

Protestantism still matters when it comes to education, study shows

25 September 2018, by Andy Dunne



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An 'enduring historical legacy' of Protestant religion is still having a significant, positive impact on secondary school enrolment rates around the world, according to the results of a new international study from a researcher at the University of Bath (UK).

Despite nearly two centuries of secularization and a dramatic expansion of government-provided secondary [education](#) since the mid-20th century in many countries around the world, the research by Dr. Horst Feldmann—just published in the journal *Comparative Sociology*—finds that in countries with a historical legacy of Protestantism more young people are attending secondary school.

Looking at data from 147 countries—both from developed and developing countries—the paper studies the influence of historical as well as contemporary Protestantism on education in recent years—specifically the period from 1975 to 2010.

At the start of the Reformation in 1517, initiated by Martin Luther, Protestantism made strenuous efforts to expand schooling. Luther demanded

compulsory elementary education for boys and girls from all social classes. Other German Protestants soon developed a comprehensive system of schooling, including a system of secondary education. The German reforms quickly became a blueprint for education across many other countries in western and northern Europe.

Britain exported Protestantism to its colonies around the globe, which profoundly shaped their educational systems as well. Here too, Protestants introduced mass education, including formal education for women as well as for marginalized groups, including slaves. The Protestant missionaries in the British colonies were also the first to provide post-primary education. As a result of these reforms, school enrolment rates were substantially higher than in colonies of, for example, Spain and France.

However, from the 19th century Protestantism's influence on schooling had strongly waned—first in traditionally Protestant countries and, further to decolonization, in Britain's former colonies. School systems were secularized and almost completely taken over by the state.

Still, Dr. Feldmann argues that Protestantism's original influence on education and schooling has become part of the national culture in traditionally Protestant countries and in several former British colonies such as Australia and the United States.

His statistical analysis finds that countries with larger Protestant population shares in 1900 had higher secondary school enrolment rates over the years 1975 to 2010. For example, the Nordic countries have both the highest historical Protestant population shares and some of the highest contemporary enrolment rates.

Dr. Feldmann statistically controlled for other factors that determine school enrolment rates, such as income per person and demographic factors, to

eliminate their effects.

He explains: "In contrast to what many might expect, the Protestant legacy has an enduring effect on secondary schooling—in spite of almost 200 years of secularization.

"This study is the first to show that the historically positive effect of Protestantism on schooling is still noticeable today.

"It also shows that this is not only the case in a few traditionally Protestant countries. Rather the historically positive effect of Protestantism on schooling is a global phenomenon."

Dr. Feldmann's study suggests that the magnitude of the effect is small. Moreover, it indicates that Protestantism's traditional influence on schooling has diminished over time and that contemporary Protestantism, in contrast to historical Protestantism, does not affect schooling.

More information: *Comparative Sociology* ,
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Provided by University of Bath

APA citation: Protestantism still matters when it comes to education, study shows (2018, September 25) retrieved 23 September 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-09-protestantism.html>

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