiliation, religious non-affiliation, and age differences, while drawing on national scholarship to contextualise the patterns identified in the ESS.

While women have traditionally exhibited higher levels of religiosity than men, this gender gap has narrowed over time, largely due to a more pronounced decline in women's participation rather than an increase in male religiosity. Generational turnover plays a crucial role in this process: younger cohorts of women are significantly less likely to engage in regular religious practices than older generations, indicating a shift in the social, cultural, and normative conditions that have historically sustained women's stronger attachment to religion (Palmisano and Todesco 2019; Ruspini and Crespi 2024; Stolz et al. 2025; Bussi and Lucchini 2027; Dillon 2027).

In the following paragraphs, we use ESS data to examine trends in women's weekly religious attendance, Catholic affiliation and non-affiliation, as well as differences by age, in the three countries.

4.1. Decline and Transformation of Women's Religiosity: Some Trends

Data from the European Social Survey² document a long-term decline in regular religious practice, especially in weekly church attendance (Voas and Chaves 2016).

The ESS indicators used here do not provide an exhaustive measure of religiosity, but they allow comparisons over time and across age groups in women's institutional religious participation and affiliation in the three countries.

Table 1 presents changes in women's weekly religious attendance in Italy, Spain, and Ireland over the period covered by the European Social Survey, providing a comparative overview of long-term patterns of institutional religious participation.

Table 1. Weekly religious attendance among women in Italy, Spain and Ireland (%), ESS 2002–2023.

Country	2002–2004 (ESS Rounds 1–2)	2010–2012 (ESS Rounds 5–6)	2020–2023 (ESS Rounds 10–11)
Italy	40	33	27
Spain	30	23	18
Ireland	55	42	26

Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey (ESS), selected rounds (2002–2023). Note: Percentages refer to female respondents aged 18 years and older who attend religious services at least once a week.

Across all three countries, weekly attendance declined substantially over the last two decades, confirming a common trend towards reduced participation in institutional

religious practice among women. However, the pace and magnitude of this decline differ across the three national contexts. Ireland records the most pronounced decrease from a historically high level of female religious participation. Spain also shows a marked decline, whereas Italy displays a more gradual reduction, consistent with the persistence of cultural forms of Catholic belonging described in previous research (Cipriani 2017; Garelli 2020). These descriptive patterns are consistent with comparative studies that identify generational replacement as a major driver of secularisation and highlight the importance of national historical and institutional contexts in shaping distinct trajectories of religious change (Voas and Chaves 2016; Stolz et al. 2025).

While the decline in weekly attendance clearly indicates weaker institutional religious participation, it does not necessarily imply an equivalent decline in religious identification. Table 2 therefore examines changes in Catholic affiliation to assess whether women's sense of religious belonging has evolved in parallel with changes in religious practice.

Table 2. Catholic affiliation among women in Italy, Spain and Ireland (%), European Social Survey, selected rounds (2002–2023).

Country	2002–2004 (ESS Rounds 1–2)	2010–2012 (ESS Rounds 5–6)	2020–2023 (ESS Rounds 10–11)
Italy	90	84	74
Spain	85	73	58
Ireland	93	87	69

Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey (ESS), selected rounds (2002–2023). Note: Percentages refer to female respondents aged 18 years and over who identified themselves as Roman Catholic.

Data indicate that Catholic affiliation has declined across all three countries, although less uniformly than weekly religious attendance. Religious identification, therefore, appears more resilient than regular institutional participation, suggesting that belonging and practice do not necessarily change at the same pace.

Cross-national differences nevertheless remain evident. Ireland shows the largest decline in Catholic affiliation, reflecting the broader transformation of the relationship between Catholicism and national identity. Spain also records a significant reduction, whereas Italy continues to exhibit comparatively higher levels of Catholic identification despite declining participation in religious services.

These findings align with studies arguing that secularisation often involves a growing decoupling of religious identity from regular religious practice, particularly in historically Catholic societies where cultural and symbolic forms of belonging may persist despite declining institutional participation (Davie 2002; Hervieu-Léger 2000; Garelli 2020).

Table 3 examines changes in the proportion of women reporting no religious affiliation in Italy, Spain, and Ireland, providing a complementary perspective on the decline in Catholic affiliation presented in Table 2.

Religious non-affiliation has increased across all three countries over the last two decades, although the pace of growth differs considerably between national contexts. Together with the decline in Catholic affiliation, these results point to an expanding distance from formal religious identification among women.

The increase is particularly pronounced in Ireland and Spain, where the expansion of religious non-affiliation accompanies substantial declines in both weekly attendance and Catholic identification. Italy also shows an upward trend, albeit more slowly, suggesting the persistence of cultural and symbolic forms of Catholic belonging despite declining institutional participation.

Table 3. Women reporting no religious affiliation in Italy, Spain and Ireland (%), European Social Survey, selected rounds (2002–2023).

Country	2002–2004 (ESS Rounds 1–2)	2010–2012 (ESS Rounds 5–6)	2020–2023 (ESS Rounds 10–11)
Italy	7	11	20
Spain	10	18	32
Ireland	4	8	22

Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey (ESS), selected rounds (2002–2023).
 Note: Percentages refer to female respondents aged 18 years and over reporting no religious affiliation.

These findings are consistent with comparative studies describing secularisation as involving not only declining religious practice but also the growing normalisation of religious non-affiliation, particularly among younger generations and in societies characterised by rapid cultural change (Bullivant 2022; Stolz et al. 2025).

Viewed comparatively, the increase in religious non-affiliation suggests that the weakening of institutional religious belonging extends beyond declining participation alone. While the ESS does not capture the motivations behind disaffiliation, these patterns align with broader transformations in the relationship between women and institutional religion described in recent scholarship. Previous research has linked these developments to changes in women's educational attainment, labour market participation, family life, sexuality, and expectations regarding individual autonomy, all of which have contributed to the reshaping of relationships with religious institutions (Woodhead 2008; Inglehart 2020; Schnabel et al. 2022). Within this context, women's relationships with Catholic institutions appear increasingly characterised by tensions between institutional norms and changing social expectations. The observed differentiation between institutional participation and formal religious affiliation is consistent with sociological approaches that distinguish religious belonging from regular religious practice and emphasise the plurality of contemporary religious trajectories (Davie 2002; Hervieu-L  ger 2000).

As shown in Table 4, across all three countries, younger women report substantially lower levels of weekly religious attendance than older generations, indicating that institutional religious involvement is increasingly concentrated among older age cohorts. Although this pattern is common to all three national contexts, its intensity differs.

Table 4. Weekly religious attendance among women by age group in Italy, Spain and Ireland (%), European Social Survey (2002–2023).

Country/Age	65+	35–64	18–34
Italy	40–45%	25–30%	10–15%
Spain	30%	15–20%	5–10%
Ireland	40–50%	25–30%	10–15%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey (ESS), selected rounds (2002–2023).
 Note: Percentages refer to female respondents attending religious services at least once a week.

The generational gap is particularly pronounced in Ireland and Spain, where younger women exhibit markedly lower participation rates than older cohorts. Italy also shows a clear age gradient, although younger women continue to report comparatively higher levels of attendance than their counterparts in the other two countries. These findings are consistent with research identifying cohort replacement as a central mechanism of contemporary secularisation in Europe, whereby successive generations enter adulthood with lower levels of institutional religious participation than previous cohorts (Voas and Chaves 2016;

[Stolz et al. 2025](#)). At the same time, the ESS data do not permit conclusions about the motivations underlying these generational differences or about the future religious trajectories of individual women.

Across Tables 1–4, a coherent comparative pattern emerges. Weekly religious attendance and Catholic affiliation have declined, while religious non-affiliation has increased, particularly among younger women. Although the pace and intensity of these changes differ across Italy, Spain, and Ireland, the evidence consistently points to an ongoing reconfiguration of women's relationship with institutional Catholicism. These patterns provide the macro-level context for the qualitative analysis presented in the following section, which examines how selected reform-oriented Catholic organisations publicly articulate religious belonging, institutional critique, and demands for reform.

This cohort-based pattern supports the interpretation of secularisation as a process driven by generational change ([Voas and Chaves 2016](#)).

4.2. National Contexts of Catholic Change: Similarities and Differences

In Italy, secularisation has followed a relatively gradual and uneven trajectory, characterised by the persistence of cultural Catholicism alongside declining levels of regular practice ([Cipriani 2017](#); [Garelli 2020](#)). The ESS data are consistent with this pattern: Catholic affiliation remains widespread among Italian women. A clear generational effect also emerges: while older women continue to exhibit relatively high participation rates, weekly Mass attendance is substantially lower among younger respondents. This divide highlights the importance of socialisation processes and indicates that the transmission of religious practices is becoming less consistent across generations.

Previous research on Italian Catholicism has documented the persistence of occasional and life-cycle forms of participation beyond regular Mass attendance ([Cipriani 2017](#); [Garelli 2020](#)).

These patterns are consistent with the notion of “diffused religion” ([Cipriani 2017](#)) and confirm the persistence of symbolic and cultural forms of Catholic belonging beyond regular practice. Identification remains relatively high compared to other European contexts (Tables 2 and 3), while disaffiliation is increasing more gradually. Taken together, the ESS evidence and the Italian literature suggest a pattern in which declining regular participation coexists with comparatively resilient Catholic identification. The Italian case can therefore be interpreted as an example of differentiated institutional involvement rather than as evidence of either unchanged religiosity or complete religious withdrawal.

Spain and Ireland are examples of accelerated processes of religious transformation. While declining religious engagement in both contexts is accompanied by a substantial erosion of Catholic identification and a marked increase in non-affiliation, the meanings and trajectories of disengagement differ significantly.

Spanish scholarship interprets the decline in Catholic participation and affiliation in relation to broader processes of cultural modernisation, individualisation, and generational change ([Pérez-Agote 2022](#)). The decline of Catholicism among younger women reflects not only decreasing religious practice but also the weakening of religion as a central framework of social identity and moral authority. In comparative terms, Spain has the lowest weekly attendance and the highest non-affiliation among the three countries considered. In this context, [Pérez-Agote \(2022\)](#) describes this transformation as a process in which secular orientations have become increasingly normalised, especially among younger generations, rather than the result of a single moment of institutional rupture. The Spanish case therefore combines declining practice, weakening Catholic affiliation, and rising non-affiliation. The ESS data establish this descriptive pattern, while the national literature provides the interpretative context for understanding its cultural and generational dimensions.

Ireland presents a different trajectory. Historically characterised by exceptionally high levels of female religiosity and strong Catholic institutional influence, recent decades have seen a rapid weakening of both religious engagement and confidence in Church authority (Ganiel 2016).

Unlike the more gradual secularisation observed in Spain, Irish scholarship has linked the weakening of Catholic institutional authority to public controversies over sexuality, reproductive rights, abuse, accountability, and the Church's moral legitimacy (Inglis 2007; Ganiel 2016).

These studies suggest that ethical and political critique forms an important part of the wider context of Irish religious change, although the ESS data used here do not directly measure women's motivations for disengagement. In this sense, declining religiosity in Ireland cannot be understood solely as the outcome of long-term secular trends, but also as a reaction to the perceived loss of institutional legitimacy. Existing studies have documented growing public criticism of the Church's moral and institutional credibility, particularly regarding its teachings and contemporary values of gender equality, autonomy, and social justice (Inglis 2007; Ganiel 2016). The Irish case therefore differs from Italy and Spain not only in the speed of decline from historically high participation levels, but also in the national context of declining institutional trust described in the literature. The comparison should nevertheless remain contextual rather than causal: the ESS patterns do not demonstrate why individual women participate, affiliate, or disengage.

Despite these differences, the comparative evidence identifies a shared weakening of institutional participation and Catholic affiliation, accompanied by nationally distinct patterns of non-affiliation. Concepts such as selective belonging and critical negotiation remain interpretative categories for understanding these transformations, rather than direct measures produced by the ESS analysis.

4.3. From Disengagement to Reconfiguration?

Overall, the ESS findings support a differentiated understanding of secularisation in terms of institutional participation and affiliation. Across Italy, Spain, and Ireland, declining weekly attendance, weakening Catholic identification, increasing non-affiliation, and marked age differences coexist, although with different national intensities. These descriptive patterns are consistent with theoretical approaches that understand secularisation as involving changes in the relationship between religious practice, formal belonging, and institutional authority rather than a single uniform process of religious disappearance (Bullivant 2022; Schnabel et al. 2022; Stolz et al. 2025; Crespi and Scocco 2027).

The quantitative evidence alone does not establish whether declining participation or non-affiliation represents indifference, ethical critique, personal reassessment, or another form of religious positioning. Existing scholarship suggests that gender equality, sexuality, and personal autonomy may shape women's relationships with religious institutions, but the ESS indicators used here do not directly measure these motivations (Woodhead 2008; Schnabel et al. 2022). Declining attendance or affiliation should therefore not be treated as agency in itself.

Section 4 establishes the macro-level context of changing institutional religious involvement among women, but it does not by itself demonstrate active reinterpretation or collective agency. These dimensions require evidence of articulated interpretations, evaluations, claims, or organised action, as defined in Section 2. The documentary analysis in Section 5 examines whether and how such forms appear in the public materials produced by the three selected organisations. Section 5 therefore turns to the documentary analysis of three analytically informative reform-oriented Catholic organisations and examines how

they publicly articulate interpretive, critical-discursive, and collective-institutional forms of agency.

5. The Reconfiguration of Religious Belonging

This section moves from patterns of religious change to initiatives that critically engage with Catholicism. Three case studies were selected: *Donne per la Chiesa* (Italy), *Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia* (Spain), and *We Are Church Ireland*. These cases allow us to examine how continued identification with Catholicism is combined with institutional critique and demands for gender equality, recognition, and women's greater participation in Church decision-making. These forms of activism can be read through the concept of agency, understood here as the capacity to act within existing institutional frameworks through reinterpretation, organised dialogue, and public intervention (Avishai 2008; Neitz and Bradley 2023).

As anticipated in Section 3, the analysis is based on publicly available documents produced by the associations: manifestos, assembly texts, programmatic statements, and records of activities (such as seminars, webinars, public debates, courses). The sources reveal how the groups describe themselves, define their objectives, and frame their actions in theological and institutional terms.³

A final comparative discussion highlights convergences and differences across the cases.

5.1. *Donne per la Chiesa* (Italy)

Donne per la Chiesa, founded in 2018, is an association of women committed to the renewal of the Catholic Church. The 2018 Manifesto (*Donne per la Chiesa* 2018) opens with the following statement: *"We are women of faith, disciples of Jesus, who love the Church, our families, and those who are most vulnerable and defenceless. We also value our own strength, energy, and intelligence, which we recognise as gifts from God. We want to bring our whole selves to the Church, to society, and to our families, without diminishing who we are in order to please others. We do not feel the need to conform to predefined models; rather, we affirm each woman's right to shape her own unique path: as a person, as a woman, and as a sister, daughter, wife, or mother. We value the gift of motherhood entrusted to us by the Creator, while recognising that it extends far beyond biological motherhood. For this reason, we seek to be life-giving in every aspect of our lives, including our work and our social and political engagement."*⁴

While rooted in Italy, it belongs to the Catholic Women's Council, a global umbrella group connecting Catholic women's networks worldwide to work together for the full recognition of dignity and equality within the Catholic Church.

The Manifesto outlines the association's main concerns and priorities, including recognition of women's expertise, equal dignity within ecclesial structures, and access to forms of ministry, including sacramental ministry. It also highlights women's extensive presence in parish life, catechesis, pastoral activities, voluntary service, and social action, while noting their limited access to decision-making processes and positions of formal responsibility. As the Manifesto states, *"when it comes to decision making, there is no space for the original contribution of women. . . We do not ask for places of power, but to be fully recognized as daughters of God and members of the community on equal terms with men"* (*Donne per la Chiesa* 2018). The document also draws on Catholic theological references to support its claims. Biblical figures such as Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene are presented as interpretative resources" (*Donne per la Chiesa* 2018).

The 2022 Assembly intervention (*Donne per la Chiesa* 2022a) further clarifies the group's self-understanding. It explicitly adopts a feminist perspective and links its origins to shared reflection on women's lived experience in the Church. Members describe themselves as "baptised adult women" who do not ask permission to meet, reflect, or speak. A distinction is drawn between the Church as people of God and hierarchical governance,

allowing critique to coexist with continued Catholic belonging. The association engages with Catholic feminist traditions through seminars and publications that refer to thinkers such as Adriana Zarri, Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Teresa Forcades ([Donne per la Chiesa 2022b, 2026c](#)).

The association's website features a wide range of events, including seminars, webinars, and public debates. Educational and awareness-raising activities play an important role in its work. Among these, the *Mai senza di te* project, developed in collaboration with other Catholic groups, aims to provide participants with the tools to recognise gender stereotypes and inequalities and to promote more inclusive relationships within the Church and society. The 2026 programme is organised around four thematic modules: deconstructing gendered language and stereotypes, the history of feminist thought, re-reading biblical female figures, and rethinking masculinity ([Donne per la Chiesa 2026b](#)). Donne per la Chiesa also organises the *Piccola scuola online*, which offers courses on feminism, feminist theology, biblical interpretation, inclusive language, patriarchy, and gender justice. The 2026 course *Femminismi* aims to provide participants with “keys for interpreting contemporary questions of gender justice in society and in the Church” and to “experience the potential of inclusive language and the awareness of the weight of words” ([Donne per la Chiesa 2026a](#)). As written in the Manifesto, the association seeks to “invent new forms that enrich the Church”, while emphasising assertiveness, freedom, and female alliance as guiding principles for its action ([Donne per la Chiesa 2018](#)).

5.2. *Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia (Spain)*

Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia emerged in Spain between late 2019 and early 2020 as a movement aimed at greater gender equality and renewal within the Catholic Church. Bringing together women from parishes, religious congregations, and long-standing Catholic feminist groups and networks, *Revuelta* took shape in the context of the feminist strikes called for on 8 March and expanded from its initial groups in Madrid and Barcelona to other Spanish cities ([Torres Pérez and Vidal 2023](#)). The Manifesto ([Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia 2025](#)) defines its identity and principal aims. *Revuelta*'s members describe themselves as “believing women” and state: “We are committed to the cause of Jesus and fight for the renewal of the Church and social transformation from a women's perspective” ([Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia 2025](#)).

The movement also describes itself as “new but coming from afar”, locating its mobilisation within a longer history of Christian women's engagement. *Revuelta* receives and carries forward this legacy, which includes earlier generations of Catholic women in Spain, such as María Salas Larrazábal and Pilar Bellosillo, as well as the feminist Catholic groups and theological networks that developed in the following decades. The recurring references to *genealogía* (genealogy), *memoria* (memory), and *herencia recibida* (received heritage) connect this history to the movement's present engagement and its orientation towards future change ([Díaz Alamo 2023](#)). At the same time, *Revuelta* explicitly situates its commitment to reform within continued ecclesial belonging. As stated in the Manifesto, “We work in the Church because it is our community of reference for living the Gospel. We will continue working within it so that we may recover the community of equals brought by Jesus” ([Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia 2025](#)).

This sense of belonging does not prevent the movement from denouncing the discrimination experienced by women within the Catholic Church. The Manifesto emphasises the contradiction between women's central role in ecclesial life and their exclusion from positions of responsibility: “Women are the overwhelming majority in volunteering, religious celebrations, catechesis, pastoral work, social action with the poorest people, ecclesial movements, education, and religious life. . . We are the hands and the heart of the Church, but we are denied

a voice and a vote, participation in decision-making, and leadership in the appropriate spheres” ([Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia 2025](#)). Revuelta’s key documents set out a number of demands for Church reform. These include women’s access to the diaconate and the priesthood and the recognition of feminist theology. The movement also challenges patriarchal and sexist language in homilies, liturgical texts, and Church documents, and calls for a rethinking of sexual morality grounded in tenderness and mercy. These demands are linked to broader social concerns, such as the labour and sexual exploitation of women, and the recognition of the diversity of families, identities, and sexual orientations ([Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia 2025](#)).

The website documents a wide range of collective activities, including public demonstrations, open letters, theological meetings, educational initiatives, workshops, and local actions organised across different Spanish cities, particularly around International Women’s Day ([Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia n.d.](#)). These events combine public witness with spaces for theological reflection and give concrete expression to the movement’s commitment to “raise our voices” (*alzamos la voz*) and to make visible the discrimination, invisibilisation, and exclusion experienced by women within the Catholic Church.

5.3. We Are Church Ireland

Founded in 1997, We Are Church Ireland (WACI) is the oldest of the three organisations examined in this study and forms part of the international We Are Church network. WACI presents itself on its website as “Working for Justice in the Roman Catholic Church” ([We Are Church Ireland n.d.](#)). Its *Principles of Organisation* state: “We Are Church Ireland is a movement within the Roman Catholic Church with links to the International Movement We Are Church. We seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ and we are committed to pray and work for the renewal and transformation of the Church, discerning the signs of the times under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” ([We Are Church Ireland 2025](#)).

WACI is guided by seven key aims. The first two concern the equality of all the baptised through shared decision-making and the full participation of women in all aspects of Church life, including priesthood. The next three call for a positive and inclusive approach to sexuality, the removal of compulsory clerical celibacy, and a Church that does not marginalise people because of their sexual orientation, marital situation, or for any other reason. The final two concern justice and equality, with particular attention to vulnerable and deprived people, and climate justice and care for the Earth ([We Are Church Ireland 2025](#)). Women’s participation is addressed more specifically in WACI’s 2026 response to the 2025 Petrocchi Commission report, which ruled against admitting women to the sacramental diaconate. The response discusses the issue in relation to the wider synodal process and reaffirms the aim of “full equality of all the baptised and the inclusion of women in all ministries” ([We Are Church Ireland 2026b](#)). WACI draws on historical and scriptural references to connect past and present in its advocacy for women’s equality. During its 2026 International Women’s Day action in Dublin, the movement invoked St Brigid, whom it described as a “Bishop and Abbess”, alongside women in the early Church, to support its contemporary claims concerning women’s role and ministry in the Church ([We Are Church Ireland 2026a](#)).

The movement’s activities combine theological discussion, inclusive forms of worship, and public action. Its website documents webinars, panel discussions, Advent and Pentecost liturgies, the sharing of articles and news, and forms of “public witnessing”. Talks and published materials bring together different women’s voices, among them Tina Beattie, Sr Mary Barron, Julieann Moran, and Soline Humbert, addressing women’s equality and ordination, sexuality, and more collaborative forms of governance and participation

in Church life. WACI has campaigned for greater lay involvement in decision-making, including voting rights in the Catholic Church's synodal process.

WACI's reform agenda extends to LGBTQ+ inclusion and environmental concerns. The movement is a member of the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics and participated in its 2025 General Assembly in Madrid. Its work in the LGBTQ+ field has involved Dublin Pride, a prayer vigil against violence towards the community, and public statements on pastoral care and same-gender unions. The agenda also encompasses climate justice and care for the Earth, addressed in the seventh of WACI's aims ([We Are Church Ireland 2025](#)).

5.4. Cross-Case Reflections

The comparative lens highlights a shared orientation towards reform within Catholicism, alongside differences in the claims, priorities, and forms of engagement articulated by the selected organisations.

Across the three cases, belonging to the Catholic Church remains explicit. None of the movements frame their engagement as a break with the institution; rather, they articulate critique and demands for reform through Catholic theological language and categories. In each case, criticism of Church structures is presented as compatible with continued Catholic belonging.

A further shared feature is the idea that all baptised members possess equal dignity. This principle is used to challenge the exclusion of women from decision-making processes and ordained ministry. Other recurring themes include access to ministry, recognition of women's theological competence, and inclusion in Church governance.

The case studies nevertheless reveal different forms of reform-oriented engagement within Catholicism, ranging from theological reflection and organised discussion to more explicit forms of public mobilisation. In Italy, *Donne per la Chiesa* focuses on theological formation, collective reflection, and dialogue, with an emphasis on recognition, voice, and women's participation within existing structures. In Spain, *Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia* combines theological claims with public action, linking ecclesial equality to feminist concerns and broader social issues, including violence against women. *We Are Church Ireland* advances reform through a transnational reform agenda that combines questions of women's participation with debates on governance, inclusion, sexuality, and sexual diversity. These differences are reflected in the preferred forms of action: educational initiatives and feminist theological formation in the Italian case; public mobilisation and collective witness in Spain; and dialogue, public debate, and engagement with national and international reform processes in Ireland.

The analysis also reveals elements of continuity over time. *Donne per la Chiesa* situates its work within traditions of Catholic feminist thought and women theologians; *Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia* explicitly traces a genealogy through earlier generations of believing and feminist women; and WACI draws on historical and scriptural references in its present advocacy for women's equality. These examples show how contemporary claims for recognition, participation, and reform build on earlier experiences and traditions within Catholicism. They also highlight the importance of situating this activism within longer histories of religious feminism and Catholic reform. This perspective is consistent with scholarship that questions a simple opposition between feminism and religion and examines how feminist claims are articulated in religious traditions ([Reilly 2011](#); [Midden 2026](#)).

6. Conclusions

This article has examined changes in women's religious belonging in secularising European societies, focusing on Italy, Spain, and Ireland. It combines macro-level indicators of religious involvement with an analysis of reform-oriented Catholic women's

initiatives. The quantitative and qualitative findings point to a complex and multilevel process of religious change, involving shifts in institutional participation, belonging, and the relationship with religious authority. The ESS data show that, across all three countries, women's weekly religious attendance and Catholic affiliation have declined over recent decades, while non-affiliation has increased, although the pace and intensity of these changes vary across national contexts. They also reveal marked generational differences in religious attendance.

The comparative perspective further shows that secularisation does not unfold uniformly across Catholic European societies. In Italy, declining weekly attendance coexists with comparatively resilient Catholic affiliation, a pattern that is consistent with interpretations of Italian Catholicism in terms of "diffused religion". In Spain, declining religious participation and Catholic affiliation, together with rising non-affiliation, are consistent with scholarship describing a broader normalisation of secular orientations, particularly among younger generations. Ireland, by contrast, shows a particularly pronounced decline from historically high levels of religious participation and affiliation, within a national context marked by institutional crises and declining trust in Church authority. These differences underline the importance of analysing secularisation within historically specific configurations of religion, national identity, and gender relations.

The analysis highlights the importance of moving beyond dichotomous interpretations opposing religious commitment and secular emancipation. In this respect, lived religion provides a useful theoretical perspective for interpreting forms of religious belonging that combine attachment, critique, and selective engagement. *Donne per la Chiesa*, *Revuelta de Mujeres en la Iglesia*, and *We Are Church Ireland* illustrate how religious engagement coexists with demands for institutional reform. Across all three cases, the organisations' public narratives do not reject Catholic belonging; rather, they articulate it alongside claims for recognition, participation, and equality. These accounts display overlapping forms of interpretive, critical-discursive, and collective-institutional agency, although their articulation varies. Contemporary women's activism also draws on earlier experiences and traditions, with continuities that reflect different national, religious, and feminist histories.

While the study highlights the value of combining different methods, several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The research relies primarily on repeated cross-sectional survey data and publicly available documents. This methodological choice enables comparison across the three national contexts but cannot fully capture the diversity and complexity of individual religious experiences. More specifically, the ESS data identify patterns of institutional participation and affiliation but do not capture the motivations or everyday religious practices underlying them. Similarly, the documentary analysis concerns the public narratives of three selectively chosen reform-oriented organisations and should not be interpreted as representative of Catholic women more broadly, including women with more institutionally loyal or conservative orientations, women who have left the Church, or those who maintain religious belonging without activism.

Future research using qualitative interviews, ethnographic approaches, and longitudinal data could explore how women from different backgrounds experience and negotiate religious belonging in everyday life and across the life course, including among women who position themselves outside reform groups. A historical perspective could further trace continuities and changes in women's religious activism. Extending the analysis beyond Catholicism could also provide important insights into women's engagement and its dynamics in other religious traditions. Overall, the study suggests that understanding religious change in contemporary Catholic Europe requires attention not only to declining institutional participation but also to how religious belonging and organised activism are articulated within changing national and institutional contexts.

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Notes

- ¹ Detailed information on country-specific sampling procedures, weighting and survey documentation is available through the European Social Survey Data Portal. ESS provides analysis and post-stratification weights to account for differences in selection probabilities, non-response, non-coverage and sample composition. The ESS methodological documentation recommends the use of the analysis weight as the default weighting procedure for comparative analyses. Ireland and Spain participated in all rounds, while Italy participated only in Rounds 1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 11.
- ² Tables 1–4 are based on indicators available in the European Social Survey (ESS), Rounds 1–11 (2002–2023). The variables are harmonised across survey waves and allow longitudinal comparison between Italy, Spain, and Ireland. The analysis draws on three ESS dimensions: religious attendance (attendance at religious services at least once a week); religious affiliation (self-identification as Catholic); and no religious affiliation (“No religion”).
- ³ All the documents included in the analysis are cited in Section 5 and listed in the References.
- ⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, translations into English of Italian- and Spanish-language documents are by the authors.

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