

Religious Upbringing and Partner Selection: An Analysis of Union Formation among Catholics and Muslims in France

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Abstract

Most Muslims and Catholics in France are partnered today with someone from the same religious background. Yet such measures of religious homogamy overlook the diversity of past relationships and the role of religious upbringing. Using retrospective data from the *Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux* (EPIC, Ined–Insee 2013–2014), we examine partner choice across two cohorts (1948–1963 and 1964–1978). Results show that a substantial share of both Catholics and Muslims have experienced at least one interreligious union. This generational shift reflects the rise of “complex” trajectories combining both homogamous and heterogamous unions over the life course. By situating these trajectories in a temporal perspective, the study highlights how secularization, education, and social background have reshaped union formation while persistent homogamy remains strong among the most religiously socialized groups.

Keywords: *Religion; Homogamy; Heterogamy; Socialization; Union formation; Relationship trajectories; Religious background; Cohorts.*

Introduction

In 1964, Alain Girard demonstrated that partner selection is shaped by a variety of factors, including social and cultural background, geography, educational attainment, and circumstances of encounter. Subsequent research has also examined the role of religion in shaping partner preferences. In France, choosing a partner from the same religious background is common in union formation, a phenomenon referred to as religious homogamy (Maudet, 2019, 2021; Bouchet-Valat & Grobon, 2021). Drawing on data from the *Étude sur les Parcours individuels et Conjugaux* (EPIC, Ined Insee, 2013), Maudet (2021) reports that nearly eight out of ten Catholics and Muslims aged 25 to 45 were in stable unions with a partner of the same faith. Religion therefore remains central in studies of partner selection, not only because of the prevalence of religious homogamy, but also because of the values it conveys, which may influence perceptions of family, couplehood (often framed in heteronormative terms), and marriage (Régner-Loilier & Prioux, 2008). These influences are especially strong when individuals have been socialized into religious values from early childhood (Bréchon, 2018).

At the same time, the extent of religious homogamy differs across groups. Research has shown particularly strong homogamous tendencies among Muslims, for both men and women (Pruvost, 1993), while among Catholics, men appear more attentive to the religious affiliation of their partners than women (Maudet, 2021). For women, religion interacts with other dimensions of stratification, such as social origin, education, and occupation, that can moderate

partner selection, especially in the upper social strata. In these cases, “class homogamy reinforces religious homogamy” (Maudet, 2021, p. 18).

Although religious homogamy remains important in France (Maudet, 2021), recent evidence suggests that it has declined across generations (Bouchet-Valat & Grobon, 2021). This decline parallels broader secularization trends, as well as changes in other forms of homogamy, contributing to greater diversity in union trajectories and reduced family interference in partner choice among younger cohorts. These generational shifts are, however, nuanced by gender, with younger women in particular exhibiting less homogamy than earlier generations.

Yet, we argue that existing measures of religious homogamy face an important limitation: they typically rely on religious affiliation reported at the time of survey. Such measures neglect the religious background of origin, even though socio-religious environments play an important role in transmitting norms and shaping values during childhood (Percheron, 1985, in Bréchon, 2018). Religion as an agent of socialization, especially in early life, can profoundly influence individual trajectories, even when beliefs and practices evolve over time (Maudet, 2019; Santelli & Collet, 2012).

This is particularly evident in the case of marital conversions. Le Pape (2008) distinguishes between conversions driven by family expectations, often under strong social pressure, and those undertaken “to please one’s partner,” presented as an act of love and compromise. Despite appearing voluntary or superficial, these conversions can entail profound changes at both the individual and couple levels. Similarly, rather than full conversion, some individuals resume religious practice after meeting a partner, despite having previously distanced themselves from religion (Maudet, 2019). As Bessin (2009) notes, biographical disruptions such as bereavement or other life shocks can also trigger renewed religious engagement, particularly when early religious socialization has left enduring imprints. These processes highlight the gap between religious affiliation at the time of survey and the deeper influence of early religious upbringing.

For this reason, analyses that rely solely on current religious affiliation risk overlooking a different and often more formative religious socialization. A retrospective approach is needed to capture the role of childhood religious background, alongside subsequent conversions or returns to practice, in shaping union trajectories. This study therefore offers an in-depth analysis of individuals’ romantic trajectories with respect to both their own and their partners’ religious backgrounds. Using nationally representative EPIC data, which reconstruct the complete relationship histories of individuals born in France between 1948 and 1978, we investigate not only the persistence and decline of religious homogamy, but also the conditions under which heterogamous unions emerge and how individuals combine both homogamous and heterogamous relationships over the life course.

Literature Review

What do we know about religious homogamy in France?

In France, Alain Girard (1964) demonstrated that the marriage market does not operate randomly, as marital choice is strongly shaped by geographic, social, and cultural proximity. Yet despite the enduring importance of these factors, homogamy has been declining. Bouchet-Valat (2014) documented a progressive decrease in both educational and class homogamy between 1969 and 2011. Specifically, educationally endogamous unions dropped from 47% to 27% over this period (p. 471). Similarly, class homogamy declined by ten percentage points:

“The proportion of such couples fell from 30% to 20% of all unions, and even from 40% to 22% among dual-earner couples” (Ibid., p. 473).

Religious homogamy follows the same trend. It fell from 95% among couples formed in 1919 to 68% among couples formed in 2014 (Bouchet-Valat & Grobon, 2021, p. 2). Despite this decline, religion remains the strongest predictor of homogamy. Because religion functions as a powerful socializing institution from childhood (Percheron, 1985, in Bréchon, 2018), it is important to examine its trajectory in comparison with other forms of homogamy, while also considering the secularization of French society, gendered dynamics in both religion and union formation, and the role of socialization within shared social backgrounds.

Changing contexts of religious homogamy in France

A less homogamous landscape of couple formation

The decline of religious homogamy in France is part of a broader decline in class and educational homogamy among younger cohorts.

Educational homogamy has generally decreased, with fluctuations over time, as shown by Vanderschelden (2006) and Bouchet-Valat (2014). Bouchet-Valat attributes this decline partly to the significant expansion of women’s access to education across generations. In 1969, more than seven out of ten women had no diploma or only a certificate of primary studies, while by 2010 this proportion had fallen to about two out of ten.

With the expansion of education, first relationships increasingly began before studies were completed, often in school settings (Bouchet-Valat & Grobon, 2019). Fewer than 20% of couples formed in the 1950s started before the end of schooling, compared to more than 50% in the 1980s. Still, this increase in school-based relationships had only a limited impact on educational homogamy, partly because of higher rates of separation and repartnering (Ibid.). This trend is consistent with the overall decline of educational homogamy observed by Bouchet-Valat (2014).

Homogamy based on social origin has also weakened. Forsé and Chauvel (1995) showed that in France, acquired social position (e.g., through education) increasingly shapes marital choice more than inherited social origin. Despite declines in both social origin and educational homogamy, partner selection tends to emphasize acquired social attributes.

Nevertheless, religious homogamy remains strong. Maudet (2021) reports that 82% of practicing Catholic women and 88.4% of practicing Catholic men are in religiously homogamous unions. Among Muslims, the figures are 85.8% for women and 87.1% for men. However, these estimates refer only to unions ongoing at the time of survey, potentially masking more complex trajectories. Beyond possible relationships outside religious networks, individuals’ religious affiliation may shift over time. This underscores the importance of considering childhood religious environment rather than only current religious and marital status.

Religious homogamy and secularization

The intergenerational transmission of religiosity is increasingly shaped by secularization, driven largely by cohort replacement (Bréchon, 2018). Younger generations are less religious, and families play a weaker role in constraining marital choices based on faith. As homogamy declines across dimensions, secularization raises questions about the persistence of religious homogamy over time.

Bréchon (2004) documents a nine-point decline in Christian affiliation among cohorts born in 1999 compared to those born in 1981. At the same time, self-identification as having “no religious affiliation” has grown. For example, Catholic baptism rates dropped from about 90% of the French population around 1970 to 77% in 2005 (Dittgen, 2007, p. 14). Among children aged 0–7, the number of baptisms fell from over 380,000 out of 807,000 births in 2000 (47%) to fewer than 178,000 out of 726,000 births in 2022 (25%). Similarly, in 2018, only 3% of 18–29-year-olds were regular practicing Catholics, compared to 16% of those aged 70 and older (Dargent, 2019, §4).

Within this context, religious homogamy has declined steadily across cohorts. According to Bouchet-Valat & Grobon (2021, p. 2), while 95% of couples formed in 1919 shared the same childhood religion, this proportion dropped to 68% among couples formed in 2014. This trend, beginning in the 1960s, reflects the diversification of religious identities in French unions.

Although some exceptions exist, such as Turkish immigrant families in Western Europe (Straßburger, 2003), family involvement in partner choice has generally declined. Bouchet-Valat & Grobon (2021) note that while generations born between 1920 and 1970 often faced strong parental opposition to interfaith unions, later cohorts encounter greater tolerance. This shift reflects a broader social transformation in which younger generations are less religious and parental control over marriage decisions has weakened.

Religious homogamy: individual choice and social factors

Gendered dimensions of first romantic and sexual experiences

In the formation of unions, women appear more constrained by religious imperatives than men, despite generational changes. This difference varies by religion, underscoring the importance of stratifying analyses by gender when examining the evolution of religious homogamy.

To explain fluctuations in religiosity across the life course, Marion Maudet (2019) analyzed sexual and romantic experiences among Catholic respondents. She highlights how religious commitment often fluctuates, rising and falling in tandem with sexual and relational experiences. Religious trajectories and sexual-affective trajectories are intertwined, sometimes producing distance from religion and, in certain cases, temporary ruptures. Maudet shows that youth and sexual initiation often coincide with distancing from family and weakening parental control, a moment conducive to shifts in religious engagement (Maudet, 2019).

Gender shapes these dynamics differently. Prior work shows that gender relations still strongly structure female sexuality (Maillochon, 2015; Bozon, 2012). Among Catholics and Muslims alike, men tend to engage more frequently in sexual behaviors less aligned with religious norms (Maudet, 2021). By contrast, young Muslim women initiate sexual activity later, in part due to family approval and stronger adherence to family and heterosexual norms (Maudet, 2017). Among Muslim women, penetrative sexual initiation is delayed and more often tied to marriage

(Ibid.). Virginity, especially outside marriage, symbolizes autonomy from family values and thus carries long-term implications (Santelli & Collet, 2012). Consequently, Muslim women more strictly adhere to sexual norms than Muslim men, shaping moral and marital expectations (Maudet, 2021).

Amel Boubekour (2005) describes two strategies among young Muslim women in romantic relationships: first, *“haram for the halal”*, where physical or sexual intimacy is justified by the designation of a boyfriend as a “future husband”; second, relationships framed as romantic but excluding any physical intimacy or even overt expression of closeness (§6).

Among Catholics, sexual practices converge with those of the non-religious, though age at first intercourse remains later, particularly among women. As Maudet writes, *“being a Catholic woman would mean delaying sexual initiation, if not until marriage, then at least in order to preserve and prolong the moral horizon of female virginity”* (2017, p. 108).

Mixed unions: religious dynamics and family expectations

Gender also shapes interfaith marriages. Muslim men more easily marry non-Muslim women, whereas this option is less available to Muslim women (Pruvost, 1993). This asymmetry reflects religious prescriptions: *“According to the Qur’an, a Muslim man may marry a Jewish or Christian woman, but the reverse is not allowed. In the patrilineal system, children belong to the father’s lineage, which lessens parents’ fear of losing their grandchildren”* (De Villers, 2009, p. 217). As one Muslim father explained in Bordeaux: *“A man is a man (arrajl ‘â rajl)”* (Harrami, 2008, p. 2).

Still, some families are more open to interfaith partners. De Villers (2004), in a study of Moroccan immigrants in Belgium, shows that parental openness correlates with educational level, urban origin in Morocco, and previous failed traditional marriages in the family (p. 222). Even then, university-educated children often prioritize social homogamy over religious homogamy: *“Here, religious and origin heterogamy coexist with social homogamy”* (Ibid.).

Few studies examine interfaith unions in detail, particularly concerning Catholicism. Research on geographic or cultural mixing provides interpretive tools but often focuses on immigrant descendants, not the general population. Importantly, descendants of immigrants are less likely than immigrants themselves to partner with co-ethnics. According to Lê, Simon, and Coulmont (2022), *“Unlike immigrants living in unions, 73% of whom have a partner who is also an immigrant or descendant of immigrants, only 34% of descendants of immigrants are partnered with someone of immigrant background.”*

Santelli and Collet (2003, 2013) emphasize that cultural homogamy remains a structuring factor in partner choice, alongside socioeconomic status and education. Using a biographical approach, Santelli & Collet (2013) show that among French descendants of immigrants from the Maghreb, Turkey, and Sahelian Africa, marital choices oscillate between fidelity to family endogamy and progressive breaks with tradition. These trajectories reveal a dual logic: cultural belonging on the one hand, and social similarity on the other.

For mixed-origin unions, Khalid Chahbar (2018) documents the negotiations faced by Italo-Moroccan couples, especially around cultural and religious differences. Moroccan partners often emphasize Muslim education for children as a way to preserve cultural heritage. However, Claudine Philippe (2006) argues that religion, though significant, is not insurmountable. Each

couple develops its own dynamics, sometimes minimizing religion's role. Beyond religion, Chahbar (2018) finds that challenges often concern family obligations, such as hosting relatives or providing financial support to parents. While valued in Moroccan families, such practices may be perceived as intrusions by Italian partners.

Mixed couples also face stereotypes and stigma (Philippe, 2006). Odasso (2013), studying Italo-Moroccan, Italo-Jordanian, Franco-Moroccan, and Franco-Lebanese couples, shows how such unions confront social stigmatization tied to migration background and religion. These perceptions often construct the family of origin as a symbolic boundary. Similarly, Marsicano (2019) analyzes sub-Saharan African migrants in France, emphasizing how racism and discrimination create racial boundaries that constrain marital choices.

While migration may open opportunities for intermarriage, women often remain subject to stricter partner-choice norms, reinforced by stigma (Santelli & Collet, 2013). In this sense, Marsicano (2019) shows that mixed unions can be perceived as a form of female emancipation. Yet she also cautions that relationships between minority women and majority-group men may reinforce male dominance: majority men in such unions benefit not only from gender privilege but also from administrative advantages, strengthening their power within the couple.

Mate selection as a synthesis of shared experiences

The intensity of religious practice reflects specific socialization processes that shape marital choices. In the U.S., for example, religious individuals value shared faith, pro-marriage attitudes, and anti-divorce norms (Marks, 2005). Yet, as Kalmijn (1991) argues, marital selection is not only about intensity of practice but also about educational and cultural proximity across religious groups.

Chahbar (2018) shows that Italo-Moroccan partners often prioritize discussions about children's religious education or naming practices. Thus, religious homogamy reflects shared values and experiences—some directly religious, others not—embedded in couple formation.

In France, Percheron (1985, in Bréchon, 2018) found that religion and politics were the two domains most strongly transmitted across generations, with religion being the most effectively reproduced. In 2008, a comparative study showed that weekly attendance since age 12 strongly predicted adult religiosity, while those without early religious socialization had only a 6% chance of being highly religious as adults (Bréchon, 2018, p. 11).

This transmission varies by intensity and class. Among Catholics, religious socialization is stratified: the bourgeoisie historically emphasized Catholic moral education (Bourdieu, 1979; Goblot, 2010). This nexus reinforces traditionalist conservatism (Duby, Ariès & Perrot, 1987) and leads to “self-reinforcement” (Maudet, 2021, p. 17), where individuals adhere to more conservative family structures (Duby, Ariès & Perrot, 1987; Régnier-Loilier & Prioux, 2008, 2009). Such individuals often limit romantic experiences and select partners within their religious community.

In Islam, Collet & Santelli (2012) examine the “halal marriage,” reflecting adherence to inherited social norms. Despite rejecting some practices, others are preserved and shape marital choice. Collet & Santelli (2012) also identify selective endogamy based on shared experiences such as migration and urban life. Life trajectories thus function as marital selection criteria.

However, Carol (2014) shows that while shared cultural origins may foster partner proximity, they can also increase union dissolution risks.

Capturing religious homogamy in union trajectories: a retrospective approach

Although religious homogamy remains significant in France (Maudet, 2021), evidence indicates a generational decline (Bouchet-Valat & Grobon, 2021). This decline coincides with secularization and broader shifts in homogamy, producing more diverse marital trajectories and less parental interference in union choices. Gender dynamics, however, nuance this trend, as homogamy remains stronger for women in certain contexts.

Still, existing measures of homogamy face a key limitation: they typically assess religion at the time of survey rather than considering religious background. Because religion is a powerful agent of childhood socialization (Percheron, 1985, in Bréchon, 2018), this omission overlooks the formative role of early religious environments.

Conversion in marriage illustrates this. Le Pape (2008) identifies two types of marital conversion: one driven by family expectations and social pressure, and another framed as a gesture of love and compromise. Even the latter can significantly reshape individual and couple dynamics. Maudet (2019) also shows cases of re-engagement with religion after meeting a partner, often among those socialized religiously but distanced during youth. Biographical disruptions such as death, trauma, or major encounters may trigger renewed religious practice (Bessin, 2009). This shift reflects a transition from parent-driven to self-driven religious engagement, often during phases of reduced parental control (Bozon, 2019).

Consequently, measuring religion only at the time of survey risks overlooking socialization that differs from current practice. A retrospective approach allows us to situate religious homogamy within life trajectories, capturing both continuity and change in how religion shapes union formation.

Data and Methods

Data

We use data from the *Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux* (EPIC), a nationally representative retrospective survey conducted by Insee and Ined between late 2013 and early 2014. The survey collected responses from 7,825 men and women aged 26–65, covering couple formation in France between the late 1970s and 2014. Respondents reported “all relationships that mattered,” including both cohabiting and non-cohabiting partnerships, as well as periods of separation and time spent outside of a relationship. This design makes it possible to reconstruct complete romantic histories from 1914 to 2013 (Rault & Régnier-Loilier, 2019).

EPIC is innovative in that it does not limit measurement to formal unions such as marriage or cohabitation. Instead, it records all relationships respondents deemed significant, thus capturing the diversity of conjugal forms in France, including marriage, *pacs*, cohabitation, and non-cohabiting unions. The survey provides respondents’ religious affiliation at the time of the interview and that of their current partner, but it does not record the religion of previous partners or respondents’ affiliation at earlier points in their relationship histories. Religious conversions or reconversions over the life course are therefore not directly observed.

Measures

Our primary measure of homogamy relies on childhood religious background rather than religion declared at the time of survey. Couples in which both partners grew up in similar religious environments are classified as homogamous, while those from different backgrounds are classified as heterogamous. This retrospective measure minimizes biases introduced by later changes in religious affiliation and better captures the influence of early religious socialization on values, norms, and partner selection.

Sociodemographic covariates include respondents' educational attainment, father's occupational category, and father's place of birth. These variables are used to explore how social characteristics intersect with religious background in shaping homogamous and heterogamous trajectories.

Analytical strategy

We analyze union sequences across the life course to account for individuals who experienced both homogamous and heterogamous relationships. This allows us to move beyond cross-sectional analyses of current unions, which risk obscuring more complex relationship trajectories. Analyses are stratified by sex and by cohort (1948–1963; 1964–1978) to assess generational change. Due to small sample sizes, analyses are restricted to Catholics.

We acknowledge that respondents' assessments of their childhood religious environment may be subjective. For instance, two individuals identifying as Catholic in adulthood may nonetheless report very different experiences of religious upbringing. To address this, we conducted sensitivity tests comparing current religious affiliation with reported childhood background in homogamous couples. Results of these tests are presented in the appendix.

Result

Across cohorts, the prevalence of heterogamous unions remained relatively stable among Catholics, while it rose sharply among Muslims. Among Catholics, only a modest increase is observed (+3 percentage points), and this is significant only for men. In contrast, the proportion of Muslims experiencing at least one heterogamous union almost tripled between cohorts, with both men and women showing significant increases, although the rise was particularly pronounced among men. By the most recent cohort, Catholics and Muslims display similar levels of heterogamy.

Mixed union trajectories (experiencing both homogamous and heterogamous unions) also became more common across cohorts. Among Catholics, the increase was modest and equally distributed across sexes, with women slightly more likely than men to report such experiences. Among Muslims, the overall rise was smaller, but again strongly gendered: almost no change for women, contrasted with a marked increase for men.

Table 1. Types of Relationships Experienced by Respondents, by Generation, Gender, and Religion

	Catholics			Muslims		
	1948-1963	1964-1978	p-value	1948-1963	1964-1978	p-value
	% (N)	% (N)		% (N)	% (N)	
Having experienced at least one heterogamous relationship*						
Total	29% (696)	32% (535)	0.028	13% (25)	33% (70)	0.001
Women	34% (465)	34% (344)	0.8	14% (17)	26% (33)	0.045
Men	23% (231)	30% (191)	0.005	13% (8)	39% (37)	0.004
Having experienced at least one heterogamous relationship and at least one homogamous relationship**						
Ensemble	16% (381)	20% (329)	0.005	9.4% (15)	14% (30)	0.2
Women	17% (239)	21% (217)	0.031	9.2% (10)	9.5% (16)	0.9
Men	14% (142)	18% (112)	0.082	9.7% (5)	19% (14)	0.2

Sample: Catholic Women aged 16–49 (EPIC 2013, Ined–Insee).

Reading*: 34% of Catholic women from the first generation (1948–1963) reported having experienced at least one heterogamous relationship during their lifetime, compared to 34% among those from the 1964–1978 generation (p -value = 0.8).

Reading**: 17% of Catholic women from the 1948–1963 generation reported having experienced at least one heterogamous relationship and at least one relationship with a partner from a similar religious background, compared to 21% among those from the 1964–1978 generation (p -value = 0.031).

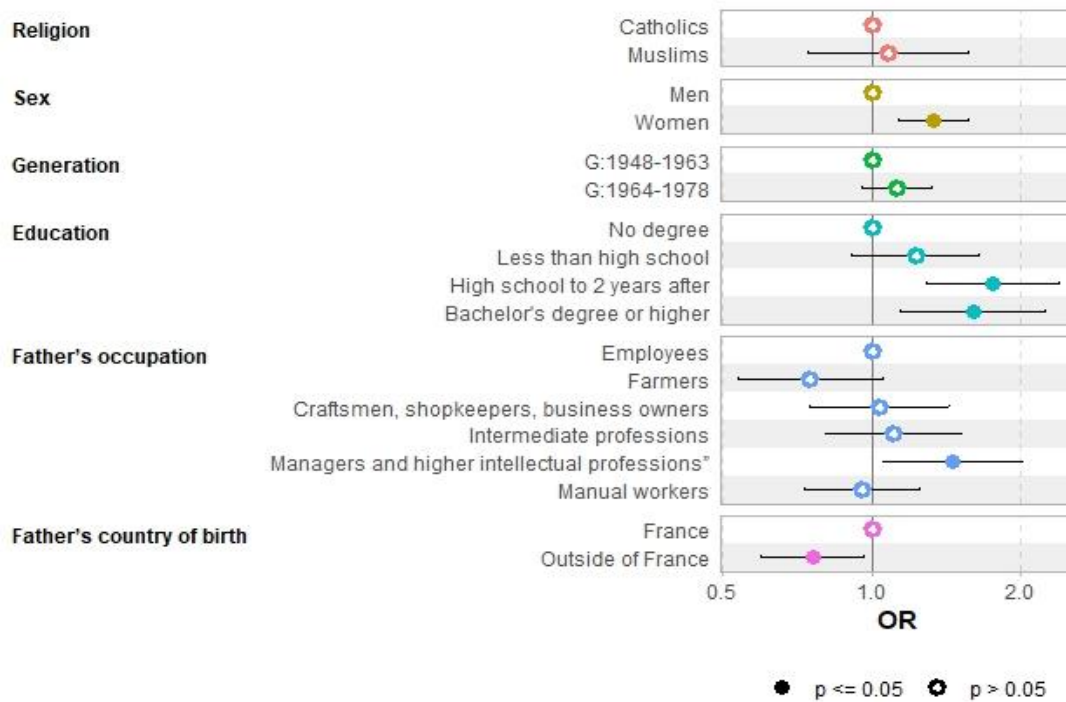
Overall, these results point to a moderate generational increase in heterogamy among Catholics, but a much sharper rise among Muslims, particularly among men. This divergence raises questions about the underlying mechanisms, which we address using logistic regression models incorporating sociodemographic and socioeconomic factors.

Determinants of religious heterogamy

Figure 1 presents the logistic regression model estimating the factors associated with the probability of ever having experienced a heterogamous union. It should be recalled that the variable used to define a heterogamous union is measured with respect to the respondent's childhood religious background, while all other characteristics are reported at the time of the survey.

The results indicate no significant difference in the likelihood of heterogamy between individuals raised in Catholic versus Muslim households. However, gender plays a clear role: women are more likely than men to report at least one heterogamous union in their lifetime. Educational attainment is also strongly associated with heterogamy: individuals with at least a high school diploma, and particularly those with advanced degrees, are more likely to have experienced heterogamous unions compared to those without qualifications. Father's occupational status shows only a marginal effect; only respondents whose father was a manager or higher-level professional are significantly more likely to report heterogamy compared to those whose father was an employee. Father's nativity, by contrast, has a clearer effect: individuals whose father was born abroad are less likely to have formed unions across religious boundaries than those whose father was born in France.

Figure 1. Factors Correlated with Religious Heterogamy



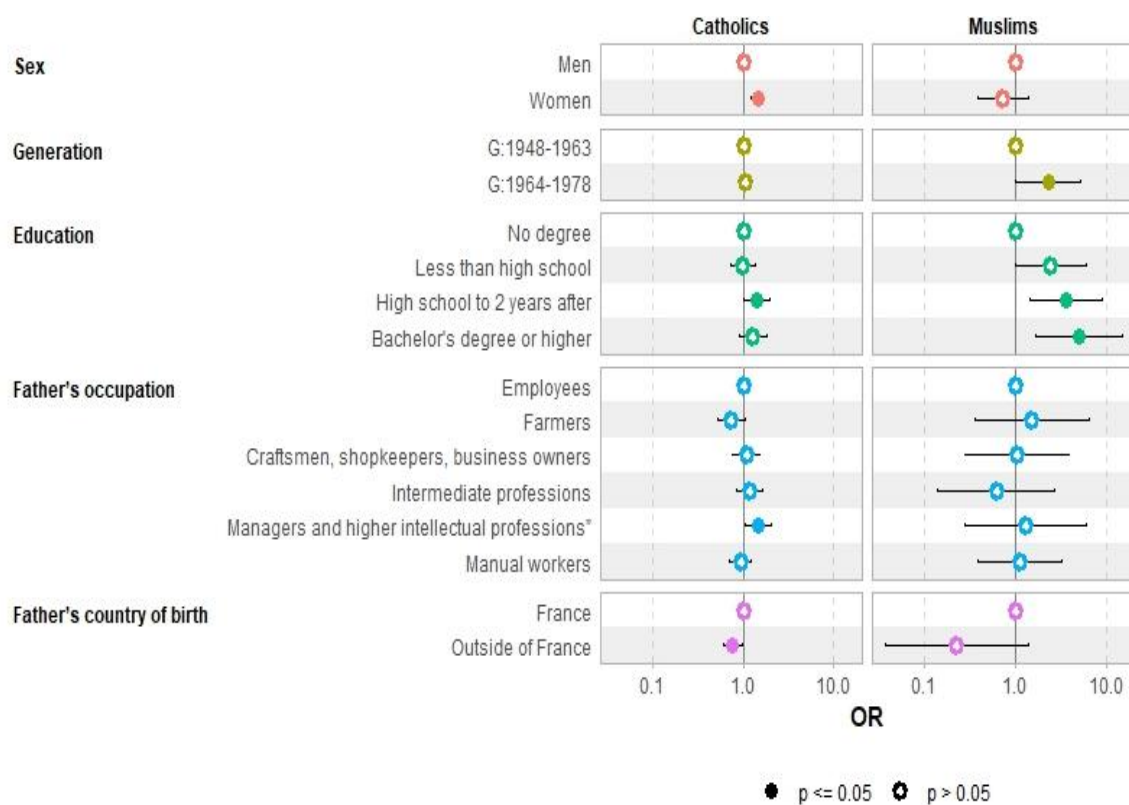
Sample: Catholic Women aged 16–49 (EPIC 2013, Ined–Insee).

Thus, while heterogamy measured at the time of the survey is lower among Muslims than among Catholics (Maudet, 2021), the probability of having experienced at least one heterogamous union over the life course does not differ between the two religious groups when socialization background is considered.

To further explore potential differences between Catholics and Muslims, we stratified the regression models by religion (Figure 2). Among Catholics, the gender differences observed in the pooled model persist: women remain more likely than men to experience heterogamous unions, while generational differences are not significant. Education continues to be positively associated with heterogamy, with the strongest contrast between individuals without a diploma and those with intermediate qualifications (high school to two years of postsecondary education). Father's occupational category and nativity display similar patterns as in Figure 1: only those whose father was a higher-level professional report significantly greater heterogamy, while those whose father was foreign-born are less likely to form cross-religious unions.

Among Muslims, the key determinants are generation and education. The gender effect observed in the pooled model is no longer significant. Instead, generational change is pronounced: individuals born between 1964 and 1978 are more likely to report heterogamy than those born between 1948 and 1963. Education is also a strong predictor: relative to individuals without a diploma, those with at least a high school degree—and especially those with university-level qualifications—are much more likely to experience heterogamy.

Figure 2. Factors Associated with Religious Heterogamy Across Religions



Sample: Catholic Women aged 16–49 (EPIC 2013, Ined–Insee).

Taken together, the stratified models confirm that gender differences in heterogamy are specific to Catholics, whereas generational change is specific to Muslims. They also show that the positive association between education and heterogamy is stronger for Muslims than for Catholics. This highlights the role of educational institutions as key spaces of interreligious contact, particularly for Muslim women, as shown in prior research (Santelli & Collet, 2011). These results therefore nuance the overall picture of strong religious homogamy among Muslims (Maudet, 2021) by revealing that many have, in fact, experienced heterogamous unions over the life course.

Complex union trajectories (homogamous and heterogamous)

The previous results indicate a general increase in unions between individuals from different religious backgrounds. This trend toward greater interreligious unions is partly explained by the rise of “complex” or “mixed” trajectories, in which individuals experience both homogamous and heterogamous unions over the life course (from 16% to 20% between the 1948–1963 and 1964–1978 cohorts among Catholics). We therefore focus here on the structure of these trajectories: can we identify distinct types of conjugal pathways? At which stages of the life course do homogamous and heterogamous unions occur? Do individuals alternate between the two without a clear pattern, or do short-lived heterogamous experiences typically precede a return to homogamy? Conversely, do some leave homogamous unions to establish new heterogamous partnerships? Finally, can certain social characteristics be linked to the likelihood of following one type of trajectory rather than another?

To explore these questions, we apply sequence analysis in order to capture the alternations and dynamics of homogamous and heterogamous unions across the life course. Union trajectories were modeled using four Optimal Matching procedures—separately for men and women in the two cohorts (1948–1963 and 1964–1978). We observe individuals from ages 16 to 49, coding their time spent in each state: “in a homogamous union,” “in a heterogamous union,” and “single/out of union.” For members of the younger cohort who had experienced both homogamous and heterogamous unions, an additional state was included (“not observed”), reflecting the unobserved portion of their trajectory beyond their age at the time of the survey (e.g., a respondent interviewed at age 35 is only observed between ages 16 and 35).

Among Catholics, three main types of trajectories emerge consistently across sex and cohort. The first type is characterized by predominantly homogamous unions (green in figures), the second by predominantly heterogamous unions (purple), and the third by long periods of singlehood punctuated by both homogamous and heterogamous relationships. In other words, complex trajectories may consist of long-lasting homogamous unions, long-lasting heterogamous unions, or extended singlehood interspersed with shorter unions of both types. The relative proportions of these pathways, and the social characteristics associated with them, vary by sex and cohort (Figures 3.1–4.2). For this study, we restrict the analysis to Catholics aged 16–49, due to limited case numbers for other religions (a total of 710 life trajectories).

Women, 1948–1963 cohort: predominantly homogamous trajectories

For women born between 1948 and 1963, the dominant pathway is homogamy (56.5%, Figure 3.1). Two subgroups can be distinguished. In the first, homogamous unions correspond to the main or lifelong partnership, while heterogamous experiences are confined to early adulthood and tend to be short-lived, suggesting a general orientation toward homogamy with limited tolerance for early experimentation. In the second subgroup, long homogamous partnerships are followed by later heterogamous unions, often after separation. These transitions may reflect a desire for renewal, weaker salience of religious background at later stages of life, or reduced homogamous opportunities. Daughters of managers and artisans/shopkeepers are overrepresented in the predominantly homogamous group (20% vs. 14% overall; 16% vs. 13% overall, respectively; Figure 3.2).

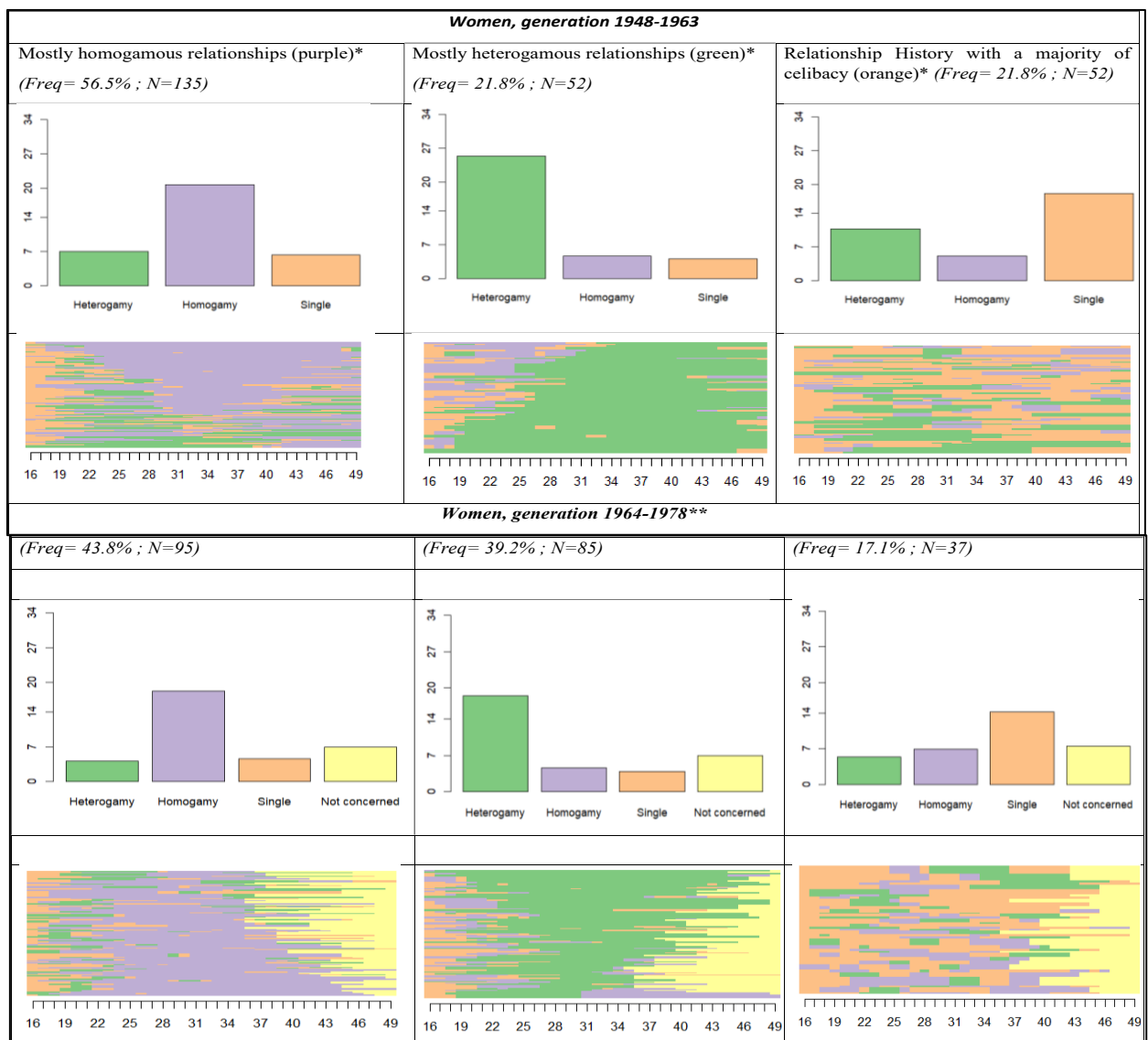
Women with predominantly heterogamous trajectories represent 22% of those who experienced both homogamous and heterogamous unions. Their profiles are characterized by one long heterogamous partnership preceded by brief homogamous relationships in youth, suggesting that early homogamy reflects family influence before women moved toward more autonomous partner choices. Daughters of working-class fathers are particularly overrepresented in this group (42% vs. 31% overall; Figure 3.2). Another 22% of women in this cohort followed trajectories marked by long periods of singlehood combined with relatively short homogamous and heterogamous unions. These women are disproportionately daughters of intermediate-level professionals and show signs of upward mobility, being overrepresented among those with secondary or short tertiary education (47% vs. 37% overall; Figure 3.2).

Overall, 17% of Catholic women in this cohort experienced at least one homogamous and one heterogamous union (Table 1). While these “complex” trajectories remain in the minority, they show important internal variation: prolonged homogamy among women from privileged families with early or late heterogamous experiences, long heterogamous partnerships among women from working-class backgrounds, and extended singlehood trajectories associated with middle-class origins and educational mobility.

Women, 1964–1978 cohort: complex trajectories with stronger heterogamous components.

Among younger Catholic women, homogamous trajectories remain frequent but less dominant than before (43.8% vs. 56.5%). They typically begin with a brief heterogamous experience, followed by a stable homogamous partnership. Unlike the earlier cohort, daughters of privileged families are not overrepresented in this trajectory.

Figure 3. Relationship history of women who experienced at least one religiously homogamous or heterogamous relationship among Catholics aged 16 to 49.



* weighted

** Individuals whose age at the time of the survey exceeds the age threshold for analyzing relationship occurrence are indicated as “not concerned” (yellow). This category is not included in the results.

Sample: Catholic Women aged 16–49 (EPIC 2013, Ined–Insee).

Table 2. Sociodemographic characteristics of Catholic women in each relationship trajectory

Women of the 1948–1963 cohort				
Characteristics	Mostly homogamous unions (% [*] , n [*]) Freq=56.5%; N=135	Mostly heterogamous unions (% [*] , n [*]) Freq=21.8%; N=52	Mostly single (% [*] , n [*]) Freq=22%; N=52	Total N=239
Father's occupational category (p-value = 0.02)				
Farmers	8.9 (14)	2.9 (3)	2.8 (4)	7.1 (21)
Craftsmen, shopkeepers, business owners	16.1 (17)	11.2 (6)	8.2 (7)	13.4 (30)
Managers and higher intellectual professions	19.8 (25)	3.3 (2)	9.8 (6)	14.2 (33)
Intermediate professions	14.3 (19)	14.9 (7)	19.2 (11)	17.9 (37)
Employees	11.8 (21)	9.6 (5)	10.6 (6)	10.9 (32)
Manual workers	25.3 (32)	49.4 (22)	28.9 (15)	31.1 (69)
No response	3.9 (7)	7.7 (5)	7.7 (5)	5.4 (17)
Education level at union formation (p-value = 0.078)				
No diploma	8.5 (10)	10.7 (5)	8.1 (3)	8.9 (18)
Below high school diploma	33.7 (48)	59.5 (28)	25.8 (17)	37.3 (93)
High school diploma to 2-year college degree	39.0 (64)	19.8 (12)	47.0 (21)	36.8 (79)
3-year college degree and higher	18.8 (31)	10.0 (7)	19.1 (11)	17.0 (49)
Father's country of birth (p-value > 0.5)				
France	83.2 (110)	81.4 (40)	80.1 (41)	82.1 (191)
Outside France	13.4 (20)	13.5 (8)	13.3 (7)	13.3 (35)
No response	3.5 (5)	5.1 (4)	6.8 (4)	4.5 (13)
Women of the 1964–1978 cohort				
	Freq = 43.8%; N=95	Freq = 39.2%; N=85	Freq = 17.1%; N=37	N=239
Father's occupational category (p-value = 0.02)				
Farmers	0.6 (1)	0.0 (0)	8.7 (4)	1.7 (5)
Craftsmen, shopkeepers, business owners	13.5 (12)	7.6 (7)	16.5 (7)	11.6 (26)
Managers and higher intellectual professions	13.3 (15)	19.6 (17)	16.6 (6)	16.5 (38)
Intermediate professions	12.8 (13)	13.0 (12)	4.5 (3)	11.5 (28)
Employees	12.3 (12)	4.3 (4)	22.2 (5)	10.7 (21)
Manual workers	28.8 (28)	44.1 (34)	26.2 (9)	34.7 (71)
Education level at union formation (p-value = 0.065)				
No diploma	12.7 (9)	4.6 (4)	2.9 (1)	7.7 (14)
Below high school diploma	27.3 (24)	20.1 (19)	20.1 (9)	23.4 (55)
High school diploma to 2-year college degree	32.9 (30)	50.1 (35)	47.5 (15)	42.5 (80)
3-year college degree and higher	33.5 (34)	18.0 (22)	29.5 (12)	26.4 (68)
Father's country of birth (p-value = 0.5)				
France	71.4 (71)	73.6 (53)	80.3 (29)	73.8 (163)
Outside France	9.9 (10)	12.6 (11)	14.4 (5)	14.4 (28)
No response	18.7 (14)	13.8 (11)	5.3 (3)	11.8 (26)

*weighted n unweighted.

Sample: Catholic Women aged 16–49 (EPIC 2013, Ined–Insee).

Heterogamous trajectories, by contrast, are more prevalent (39.2% vs. 22% in the earlier cohort; Figure 3.2). These women often follow the same pattern as their predecessors—brief early homogamy followed by longer heterogamous unions. Daughters of working-class fathers are again overrepresented (49%), and educational mobility remains evident, as heterogamous trajectories are associated with higher representation among those with secondary and short tertiary education (50% vs. 43% overall; Figure 3.2).

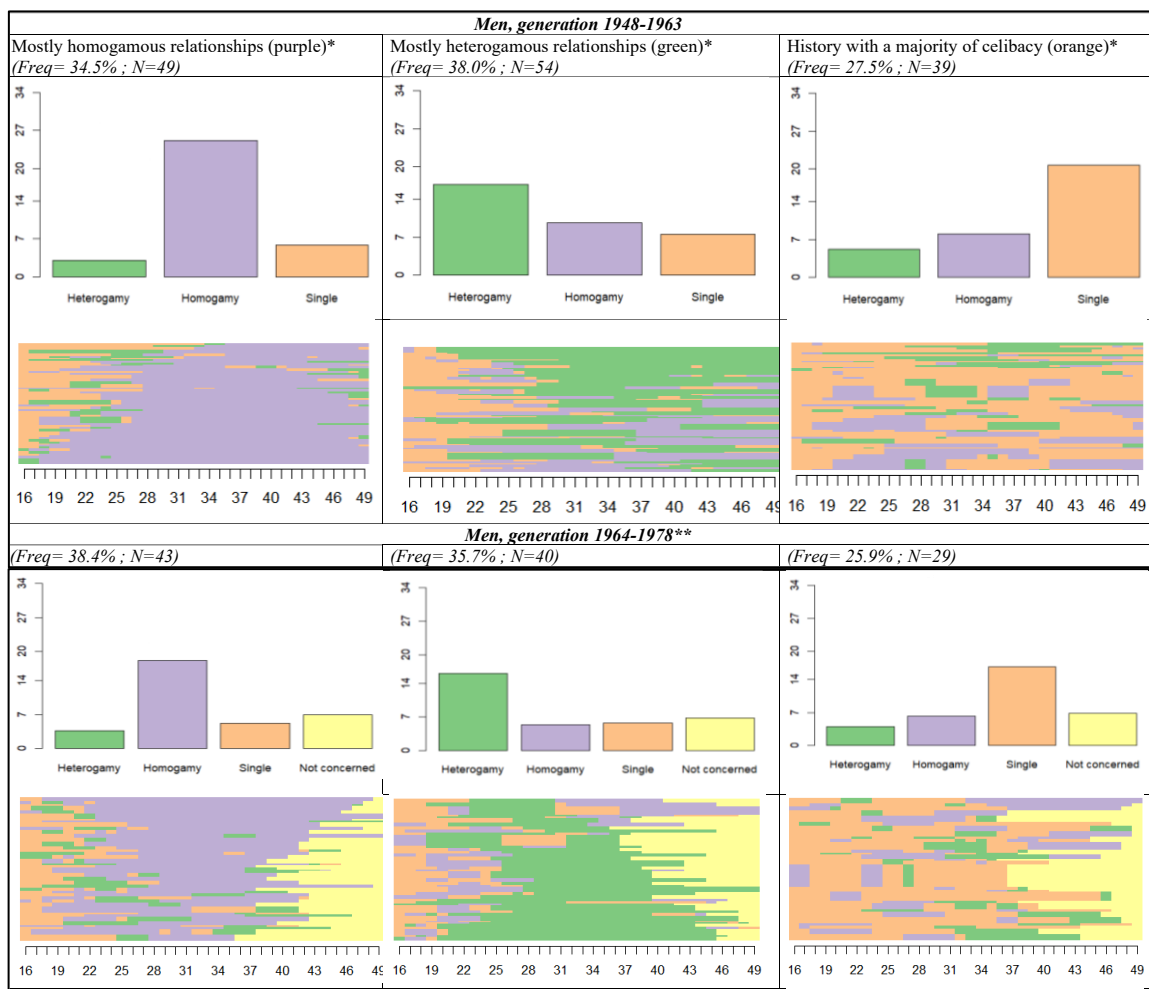
Finally, 17.1% of younger women follow singlehood-dominated trajectories. These are more common among daughters of employees (22% vs. 11% overall), managers (17%), and artisans/shopkeepers (17%), marking a shift from the earlier cohort.

In sum, younger Catholic women show a decline in homogamous trajectories and a clear increase in heterogamous ones, consistent with the overall rise of interreligious unions (Table 1).

Men, 1948–1963 cohort: more diverse complex trajectories

Among Catholic men born between 1948 and 1963, 34.5% follow predominantly homogamous trajectories, characterized by a main homogamous union and limited heterogamous experiences early or late in life. In contrast to women, this group shows no significant social overrepresentation. The second group, representing 38%, is more heterogeneous, combining homogamous and heterogamous unions in varying orders. Some men began with heterogamous unions and later stabilized in homogamy, while others followed the reverse sequence. No strong social differentiations appear in this group. Finally, 27% of men experienced long singlehood trajectories, punctuated by short unions of both types—similar to women, but more pronounced.

Figure 4. Relationship history of men who experienced at least one religiously homogamous or heterogamous relationship among Catholics aged 16 to 49.



* weighted

** Individuals whose age at the time of the survey exceeds the age threshold for analyzing relationship occurrence are indicated as “not concerned” (yellow). This category is not included in the results.

Table 4. Sociodemographic characteristics of Catholic women in each relationship trajectory

Men of the 1948–1963 cohort				
Characteristics	Mostly homogamous unions (% , n*) Freq=34.5%; N=49	Mostly heterogamous unions (% , n*) Freq=38.0%; N=54	Mostly single (% , n*) Freq=27.5%; N=39	Total N=142
Father's occupational category (p-value = 0.6)				
Farmers	17.0 (8)	9.7 (5)	14.5 (6)	13.5 (19)
Craftsmen, shopkeepers, business owners	10.0 (5)	15.5 (7)	21.9 (4)	15.3 (16)
Managers and higher intellectual professions	17.0 (7)	16.1 (9)	6.8 (3)	13.9 (20)
Intermediate professions	18.6 (9)	8.8 (6)	10.2 (5)	12.6 (11)
Employees	6.6 (3)	8.8 (6)	2.7 (2)	6.4 (11)
Manual workers	25.4 (13)	27.7 (14)	27.9 (13)	26.9 (40)
No response	5.4 (13)	13.5 (7)	16.0 (5)	12.6 (15)
Education level at union formation (p-value = 0.078)				
No diploma	5.8 (1)	15.7 (5)	1.9 (1)	8.7 (7)
Below high school diploma	52.1 (24)	48.1 (25)	55.9 (24)	51.5 (73)
High school diploma to 2-year college degree	15.2 (8)	20.9 (11)	10.9 (5)	21.9 (24)
3-year college degree and higher	26.9 (16)	15.3 (13)	10.3 (5)	17.9 (34)
Father's country of birth (p-value > 0.9)				
France	82.8 (39)	76.8 (41)	68.7 (27)	76.7 (107)
Outside France	11.8 (6)	9.7 (6)	11.7 (6)	10.6 (17)
No response	5.4 (4)	13.5 (7)	19.6 (7)	12.4 (18)
Men of the 1964–1978 cohort				
	Freq = 38.4%; N=43	Freq = 35.2%; N=40	Freq = 25.9%; N=29	N=112
Father's occupational category (p-value = 0.089)				
Farmers	8.7 (4)	12.5 (6)	3.8 (2)	8.8 (12)
Craftsmen, shopkeepers, business owners	15.6 (8)	8.5 (5)	7.2 (3)	10.7 (16)
Managers and higher intellectual professions	16.9 (7)	7.4 (4)	18.5 (6)	13.8 (17)
Intermediate professions	11.9 (5)	17.2 (8)	28.7 (5)	18.6 (18)
Employees	20.8 (8)	13.2 (4)	9.4 (2)	14.8 (14)
Manual workers	22.9 (9)	17.4 (8)	29.9 (9)	22.8 (26)
No response	3.3 (2)	23.7 (5)	2.6 (2)	10.6 (9)
Education level at union formation (p-value = 0.9)				
No diploma	2.9 (1)	11.1 (2)	8.3 (3)	7.5 (6)
Below high school diploma	24.9 (12)	23.9 (9)	25.9 (9)	25.9 (30)
High school diploma to 2-year college degree	47.1 (18)	44.5 (18)	45.3 (10)	45.7 (46)
3-year college degree and higher	25.0 (12)	20.8 (11)	16.0 (7)	21.0 (30)
Father's country of birth (p-value = 0.011)				
France	88.3 (37)	71.1 (33)	82.2 (23)	80.2 (93)
Outside France	8.5 (4)	5.3 (2)	15.2 (4)	9.2 (10)
No response	3.3 (2)	23.7 (5)	2.6 (2)	10.6 (9)

*weighted n unweighted.

Sample: Catholic Men aged 16–49 (EPIC 2013, Ined–Insee).

Men, 1964–1978 cohort: stable patterns across generations

For younger Catholic men, the three clusters persist in roughly the same proportions as in the earlier cohort: homogamous, heterogamous, and singlehood-dominated trajectories. No clear generational shift is observed, and the distribution by social background remains largely indistinguishable, likely due to limited sample size.

This analysis reveals three recurring patterns among Catholics of both sexes: predominantly homogamous, predominantly heterogamous, and singlehood-dominated trajectories. Among women, heterogamous trajectories have expanded between cohorts, even within complex pathways, while men's trajectories remain more stable. These findings align with earlier evidence showing rising interreligious unions, especially among women from middle-class families with intermediate levels of education (see also Maudet, 2021).

Conclusion

The analysis of interreligious unions in France across cohorts highlights marked generational dynamics. Our results reveal a progressive increase in interreligious unions, particularly among Muslims. Once sociodemographic characteristics are controlled, however, no significant differences remain between Catholics and Muslims in the overall likelihood of ever entering a heterogamous union.

Social factors are shown to play a central role in shaping the probability of interreligious unions. Educational attainment and parental occupational status emerge as important determinants: individuals with higher levels of education display greater openness to interreligious unions, while those from more modest socioeconomic backgrounds, or whose father was foreign-born, are more likely to remain in homogamous partnerships. This is especially pronounced among Muslims, for whom the association between education and interreligious unions is much stronger than among Catholics.

Our findings also highlight the diversity of conjugal trajectories leading to heterogamous unions. Complex life courses—those combining at least one homogamous and one heterogamous union—can be grouped into three main types, each associated with distinct sociodemographic profiles. These complex trajectories illustrate the flexibility of partnership norms with respect to religion: individuals may move from homogamy to heterogamy or vice versa, reflecting plural and evolving patterns of union formation.

At the same time, certain caveats should be noted. Respondents' perception of their childhood religious environment is subjective and may vary in intensity, even within the same faith. Retrospective reporting of partners' religious background may also be subject to recall bias. In addition, sample size constraints, particularly for men, Muslims, and Protestants, limited the depth of analysis possible for some groups. Finally, while religious background is measured retrospectively, socioeconomic variables are captured at the time of the survey, which prevents us from fully accounting for changes in education or parental resources over the life course. These measurement issues may partly obscure the interplay between union experiences and evolving individual characteristics.

Taken together, however, the analyses confirm that increasing heterogamy in France reflects a reconfiguration of union trajectories and their sociodemographic determinants. Generational change, the role of education, and the diversity of conjugal pathways all point to a dual dynamic: on the one hand, secularization and the diversification of partner choice; on the other, persistent religious homogamy, especially among the most religiously socialized groups.

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