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Does the share of religious ingroup members affect how important religion is to adolescents? Applying Optimal Distinctiveness Theory to four European countries

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ABSTRACT

European youth attend classrooms that are religiously diverse, with the importance of religion differing between ethno-religious groups. While religion no longer matters much to many native-origin Christian youth, it is important to many of their immigrant-origin Christian and, especially, Muslim peers. Considering religion as a source of adolescents' social identity, we examine how religious classroom composition relates to the importance adolescents attach to religion. Optimal Distinctiveness Theory suggests a curvilinear relation, because a group has to be large enough to satisfy the need of belonging but small enough to satisfy the need for differentiation. Using large-scale survey data for 15-year old adolescents from four European countries, we find that this inverted U-shaped relation holds for immigrant-origin Muslim but not for native- and immigrant-origin Christian youth. Instead, for Christian youth religion was more important in classrooms with higher shares of Muslim classmates, thus lending credence to arguments derived from threat theory.

KEYWORDS

Religiosity; classroom composition; Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT); group threat

1. Introduction

In the last couple of decades, immigration has made European schools and classrooms increasingly diverse. Reflecting this societal change, a vast amount of research examines the consequences of ethnic classroom composition for a broad range of students' attitudes and behaviour, ranging from interethnic attitudes (Bubritzki et al. 2018; Janmaat 2014; Stark, Mäs, and Flache 2015) to interethnic friendships (Munniksma et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2016; Van Houtte and Stevens 2009), bullying (Tolsma et al. 2013; Vervoort, Scholte, and Overbeek 2010) and ethnic pride (Leszczensky et al. 2018).

While these and other studies on ethnic composition have yielded important insights, fewer studies have focused on the consequences of *religious* composition of diverse classrooms. Research has recently started to investigate religious boundaries in school-based friendship networks, in particular between Christian and Muslim youth (e.g. Leszczensky and Pink 2017; Windzio and Wings 2014). But the strength of religious identification

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and the importance adolescents attach to religion vastly differs among European adolescents. Whereas native Christian Europeans have become less attached to their religion over the past decades (Van Tubergen and Sindradóttir 2011), European Muslims, including European-born adolescents, tend to have strong religious identities (Foner and Alba 2008; Voas and Fleischmann 2012). Since Muslim parents are highly effective in transmitting their religion to their children (e.g. Jacob and Kalter 2013; Soehl 2017), in many European classrooms native-origin youth who are highly secular or even non-religious face much more religious Muslim peers, with immigrant-origin Christian youth falling somewhere in between these two opposing poles (Jacob and Kalter 2013). On average, religion thus is more important to European Muslims than to their Christian counterparts, which is reflected by stronger religious identification among the former (e.g. Verkuyten 2007; Verkuyten and Thijs 2010).

Surprisingly little is known, however, about whether and how religious composition of European classrooms shapes how important religion is to adolescents. Since religion can be an important source of social identification for adolescents (Kogan, Fong, and Reitz 2020; Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman 2010), a theory is suitable that explicitly relates the strength of identification with a salient category to the relative size of members of that category in a given context. *Optimal Distinctiveness Theory* (ODT, Brewer 1991) posits that people have both a need for inclusion, i.e. belonging to a social group, and a need for differentiation, i.e. being different from others. According to ODT, ingroup identification therefore is expected to be strongest if the relative size of the respective group is optimally balanced such that it is large enough to satisfy the need for inclusion but small enough to satisfy the need for differentiation.

Against the background of increasing religious diversity in schools, we apply ODT to examine how the share of religious ingroup members as an aspect of religious classroom composition relates to the importance students attach to religion. While the importance attached to religion is not identical to the strength of religious identification, strong religious identifiers arguably attach a high importance to religion; likewise it can be expected that religion is of little importance to those who do not strongly identify with a religious category. Tentatively assuming that importance attached to religion reflects the strength of identification with one's own religious group, we empirically test ODT's prediction of an inverted U-shaped relation between the share of the religious ingroup in the classroom and the importance of religion. We also compare this prediction to the alternative hypothesis that the strength of religious identification increases with the relative size of religious ingroup members in class, as suggested by classical accounts from the sociology of religion that point to the importance of social control, peer pressure, and obedience for religious identification (e.g. Need and De Graaf 1996; Te Grotenhuis and Scheepers 2001). We use large-scale data for four European countries, which have been collected by the *Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries* (CILS4EU; Kalter et al. 2016) and are representative among 15-year olds in England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

Our analysis reveals pronounced differences between ethno-religious groups. When all religious groups are pooled together, we find no association between the individual importance of religion and the share of classmates with the same religion. In line with ODT, however, for immigrant-origin Muslim youth the importance of religion peaked in classrooms with about two third of co-religionists, but was lower in classrooms with either less

or more Muslim classmates. In contrast, neither for native- nor for immigrant-origin Christian youth the association resembles an inverted U-shape.

Searching for an explanation for this deviation from the predictions derived from both ODT and classic accounts in the sociology of religion, we considered threat theory (Blalock 1967; Quillian 1995) as an alternative framework to link religious composition and the importance of religion. In short, threat theory suggests that, especially, majority group members might feel threatened by high shares of outgroup members, because this challenges their dominant status position. In classrooms with high shares of outgroup members, adolescents may increase their ingroup identification to counter perceived social identity threat (e.g. Munniksmä et al. 2017). Muslims are by far the largest religious outgroup for Christians in Europe and may therefore be the group that is potentially perceived as most threatening to non-Muslims. How important religion is to Christian students thus might be affected by the size of the Muslim outgroup rather than the share of religious ingroup members. In line with this idea, additional analyses indicate that religion was indeed more important to Christian students if they attended classrooms with high shares of Muslim youth.

2. Theory

2.1. Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT)

Religion is a key source of social identity, as it consists of norms, beliefs and values that organise how people understand their place in the world (Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman 2010). Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT) is a social-psychological theory that explicitly links group identification to the share of ingroup members in a given context (Brewer 1991; Leonardelli, Pickett, and Brewer 2010). The starting point of ODT is the assumption that people identify with social groups in order to satisfy two fundamental yet competing human needs (also see Hornsey and Jetten 2004). On the one hand, humans have a need for *inclusion*, which means that they desire to belong to a social group of people who are similar regarding one, or more, salient characteristics, such as sharing a religious affiliation, belonging to the same ethnic group, following the same political ideology, or listening to the same style of music. On the other hand, humans have a need for *differentiation*, which means that they desire to be distinct from others. For instance, if all people in a given context belong to the same religion or listen to the same style of music, these characteristics cannot function as a basis for a distinctive group identification, because group members do not stand out from the crowd.

The key prediction of ODT is that identification with a social group is strongest if group membership satisfies both the need for inclusion and the need for differentiation. As both needs reflect competing desires, maximising the satisfaction of identification with a given social group requires achieving an optimal balance between both needs. This balancing process crucially depends on the size of the respective group in a given social context. As mentioned above, if the vast majority of people in such a context share a certain characteristic, this characteristic hardly satisfies the need for differentiation, as it does not allow people to feel distinct. On the other hand, if only a small minority of people shares the respective characteristic, it in turn fails to meet the need of inclusion, as the group of people is too small to form a meaningfully inclusive group. Accordingly, satisfaction of

both needs is optimally balanced when a group is large enough to satisfy the need for inclusion but small enough to satisfy the need for differentiation.

In general, smaller groups are better suited to satisfy the need for differentiation, and larger groups are better suited to satisfy the need for inclusion (Hornsey and Jetten 2004; Leonardelli and Loyd 2016). The exact location of the point of ‘optimal distinctiveness’, however, cannot be derived from ODT. Instead, it depends on the context (Brewer 1991, 487; Leonardelli, Pickett, and Brewer 2010). Irrespective of the exact location of the point of OD, however, ODT predicts an *inverted U-shaped* relation between the relative group size and the strength of identification with the respective group. That is, identification should peak if some, but not all or even most, of the people belong to a group, but it should diminish for groups that are either too small or too large.

2.2. Past research and hypothesis

Many laboratory studies have provided experimental evidence in favour of the predicted curvilinear relation between relative group size and group identification (Badea et al. 2010; also see Leonardelli, Pickett, and Brewer 2010 for a review). While research in natural settings is much less frequent, the available evidence obtained from observational studies is also consistent with ODT. For example, Lau (1989) found the strength of Black identification to be strongest in neighbourhoods with 40–70 percent black residents, being less strong in neighbourhoods with either lower or higher shares. Likewise, Abrams (2009) found an inverse U-shaped relation between young adults’ music identities and the popularity of this music style in the population. Finally, Leszczensky et al. (2018) showed that adolescents’ ethnic pride peaked in classrooms in which co-ethnics made up about half of the student body, but levelled off if the share was either smaller or larger.

Concerning the importance of religion, research has not yet used ODT to explain variation across classrooms or schools. In fact, little research has considered the effects of school composition on religiosity in the first place. Going initially back to Durkheim (1951 [1897]), sociologists of religion have suggested that the more people are socially integrated into a group, the more likely they are to follow the norms, values, and beliefs of that group (Te Grotenhuis and Scheepers 2001). The religious homogeneity of a person’s environment has been described as a key indicator of social integration (Need and De Graaf 1996; Smits, Ruiter, and Van Tubergen 2010). Applying this reasoning to schools, De Hoon and Van Tubergen (2014) found adolescents’ own religiosity to be positively associated with the share of same-ethnicity classmates in three European countries. Van der Bracht et al. (2016, 2017) found a similar pattern in the Flemish part of Belgium using the share of ethnic minorities as an indicator of school composition. Unlike research based on ODT, these studies assumed a linear effect of classroom composition. In addition to potentially missing a curvilinear relation, De Hoon and Van Tubergen (2014) and Van der Bracht et al. (2016, 2017) further focused on peers’ ethnicity rather than religious affiliation, suggesting that, for example, the religiosity of a Turkish student is more strongly affected by his Turkish than by his non-Turkish class- or schoolmates. Following ODT, by contrast, we suggest that students’ religious identification is driven by the share of students who belong to the same religion rather than by the share of same-ethnicity classmates.

In sum, in contrast to more traditional accounts focusing on social integration pressures, based on ODT we expect an inverted U-shaped relation between students' importance of religion and the share of classmates who belong to the same religious group. Since the underlying needs for inclusion and differentiation are universal, this association should hold in different national contexts as well as for members of different ethno-religious groups (also see Leszczensky et al. 2018). At the same time, ODT only applies to religious importance if religion constitutes a salient component of respondents' social identity. While religion is a prime source of identity for immigrant-origin Muslim youth, it no longer matters much to many of their immigrant- and, especially, native-origin Christian peers. Therefore, the logic of optimal distinctiveness may apply more strongly to Muslim than to Christian youth. To avoid misleading conclusions about the validity of ODT that one would draw from the aggregation of groups that strongly differ in the extent to which religion is related to their social identity, we thus test our hypotheses not only for the pooled sample but in group-specific analyses as well.

3. Data and methods

3.1. Data

We use data from the project *Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries* (CILS4EU; Kalter et al. 2016). CILS4EU provides nationally representative samples of immigrant-origin children as well as native-origin reference groups in England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. We use the first wave of the CILS4EU data, which was collected during the academic year 2010–2011 and surveyed 15-year old students.¹

The youth completed a self-administered questionnaire within their school classes. Cognitive pretests and pilot studies in all four countries were conducted to develop standardized and comparable measures. To achieve a large sample of adolescents with an immigration background, schools with higher proportions of immigrant-origin students were oversampled. Within these schools, at least two school classes were randomly selected and all students in these classes were surveyed. In total, 18,716 students in 958 classes completed the survey.

In our analysis, we focus on native-origin Christians, immigrant-origin Christians, and immigrant-origin Muslims. We define youth as native-origin if they themselves as well as both of their parents were born in the survey country; and as immigrant-origin if they themselves or at least one of their parents were born abroad. Students were asked 'What is your religion?' They could tick off their religion on a list of the most common religious affiliations, but could also indicate that they had no religion or write down a religious group that was not listed. We excluded all students without religious affiliation. We also did not consider religious affiliations other than Christian and Muslim, as there are too few youth in numbers with such affiliations in our sample to be analysed separately. In addition, since less than 1 percent of the students in the sample indicated to be Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish, respectively, there is very little variation in terms of religious classroom composition for members of these small religious minorities, as most of them are the only one of their kind in their respective classroom. Since 97 percent of the Muslims in our sample are immigrant-origin, we also excluded the very few native-origin Muslim youth who also could not be analysed separately.

We further excluded students with missing information on our key variables defined below as well as students from classrooms in which less than 10 students participated in the survey, as it is questionable whether the limited amount of participating students from these classrooms accurately reflects its actual composition. Across all four countries, these restrictions leave us with 10,778 students, 5,416 of which were native-origin Christians (50%), 2,395 immigrant-origin Christians (22%), and 2,967 immigrant-origin Muslims (28%).

3.2. Measures

Our dependent variable is the individual *importance of religion*. After indicating their religion, students were asked ‘How important is religion to you?’ They could answer this question on a four-point scale with the possible answers of ‘Not at all important’, ‘Not very important’, ‘Fairly important’, and ‘Very important’. Earlier research has used this item both as a measure of religious salience (Jacob and Kalter 2013; Van der Bracht et al. 2016) and as an indicator of subjective religiosity (De Hoon and Van Tubergen 2014; Soehl 2017; Van der Bracht et al. 2017). Especially for Muslim youth, we consider religious importance as a reasonable proxy for the strength of identification with their religious group, because Islam is a minority religion in Europe that defines a source of identification that separates Muslims from non-Muslims (e.g. Verkuyten 2007).²

As mentioned above, we distinguish between native- and immigrant-origin Christians on the one hand and immigrant-Muslims on the other. We combine information about students’ ethnic background and their religious affiliation in order to reflect well-established baseline differences with respect to the average religiosity of native and immigrant Christians in Western Europe. *Native-origin Christians* are youth who indicated to be Christian and who were of native-origin, as defined above.³ *Immigrant-origin Christians* and *immigrant-origin Muslims* are youth with a migration background who indicated to be Christian or Muslim, respectively.

The key independent variable is the *share of classmates with the same religion*. We calculated the respective number considering all students in the classroom, including those without religious affiliation. In contrast to our definition of different groups above, we did *not* distinguish between native- and immigrant-origin youth. Since religion spans ethnic boundaries, it is a potential marker of joint identity for students even if they have different ethnic backgrounds. Accordingly, for both native- and immigrant-origin Christians, the variable captures the percentage of fellow Christian students, irrespective of how many of these were of native- or immigrant-descent. Likewise, for immigrant-origin Muslims the variable captures the percentage of fellow Muslim classmates, including the (very few) of them who were of native-origin.

4. Results

4.1. How important is religion to European youth?

To put our analysis into perspective, Figure 1 illustrates how important religion was to native- and immigrant-origin Christian as well as to immigrant-origin Muslim youth in Europe. Across all four countries, immigrant-origin Muslim youth rated religion

Figure 1. Importance of religion in England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden ($n = 10,820$). Source: CILS4EU, wave 1 v1.2.0, weighted. 95% confidence intervals.

between ‘fairly’ and ‘very’ important to them, while Christian immigrant-origin youth considered religion much less but still somewhat important. By contrast, religion was ‘not very important’ to most native-origin Christian youth. This basic pattern not only resembles earlier findings (Jacob and Kalter 2013; Van Tubergen and Sindradóttir 2011), it also replicates in each of the individual countries. This consistency across the four countries justifies a joint analysis.

Table 1 sums up the share of classmates with the same religion for native- and immigrant-origin Christian as well as for immigrant-origin Muslim youth. The table conveys three important messages. First, reflecting basic demographics in the four countries, the share of classmates with the same religion differed considerably between Christian and Muslim youth. Whereas Christian students on average attended classrooms in which more than half of their classmates shared their religious affiliation, the average Muslim student attended a classroom in which roughly every fourth classmate also was Muslim. Second, the share of fellow Christian classmates was slightly higher for native- than for immigrant-origin Christians. This is because native-origin youth attended schools that were somewhat less religiously diverse than those attended by their immigrant-origin peers. Finally, jointly considering the average share of classmates with the same religion of the different groups indicates that a considerable amount of students in the four countries was neither Christian nor Muslim. However, other religious affiliations were

Table 1. Summary statistics of the share of classmates with the same religion ($n = 10,820$).

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Native-origin Christian	59.14	(22.51)	0	96.67
Immigrant-origin Christian	55.18	(23.91)	0	96.67
Immigrant-origin Muslim	27.19	(23.56)	0	95.00

Source: CILS4EU, wave 1 v1.2.0, pooled sample across all four countries using sampling weights.

Table 2. Share of classmates with the same religion for native-origin Christian, immigrant-origin Christian, and immigrant-origin Muslim students.

Classmates with the same religion	Native-origin Christian	Immigrant-origin Christian	Immigrant-origin Muslim
0–10%	1%	2%	30%
11–20%	4%	7%	15%
21–30%	6%	8%	15%
31–40%	11%	11%	14%
41–50%	14%	11%	8%
51–60%	12%	15%	6%
61–70%	14%	12%	4%
71–80%	14%	13%	3%
81–90%	19%	17%	4%
90–100%	5%	4%	1%

Source: CILS4EU, wave 1 v1.2.0, pooled sample across all four countries using sampling weights.

rather rare, with only about 1 percent or less of the students being Buddhists, Hindu, or Jewish, respectively. Instead, almost a third of the students did explicitly indicate *not* to belong to any religious group.

Table 2 further contextualises the analysis, showing that almost one third of Muslim youth attended classrooms in which Muslims made up less than 10% of the classroom and only a small minority of Muslim youth were in classrooms with a Muslim majority. By contrast, more than half of the Christian students attended classrooms in which more than half of their classmates were also Christian.

4.2. Test of hypotheses derived from ODT

To test our hypothesis about the inverted U-shaped relation between the importance of religion and the share of co-religionists we estimate a random effects multilevel model (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; Snijders and Bosker 2012), which accounts for clustering of the students in school classes. Our model includes the share of classmates with the same religion as well as its quadratic term in order to account for the expected nonlinearity. The model is estimated for the pooled sample of all four countries, including country dummies to control for baseline differences across countries. For similar reasons, gender is also controlled for, as is being a native-origin Christian, an immigrant-origin Christian, or an immigrant-origin Muslim. The full regression table is shown in the appendix (Table A1).

As Figure 2 illustrates, not distinguishing between ethno-religious groups, we found that there was almost no association between the share of classmates with the same religion and the individual importance of religion. In other words, averaged across Christian and Muslim students, religious classroom composition did not seem to have been related to how important religion was to adolescents.

So far, however, the analysis does not distinguish between different groups, thus assuming that the relation between classroom composition and religiosity is the same for Christians and Muslims. But as we saw earlier, religion was much more important to the average Muslim youth than to the average Christian one, and also more important to immigrant-origin Christians than to native-origin ones. This may also affect how much identification with the religious group satisfies the needs for belonging and distinctiveness for members of these groups, and how sensitively satisfaction of these needs responds the relative size of the respective ingroup. The aggregated analysis might thus mask important differences between ethno-religious groups.

Figure 2. Importance of religion and the share of classmates with the same religious affiliation results from a multi-level model for the pooled sample in four European countries ($n = 10,778$). Source: CILS4EU, wave 1, weighted. 95% confidence intervals. The model includes gender, survey country, and religious group.

In a next step, we therefore differentiate in our analysis between different ethno-religious groups. We do so by creating interaction effects between the respective group dummies and the linear and squared religious classroom composition terms. The full model again is reported in the appendix (Table A2).⁴

Figure 3 shows remarkable differences between the three groups. For Muslim youth the importance of religion was related to the percentage of classmates with the same religion in an inverted U-shaped way. For them, the importance of religion peaked in classrooms in which 67 percent of their classmates were also Muslim.⁵ Substantively, the association between religious classroom composition and importance of religion appears to be rather moderate, as even in classrooms with a small Muslim minority or, empirically less often, a large Muslim majority, Muslims students still reported religion to be fairly important to them. Yet the effect is still important given that even at this high average level of Muslim religiosity, variation in classroom composition is associated with discernable changes in the importance of religion. The pattern shown in Figure 3 is consistent with the expectation derived from ODT, with the point of optimal distinctiveness being reached if two thirds of the students were Muslims.

In contrast, neither for immigrant- nor for native-origin youth the identified pattern lends support for ODT. For immigrant-origin Christians, the importance of religion tended to linearly but modestly decline with rising shares of Christian classmates. By contrast, for native-origin Christians the association resembles a U-shape, with the importance of religion tending to have peaked in classrooms in which Christians were either the vast minority or majority. Both associations, however, are not statistically significant (as seen in Table A2 in the appendix). In sum, the evidence for ODT

Figure 3. Importance of religion and the share of classmates with the same religious affiliation results from a multi-level model for the pooled sample in four European countries ($n = 10,778$). Source: CILS4EU, wave 1 v1.2.0, weighted. 95% confidence intervals. The model includes gender and survey country.

therefore is mixed, as only for Muslim youth the association of the importance of religion and the percentage of classmates of the same religion followed the predicted inverted U-shaped relation.

4.3. How robust are these findings?

We report additional tests in order to assess the robustness of our findings. First, we considered the possibility that the effects of religious composition might differ across public schools and schools with religious affiliation or orientation (in the following called ‘religious schools’ for brevity). For example, students from families in which religion plays an important role might prefer religious to public schools, thus self-selecting themselves into the former. In all countries but Sweden, we were able to distinguish between religious and non-religious schools. Whereas only six of the 145 German schools in the sample were religious, every fifth English and half of the Dutch students in the sample attended a religious school. Since we do not have information on (religious) school policies, we have no possibility of assessing how much religion actually mattered in the schools in the sample. With this limitation in mind, to account for possible selection bias we reestimated the model from Figure 3 excluding religious schools. As shown in Figure A1 in the appendix, the results are very similar to those for all schools in Figure 3. We also reestimated the model from Figure 3 adding a dummy variable that distinguishes between public and religious schools; the results (available upon request) also are very similar to the initial model, and the quadratic term in the model for Muslim students is still negative and statistically significant. We therefore conclude that the results are not mainly driven by self-selection into public or religious schools.

As a second robustness check, we reestimated the model from [Figure 3](#) separately for each of the four individual countries (see Figures A2 – A5 in the appendix). Since the sample sizes of the split samples are smaller, uncertainty in the estimation increases as reflected by wider confidence intervals in the country-specific figures. Still, the curvilinear relation of the importance of religion and the percentage of classmates of the same religion for Muslim youth that we observed in the pooled sample exists in each of the individual countries. For Christian students, there is more variation across countries, which might reflect different historical relationships between the (Christian) church and state among the four countries.⁶

4.4. How to explain the pattern for Christian youth?

In the final step of the analysis, we address the result for Christian youth, which was inconsistent with the core prediction of ODT. How to explain this deviation? We argue that this finding might partly reflect the fact that the share of Christian students identified in the data less accurately resembles the social perceptions, and therefore realities, in the classrooms under study than does the share of Muslim students.

For at least two reasons Muslim students may have been much more visible as a religious group in classrooms than their Christian peers. First, as seen earlier, Muslim youth attached much more importance to religion than their non-Muslim classmates did. As a consequence, for both Muslim and non-Muslim classmates it might be easier to correctly identify the religion of Muslim than the religion of Christian classmates. By contrast, doing so might be much more difficult for Christians, as many of them do not attach much importance to religion, thus making it more difficult to distinguish them from non-religious classmates. Second, unlike Christianity, Islam is a minority religion in each of the four countries under study. Minority group membership is generally more salient than majority group membership, and minority group members therefore are generally more aware of their group membership and its implications than majority group members are (Phinney 1996; Smith 1991). Majority group members' perceptions might further amplify this tendency. For example, there is evidence that native German students classify all Muslim classmates as highly religious Muslims, irrespectively of whether or not those Muslim classmates actually feel this way (Möller et al. 2016, 275ff.).

These differences in the perception of Muslims and Christians might be further amplified by the fact that one third of the students did indicate *not* to belong to any religious group. Since three out of four of these students were of native-origin, the vast majority of them descend from Christian rather than Muslim families. While the share of Muslim classmates arguably quite accurately captures the share of Muslim students, the share of Christian students therefore might be biased, as a considerable amount of students stem from Christian families but not belong to this religion anymore.

Taken together, while the share of Muslim students identified in the data should accurately reflect the social reality in the classrooms under study, it is less certain whether this is also true for the (perceived) share of Christian students. While both shares are calculated based on students' self-declared religious affiliation, this information simply might both be much more accurate and matter more in case of Muslim as compared to Christian students.

Building on this argument, theories of threat and competition (Blalock 1967; Quillian 1995; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002) offer an alternative way to conceptualise the relationship of importance of religion and classroom composition. These theories maintain that majority group members identify more strongly with their ingroup when they encounter higher shares of minority group members, because this threatens their status of being the dominant group as well as their related social identity (e.g. Moody 2001; Munniksma et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2016; Vermeij, van Duijn, and Baerveldt 2009). Evidence in favour of this argument has been found in studies on attitudes towards Muslims in Europe (e.g. Savelkoul et al. 2011; Velasco González et al. 2008).

We therefore hypothesise that religion is more important to Christian youth if they attend classrooms with higher shares of Muslim peers. We tested this expectation by reestimating the model using the share of Muslim classmates instead of classmates with the same religion. In line with the theoretical expectation, Figure 4 shows that indeed for both immigrant- and native-origin Christian youth religion was more important in classrooms with higher shares of Muslims. Also consistent with the threat argument, this association was more pronounced for native-origin Christians, which might reflect that they felt more threatened by Muslims than did immigrant-origin Christians. In fact, whereas religion was ‘not very important’ to native-origin Christians in classrooms up to a share of 50 percent Muslims, the importance of religion for this group steeply increased if the share of Muslims passed this threshold. While the uncertainty of the estimation also rises, reflecting that few native-origin Christian students attended classrooms that were numerically dominated by Muslims, in classrooms in which Muslims made up the clear majority of the student body, religion actually was ‘fairly important’ to their Christian peers as well. In combination with the inverted U-shaped association for

Figure 4. Muslim classmates and individual religiosity results from a multi-level model for the pooled sample in four European countries ($n = 10,778$). Source: CILS4EU, wave 1 v1.2.0, weighted. 95% confidence intervals. The model includes gender and survey country.

Muslim youth, in such classrooms the importance of religion did not differ anymore among the ethno-religious groups.⁷

5. Discussion

Western European classrooms nowadays are more and more attended by youth with different religious affiliations. Yet the importance of religion differs between ethno-religious groups, with many native-origin Christians attaching less importance to religion than their immigrant-origin Christian and, especially, their Muslim peers. Acknowledging that religion is an important source of social identification and that the strength of ingroup identification depends on the context, this study examined whether and how religious classroom composition is linked to the importance adolescents attach to religion. Based on Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT; Brewer 1991), we expected an inverted U-shaped relation, as classrooms with either too few or too many classmates of the same religion may fail to optimally satisfy the combined needs for inclusion and differentiation.

Our analysis of the large-scale CILS4EU survey data for adolescents in England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden reveal important group differences. On the one hand, our findings for Muslim youth are consistent with ODT. The importance Muslim youth attached to religion peaked in classrooms with about two third of Muslims, but was lower in classrooms with either lower or higher shares.

On the other hand, no such relation was found for either native- or immigrant-origin Christian youth. Since this finding was at odds with the expectation derived from ODT, we considered threat theory (Blalock 1967; Quillian 1995; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002) as an alternative framework to understand the link between religious classroom composition and the importance of religion. For European Christians, Muslims constitute the largest religious outgroup. Native- and immigrant-origin Christian students might attach more importance to their religion if they attend classrooms with high shares of Muslims, because this may be perceived as threatening to their status as the dominant group. Additional analyses were consistent with this reasoning, showing that religion was indeed more important to Christian youth who attended classrooms with higher shares of Muslim peers. This finding held for both native- and immigrant-origin Christians.

One main take-away from our study is that the relation between religious classroom composition and the importance of religion differs among religious groups. At the same time, for none of the groups we examined we found stronger religious identification in classrooms with larger shares of co-religious peers, as more traditional approaches rooting in social integration theories would suggest (e.g. Need and De Graaf 1996; Te Grotenhuis and Scheepers 2001).

While Muslim youth generally attached more importance to religion than their Christian peers did, we found variation dependent on religious classroom composition that was consistent with Optimal Distinctiveness Theory. In this respect, our study adds to earlier research that identified a curvilinear relation between the strength of ethnic identification and the share of same-ethnic classmates in Dutch schools (Leszczensky et al. 2018).

For native- and immigrant-origin Christian youth, however, the share of Muslim rather than of fellow Christian students mattered more for how important religion was to them. This finding is in line with research showing that native students in the Flemish part of

Belgium are more religious in schools with high shares of ethnic minority students (Van der Bracht et al. 2016). We offered threat theory as a potential explanation for this association, arguing that Christian students may perceive high shares of Muslim classmates as threatening their own status, thus reacting with increased identification with their religious ingroup.

This reasoning is based on the assumption that Muslim students were more visible as a religious group in classrooms than Christian students. For one thing, religion was more important to the average Muslim than to the average Christian student, suggesting that the religion of Muslim classmates was more salient in classrooms than the one of Christian classmates. For another, about one third of the students in the CILS4EU data indicated *not* to belong to any religious group. The vast majority of these nonreligious students was of native-origin, suggesting that they descend from Christian rather than Muslim families. It thus seems reasonable to suspect that some of these students might be Christians (though not religious ones), which implies that the share of Christian classmates might have been underestimated.

For many Christians in Europe, religion is a potential but probably not the most important source of identity. Especially for native-origin youth, ethnic (e.g. English, German, Dutch, or Swedish) identification may be a more crucial identity than religion. This may also be a reason why, in European classrooms, ODT better describes the pattern for Muslim than for Christian youth. ODT further only applies to the CILS4EU data if the respondents' perceived importance of religion is clearly related to religious identification, a link that is more evident for Muslim youth living in societies numerically dominated by non-Muslims. A plethora of research shows that for many European Muslims religious identification is total rather than optional, both because of strong ingroup norms and because of exclusion and ascription by the native population (e.g. Canan and Foroutan 2016; Martinović and Verkuyten 2012; Van Heelsun and Koomen 2016; Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007). These differences may thus help to understand why the results for Muslim youth match the prediction derived from Optimal Distinctiveness Theory better than the ones for Christian youth.

One limitation of our study is the measurement of the importance of religion. While many other studies have used the same item we relied on as an indicator of religiosity or religious salience (e.g. De Hoon and Van Tubergen 2014; Jacob and Kalter 2013; Soehl 2017; Van der Bracht et al. 2016, 2017), a more fine-grained measure would be desirable for future research. Since most Muslim youth in our sample indicated religion to be very important to them, ceiling effects cannot be ruled out, even though we obtained similar results using frequency of prayer as an alternative measure. In addition, the CILS4EU measure did not explicitly ask about the importance of students' *own* religion. Given that the preceding question in the questionnaire inquired about students' own religious group, it is plausible that most students thought of their own religion when answering the question about the importance of religion. Especially for Muslims, religious importance further should be linked to stronger religious group identification, as Islam is a minority religion in Europe. Given that the link between religious importance and religious identity is less straightforward for Christians in Europe, however, a more fine-grained measure that rules out the possibility that students answered the question in a more general way would be desirable.

The cross-sectional nature of our research further limits the possibility to test the causal explanations suggested by the two main theories we apply. Previous work (Leszczensky et al. 2018) has found that even if the curvilinear association between relative size of an ethnic ingroup and strength of ethnic identification predicted by ODT showed in a cross-sectional analysis, changes in ethnic classroom composition were not consistently related to corresponding changes in ethnic identification over time. Regarding threat theory, despite much cross-sectional evidence of an association between outgroup size and perceived threat, a recent longitudinal study on a large-scale neighbourhood sample similarly failed to find an association over time (Laméris 2018, 55). Further longitudinal studies are also needed because at least for the results we found for Christians alternative causal explanations can be offered. Specifically, our results do not exclude the possibility that in school classes with a high proportion of Muslims, there may also be social influence effects between different religious groups in the sense that Christian students may have adjusted their religiosity towards that of their Muslim peers.

Finally, our study points to national differences in the religious identification of Christian youth that future research could further delve into. With the exception of native-origin Christians in England, we found that for Christian youth the association between share of co-religionists and importance attached to religion differed from the inverted U-shaped pattern predicted by ODT. This variation may reflect country-specific, historically grown differences in the relation between church and state, and the role of religion in lives of young people. While elaborating and testing potential explanations of these differences is beyond the scope of our study, we hope that respective future research benefits from applying the theoretical and methodological tools we offered.

Notwithstanding these potential limitations and the need for further research, our results point to important societal implications of the dynamics of religious identities, as they indicate that the salience of both Muslim and Christian adolescents' religious identity is shaped by the share of Muslims in schools. This is particularly relevant against the background of the arrival of large numbers of refugees from Muslim-majority countries in recent years. Our analyses point to the possibility that a growing Muslim population may further increase how important religion is to both Muslim and Christian youth, but for different reasons. In most of the schools that we studied, for Muslim youth an increasing share of Muslim students would have shifted the classroom closer to the point of optimal distinctiveness, thus resulting in stronger ingroup identification. At the same time, growing numbers of Muslim students may also strengthen Christian students' religious identity, but for them the reason our analyses suggest would be increasing perceptions of threat by a numerically strong and salient religious outgroup. Taken together, increasing numbers of Muslims in Europe could result in more religious identification of both Christian and Muslim youth, with the possible consequence of a strengthening of religious boundaries. We believe that this possibility merits further research on the relation between religious group composition and religious identification.

Notes

1. We do not make use further waves of the CILS4EU data, because many students already had left school after the first wave. For example, almost one third of the German sample left school between wave 1 and 2. This especially applied to immigrant-origin youth, as these

are overrepresented in lower educational tracks, thus resulting in a considerable loss of cases for two of our three ethno-religious groups.

2. The link between religious importance and religious identity is less clear for Christians, because, in the European context, being a Christian is not (necessarily) defined in opposition to mainstream culture, which is (at least historically) Christian. We address this point in more detail later in the paper when discussing differences in results between Muslims and Christians.
3. In Germany and the Netherlands, students could indicate whether they were Protestant or Catholic. Since this distinction was not made in England and Sweden, like other studies (e.g. Jacob and Kalter 2013), we lump Protestant and Catholic students into one category.
4. The interaction effect of belonging to an ethno-religious group and religious classroom composition is a cross-level interaction. Following the recommendation by Heisig and Schaeffer (2019), we included a random slope for the lower-level variable (i.e. ethno-religious group membership). This applies to all models reported here that contain cross-level interactions.
5. The maximum of the curve is calculated based on a separate model for Muslims by: $-(\text{Estimate of main effect of classmates with the same religion}/(2*(-\text{quadratic term})))$. The model reported in Table A2 in the appendix also shows that the interaction term between being a Muslim and the squared share of classmates with the same religion is positive and statistically significant, indicating that the relationship is curvilinear.
6. We conducted several further robustness checks that we consider as less central to our main argument than those reported above. Since they also turned out to not affect core-results, we summarize them here only briefly. First, given that our dependent variable is not strictly metric, we also estimated multilevel ordered logistic regression models. Since the results are very similar to those reported in Figure 3, we retained the intuitively more appealing representation of results from OLS regressions. Second, we also estimated models with additional control variables, such as socio-economic status of students' parents at the individual level, or the share of immigrants at the classroom level. Again, the findings reported above were robust to these alternative specifications. Third, given that religion was so important to Muslim youth, we turned to frequency of prayer as an alternative measure of religiosity that is less prone to ceiling effects because it is more evenly distributed. The results again were very similar to the ones shown in Figure 3, suggesting that ceiling effects are not a major threat to our conclusions. We refrained from presenting the results for praying more prominently, because this measure of religious practice is conceptually different from subjective importance attached to religion. Students may consider religion to be very important but still not pray frequently, and unlike the importance of religion, it is difficult to compare levels of praying across groups. For one thing, group norms differ (e.g. Muslims are expected to pray five times a day but Christians are not). For another, unlike subjective measures of religiosity (such as religious importance), measures of religious practice such as praying partly depend on opportunities to do so (e.g. a room for praying in school or the availability of a Church/Mosque in one's neighborhood).
7. We also estimated the model of Figure 4 while controlling for socio-economic status of students' parents. As before, this did not change the results.

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