

Individual religiosity and interpersonal trust in a Catholic country. The case of Italy ©

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1. The problem

Starting from Tocqueville (1954 [1862]) and Durkheim (1951 [1897], 1997 [1912]), religion has been considered one of the most important sources of social cohesion. More recently, since “social capital” has become one of the most widely researched and discussed concept in the social sciences, the role of religion in fostering social cohesion and providing other collective goods received new attention scholars. For example, Robert Putnam observed that in the United States “religious involvement is an especially strong predictor of volunteering and philanthropy” and that “religiosity rivals education as a powerful correlate of most forms of civic engagement” (2000: 67). Fukuyama (1995, 1999, 2000) analysed the role of different religions (Protestantism, Catholicism, Confucianism) in shaping different cultures of trust (particularly, the “radius” of trust, i.e. the attitude to trust only family members or to trust also other members of society in general). In an extensive review of the literature on the effects of religion on social life, Traunmüller found that many studies have dealt with the impact of religion on civic engagement and social participation in voluntary associations, concluding that “while results differ in details, the common theme is that religion has a positive effect on both associational membership and civic engagement, thus contributing to the common good” (Traunmüller 2011). However, fewer studies have addressed the issue of religion’s influence on another feature of social capital, namely interpersonal trust (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Welch *et al.* 2004). Some scholars – perhaps overstating their case – came even to the conclusion that “religion has until recently remained relatively unexplored in the trust literature and, indeed, in economics and political science overall” (Berggren and Bjørnskov 2011)¹.

Actually, even before the explosion of the social capital stream of studies, scholars put the relation between trust and religion under examination from different academic perspectives. Rotter (1967), for instance, created a scale to measure trust and found that religious membership had a positive effect on this measure. In his study, agnostics and atheists had a lower level on the trust scale than those who profess a religion (in this study, Jewish had the highest level of trust). On the contrary, other studies pointed out a possible negative effect of religion on trust: for example, according to

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Wrightsmann (1974) those who received fundamentalist religious teachings recorded lower level of trust.

A good deal of studies was carried out especially after Robert Putnam published *Making democracy work* (1993), turning social capital into a prominent topic in social science literature. According to Putnam (2000: 19), “social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense, social capital is closely related to what some have called ‘civic virtue’”. After this study many other scholars recognized trust as an important social phenomenon that could promote economic development (Knack and Keefer 1997; Zak and Knack 2001; Berggren et al. 2008), educational attainment (Bjørnskov, 2009; Papagapitos and Riley 2009), social cohesion and participation, low levels of crime (Halpern 2001; Kaariainen and Siren 2011), good democratic performance and stability (Knack 2002; Bjørnskov 2010; Uslaner 2003), even health and longevity (Barefoot *et al.* 1998). In more general terms, trust is considered a resource that facilitates cooperation and reduces transaction costs in social relationships (Freitag and Traunmüller 2009; Fukuyama 1995; Stolle 2002; Uslaner 2002).

These findings prompted a new interest in trust and its determinants, religion among them. The evidence from the empirical studies about the relation between religion and trust is mixed: some of them find a positive relation between religion and trust, while others detect a negative relation between these variables. Indeed, no conclusive evidence could be found. It has been suggested that this lack of uniformity and convergence in the results obtained “can, to a large degree, be explained by differences in the kind of data used, the choice of samples, the measures and types of religion under study and the methodologies that have been applied” (Berggren and Bjørnskov 2011: 460).

The *positive* influence of religion on trust has been ascribed to two different key features of religion. First of all, its teachings. As Berggren and Bjørnskov (2011: 461-2) put it, many religions:

“Urge their followers to adhere to an ethics of reciprocity and generosity towards others. In Judaism, through Hillel (‘Do not do to others what would be hateful if done to you’), and in Christianity, through Luke 6:31 (‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’), this is embedded in the Golden Rule. Likewise, in Islam, Mohammed’s farewell sermon includes the assertion ‘Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you’. Religion may, in this way, make use of or stimulate social or altruistic preferences [...]. Furthermore, religions often prohibit socially destructive behaviour, such as cheating or stealing. To the extent that people believe that religious persons adhere to these teachings, such persons are probably perceived as trust worthier, which may in turn induce trust. It is not only the case that religions urge their followers to follow these teachings – the teachings may be internalized, not least due to conscious efforts to influence children, but are in any case generally enforced, which should make religious people seem even more trustworthy. [...] For example, many

religious groups uphold strict behavioural codes and discipline and ostracize those who break them [...] and people who behave badly may end up in hell or be reborn as some being with lower consciousness”.

Secondly, religious membership entails repeated interactions among people and this is a feature that – as observed by many studies – fosters the development of trust relations. It is the same “mechanism” that Tocqueville found observing participation in voluntary associations. As Putnam explains it, “religiously active men and women learn to give speeches, run meetings, manage disagreements, and bear administrative responsibility. They also befriend others who are in turn likely to recruit them into other forms of community activity. In part for these reasons, churchgoers are substantially more likely to be involved in secular organizations, to vote and participate politically in other ways, and to have deeper informal social connections” (2000: 66).

On the opposite side, it has been observed that religion might have a *negative* impact on trust. As we mentioned, religious teachings might push believers and devotees to trust other people, but this trust could be restricted only to other members of the same religious community. In other words, religion could further trust in people who are religiously similar to “us”, while creating strong boundaries and separation vis-à-vis people of other religions and the non-religious.

This overlaps with a key conceptual distinction in the social capital literature between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital. For this reason, it could be postulated that religion (as in the case of mafia or familistic cultures) is a source of *bonding* social capital rather than of *bridging* one. Indeed, some scholars found that religious people are more intolerant than non-religious people towards others of different background than themselves (Guiso *et al.* 2003). Conservative and fundamentalist religious groups are often cited as typical examples of the “dark side” of social capital: in these groups there are both high level of in-group trust and high level of distrust toward people who does not belong to it (Welch *et al.* 2004). In addition, minority religious groups could “define themselves through a symbolic demarcation from the majority and therefore are less trusting of people in general. Of course, the distrust of religious minorities may also be due to the perceived or actual discrimination of one’s own religious group by the majority society” (Traunmüller 2011). Religiosity could affect negatively trust “through its effects on the non-religious, who may react to increased religiosity in a way that reduces social trust. The non-religious may consider the religious strange or different, and they may think that they behave well only so long as they expect to get social or divine rewards for doing so, i.e., that honest behaviour is not rooted in moral so much as in self-interested motives” (Berggren and Bjornskov 2011).

As this brief summary points out, the relation between religion and trust is a multifaceted one. The relation (both positive and negative) could be explained 1) on a “normative” basis, emphasizing the

importance of individual religious beliefs and norms, and/or 2) on a “structural” basis, stressing the importance of ties and interactions between members of a religious community.

The first explanation rests on the assumption that trust in other people has its basis in moral beliefs and in beliefs about human nature. Indeed, one of the most important features of every religion is the teachings about human nature and morality. For these reasons, we can expect that each religion, being based on a different moral-normative system, has a different impact on the propensity of its members to trust or distrust other people.

The second explanation is grounded in the idea that social ties embodied in religious communities are at least as important as religious beliefs:

“Religiously involved people seem simply to know more people. One intriguing survey that asked people to enumerate all individuals with whom they had a face-to-face conversation in the course of the day found that religious attendance was the most powerful predictor of the number of one’s daily personal encounters” (Putnam 2000: 67).

In a similar vein, Fukuyama underlines that trust “arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms” (1995)².

2. *What is social trust?*

“Social trust” is a multidimensional phenomenon. Many researchers have given definitions of it and the label “trust” has sometimes been used – as noted by Morrone *et al.* (2009) – “to describe a variety of very different phenomena, such as morality, empathy, reciprocity, civility, respect, solidarity, tolerance and fraternity”. Nonetheless, most of the prevailing definitions of social trust are based on individual expectations about the behaviour of others. Examples of this kind of definition are those by Sarageldin and Dasgupta (2001), who depicted trust as “the expectation of one person about the action of others that *affects the person's choice*”; or by Gambetta, who introduced the concept of subjective probability, saying that “when we say we trust someone or that someone is trustworthy, we implicitly mean that the probability that he will perform an action that is beneficial or at least not detrimental to us is high enough for us to consider engaging in some form of cooperation with him” (1988: 217).

Social – or interpersonal trust - is usually measured through the standard question developed sixty years ago by Morris Rosenberg (1957: 26), which asks: “Generally speaking, would you say that

most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?”³. This is a formulation very widely used (for example in the World/European Values Survey or the US General Social Survey). Its presence in survey questionnaires all over the world allows comparisons across countries and times.

However, this operationalization of the concept of interpersonal trust has been considered not fully satisfactory. Indeed, if interpersonal trust can be formally defined as “A trusts B to do X” (Hardin 2004)⁴, the Rosenberg question fails in explicitly identifying who is B (a friend, a neighbour or a stranger) and in specifying the type of behaviour (X) expected from them (Morrone *et al.* 2009: 13). Other operationalisations have been suggested in order to overcome these shortcomings. One of them – used in some international studies (such as the 2007 wave of the Gallup World Poll) – is the so-called *wallet question*, which identifies X (the return of a lost wallet) and B (e.g. a neighbour, a stranger or the police).

Soroka, Helliwell and Johnston (2007), among others, studied the relations between the two operationalisations and conclude that the ‘general question’ can be regarded “as relating to Uslaner’s ‘moralistic trust’, while the wallet questions refer to ‘strategic trust’”. They add that the Rosenberg question “accepts ambiguity about the reference group the respondent might have in mind. This might invite responses that describe what persons think they *should* think rather than what they actually *do* think” (Soroka *et al.* 2007: 100). In other words, while the Rosenberg question may reflect cultural attitudes, the *wallet question* is based upon experience and seems more plausible as an indicator of the respondent’s expectations and of the trustfulness in others that he or she is likely to exhibit in daily interactions (Morrone *et al.* 2009).

In the literature on trust a distinction is drawn between two radically different types of trust: *thick* and *thin* trust. *Thick* trust refers to trust embedded in personal relationships that are strong and frequent (the person to trust is a friend, a relative or a neighbour). It is a form of trust based on personal experience. On the other hand, *thin* trust –or generalized trust – “extends the radius of trust beyond the roster of people whom we can know personally” (Putnam 2000: 136). It is based more on community norms than on personal experience. It can be viewed “as a ‘standing decision’ to give most people – even those whom one does not know from direct experience – the benefit of the doubt” (Rahn and Transue 1989: 545).

3. Research questions.

As noted by Traunmüller, so far the studies on the relation between religion and trust have almost exclusively explored the context of the United States⁵. Therefore, the generalizability of the relation between religion and trust need to systematically explore others social and cultural contexts. For this reason, our study focused on Italy can make an original contribution to this line of inquiry.

A further remark. If we consider religion's effects as a standing-alone phenomenon, we run the risk of moving the discussion upon an ideological plane. In fact, many studies seem to forget the quite obvious fact that religion can be lived out in deeply different ways by individuals and therefore can produce greatly different experiences. Any discussion about religion's effects should indeed take into account the social, cultural and institutional context one is dealing with and the modes in which religion is experienced. Therefore, it is necessary to abandon a generic and unified vision of religion itself. Our case study concerns a country (Italy) with a dominant and long-standing religious tradition and with a strongly institutionalized church. Actually, with reference to this country, the role of religion in creating and nurturing trust relations, or, on the contrary, in destroying or hindering them, has been much debated. According to the influential conclusion by Putnam, "organized religion, at least in Catholic Italy, is an alternative to the civic community, not a part of it" (1993: 107). To quote again Putnam, "at the regional level, all manifestations of religiosity and clericalism – attendance at Mass, religious (as opposed to civil) marriages, rejection of divorce, expressions of religious identity in surveys – are negatively correlated with civic engagement" and "at the individual level, too, religious sentiments and civic engagement seem to be mutually incompatible" (1993: 107).

The debate about these issues focused mainly on the role of the Church as an institution rather than addressing the explanation of behaviour and attitudes of individual members of the Catholic community. This vision of the role of the Church in Italian history reflects a long tradition of scholarship by historians, who see Catholicism and the presence of the Pope as the main factors of the delay of Italian modernization. This inverse relation between religiosity and civicness has been criticized by a number of Italian sociologists, not only by those who are explicitly Catholic (such as Colozzi and Donati 2001). For instance, according to Cartocci (1994: 31), Putnam's analysis on this point reveals excessive simplification and yields a unilateral description of development processes². Also Sciolla (1997, 2005) posits that the relation between religion and trust could follow more complex lines: "Italian specificity [...] could consist in the fact that the vitality of the associational fabric created by the Church has generated social and civic engagement that, instead of give support to the state, could leave aside it, redeeming its chronic institutional weakness" (1997, 55).

² According to Cartocci, the problem stems from the use of an ambiguous "clericalism index" that is unable to distinguish clearly among the different kinds of relation with religion and from the lack of an explicit thematization of the different religiosity of the different areas of the country.

In Italy, to analyse the effects of religion on trust means to focus on the effects of Catholicism. In this respect, two features of Italian Catholicism seem especially noteworthy. First, the fact that around the Church there is an extensive network of associations and voluntary activities; indeed, in Italy the Church is one of the main sources of voluntarism and associational participation. Second, Catholicism in Italy, as a largely majoritarian religion, has evolved as a religion of a predominantly solidaristic, tolerant and inclusive character (both towards non-believers and believers of other religions). As an example, one can think of the church recreation centres (*oratori*) that are – still today – an inclusive relational space that can be accessed also by those who come from non-strictly practicing families or even adhere to other religions. Or think of the stance taken by the majority of the Catholic clergy in the “migration emergency” that has hit Italy over the last few years: an open attitude towards migrants of non-Christian background has been largely prevailing.

In view of these peculiarities of Italian Catholicism, we can expect that increasing church attendance will lead to increasing social trust. However, since we made a conceptual distinction between two different types of trust, we put forward a more specific hypothesis:

(H1) Increasing church attendance will induce increasing *thin*, rather than *thick*, social trust

In studies on trust it is often emphasized that the so-called “bootstrap problem” is the main obstacle facing the establishment of trust relations: until there is some “evidence” of others’ trustworthiness, it is difficult to trust anybody. Religious socialization should mitigate this problem imposing, or at least suggesting, an *unconditional* trustful orientation towards others⁶. In the case of *thick* trust, based upon personal and direct knowledge, religion’s influence should be weakened, while in the case of *thin* trust its effect should be particularly marked.

To test such hypotheses, we shall use binomial logistic regressions, with the main socio-demographic characteristics as control variables to make sure that the relation between church attendance and trust is not a spurious one (an extensive literature shows that church attendance is associated with certain personal characteristics). The next step of the analysis will be the observation of possible interaction between religion and other intervening variables.

It is necessary to check – if a relation between religion and trust would emerge – whether it is an “indirect” relation, caused by a third variable “intervening” in the relation between X and Y or – in the case that no relation between the two main variables would emerge – whether it is a “conditioned” relation⁷. Among several variables that – according to a large literature – could affect trust, two appear

connected with religion and therefore deserve careful examination. The first one is voluntary activity in associations; the second is life satisfaction.

Voluntary activity is generally seen as a variable strictly linked with interpersonal trust. Since Tocqueville, a long tradition of studies has underlined this link, although the direction of the influence could be controversial (is trust that fosters voluntary activity or voluntary activity that promotes trust?). Many scholars emphasized the fact that associations ensure continuing interactions among members: these interactions “create a repeated game, one of the requirements for co-operation to develop” (Whiteley 1999: 28). In turn, voluntary activity is linked with religion, both at the individual and the institutional level: Ruiters and De Graaf (2006), in a multilevel analysis, found that churchgoing has a positive impact on volunteering and that also more religious contexts have an additional positive effect.

The importance of life satisfaction in fostering trust in other people has been underlined, among others, by Whiteley: he found that it was the single variable with the strongest effect on the willingness to trust fellow citizens: “the hypothesis is that individuals who are generally happy and satisfied with their lives are more likely to trust other people than individuals who are unhappy or dissatisfied” (1999: 30). This hypothesis relies mainly on Inglehart’s theories (Inglehart 1977, 1990, Abramson and Inglehart 1995) about the influence of life satisfaction on an array of an individual’s basic values:

“Overall life satisfaction is part of a broad syndrome of attitudes reflecting whether one has a relatively positive or negative attitude towards the world in which one lives. Life satisfaction, happiness, interpersonal trust, and whether one supports radical social change or defends one’s existing society all tend to go together in a cultural cluster” (Inglehart 1990: 43)⁸.

In a broad exploration of the literature about the relation between religion and life satisfaction Koenig *et al.* (2001) found a largely prevailing positive correlation: religiosity and church attendance create purpose in life and a sense of belonging that contributes to happiness and life satisfaction⁹. More recently, the topic has been investigated also by Lim and Putnam (2010), who underline the importance for life satisfaction of the social network built through the regular attending of religious services.

4. *Data and Variable Description*

The hypotheses presented in the previous section will be tested using a harmonization of the “ISTAT Multipurpose Survey – Aspects of Daily Life (*Aspetti della Vita Quotidiana* – AVQ)”. This is an exceptionally high-quality data set: The Italian National Institute of Statistics samples, every year since 1993, about 50,000 individuals and collects information, with face to face interviews, on a variety of topics, mainly Italians’ daily activities, but also their social and political life. The magnitude of the sample and the quality of the interviews allow for particularly robust tests of casual relations between variables.

Concerning religion, the AVQ survey contains the following question: “Usually how often do you go to church or another place of worship?”. This entails some limitations we have to acknowledge. First, we do not have any variable about the differences of religion or denomination of the population surveyed, so we cannot explore the different role played in relation to trust by majoritarian Catholicism and other minority religions. Actually, in Italy the absence of this variable is less problematic than it would be in other countries, such as Germany or the United states, where religious pluralism is historically greater.

The second limitation is the fact that in the dataset there are no variables concerning religious beliefs, attitudes or practices¹⁰. The only measure of religiosity is the attendance of a church (or of another place of worship). However, it can be argued that “church attendance” should not be considered solely as an indicator of participation in the religious rites, but also as an indicator of involvement in a broader “space of relations” and sharing of social experiences with other individuals¹¹. Moreover, church attendance is considered a reasonably good indicator of adherence to a specific set of religious ideas and norms.

Therefore, we test the hypothesis that people who go to church on a regular basis show greater trust in others than the religiously un-involved. As a German scholar put it:

“The congregation is such a community where people from different segments of society meet face to face on a regular basis and come to know one another as like-minded, benevolent, and cooperative. This trustworthy behaviour is further reinforced by reputational effects that arise from regular interaction with other church members and the density of connections between congregants” (Traunmüller 2011: 348).

If the independent variable is measured through a single indicator, it is remarkable that in the AVQ survey interpersonal trust – the dependent variable - is investigated through an unusually rich set of four questions. This makes it possible to explore different dimensions of interpersonal trust. Beside the standard formulation of the question about the possibility to trust other people or the need to be careful of them, the AVQ survey includes in fact a set of other three related questions which ask

interviewees to tell their opinion about the probability that a lost wallet would be returned if found by three different kinds of persons (a neighbour, the police and a stranger) (see above for a discussion of these different indicators of trust). These last three items have been included in the questionnaire more recently, starting from the 2010 survey. Therefore, we concentrate our analysis on a five-year period from 2010 to 2014 (the latest available survey)¹².

Here Table 1

In the case of Italy, attendance of a place of worship means – for the vast majority of the population – turning out in Catholic churches, other religions being practiced by tiny minorities. If we consider the attendance of a church as a synonym of participation in the rite of the Mass, it appears that the Catholic precept of the weekly attendance of the Mass is observed by little less than a third of Italians (during the five-year period we analyse a light reduction seems detectable: from 32.6% in 2010 to 29.4% in 2014) (Table 1)¹³. About one fifth of Italians say they never go to any place of worship and about a third report to go there only sometimes a year (probably to attend ceremonies such as weddings or baptisms, that have a social and relational character more than a strictly religious meaning).

As to the four indicators of trust, a substantial stability over time emerges (see figure 1). The answers to the standard question that asks to choose between trust in others or the need to be careful of others show that little more than one fifth of Italians are trustful, while the rest are more cautious. With respect to the wallet items, in the case of a neighbour and of the police the great majority of Italians is trustful: almost three quarters think that a neighbour will return the wallet and an even greater percentage (around four-fifths) think that the police will return it. Instead, a completely different picture emerges from the third indicator. In fact, only 11-13% of the Italians surveyed think that a complete stranger would return the wallet (a slight ascending trend seems detectable).

Here Figure 1

We performed a factor analysis to explore the relations among these four different indicators of trust. The result is showed in Table 2: two factors clearly emerge from this analysis¹⁴. The first one includes two items (the probability of wallet return by a neighbour and by the police); the second one contains two other items (the standard trust question and the likelihood of wallet return by a stranger). These two factors closely approach the two types of trust discussed above. The first factor is the *thick*

form of trust, based on personal experiences or on the institutional role of the trusted person (the police); while the second factor is the *thin* trust, a form of trust directed toward generalized others.

Here Table 2

Since in the five-year period under consideration the annual variations of each variable are very slight, we pooled the yearly datasets into a single one. In this way, we obtain a very large sample, which gives an unusual robustness to statistical estimates.

In Table S1 of the supplementary material we present bivariate relations between church attendance and the main socio-demographic variables. Church attendance is clearly associated with age. The people under 25 that never go to church are almost 30%: the percentage goes down progressively, with only a slight trend reversal among oldest people (if we consider those who go to church sometimes a year together with those who never go to church, the relation between age and church attendance appear clearer). On the opposite side, the percentage of people who go to church at least once a week goes from about 17% in the two youngest categories to more than double (almost 43%) among oldest people. Church attendance is also associated with gender (women go to church much more than men). The association with education is smaller than one could imagine (only people that attend only elementary school have a profile that differ from the general sample, while other categories are quite similar one another). The geographical area in which church attendance is greater is the South (where 35.9% go to church, or another place of worship, at least once a week), while the Centre is, quite predictably, the area in which church attendance is lowest.

5. Explaining the relation between church attendance and trust.

As stated in section 1, the purpose of our analysis is to understand the relation, if any, between church attendance and trust in others. To this end, we built a multivariate model and we tested it with the data of the AVQ.

In the two binomial logistic regressions the independent variable is “church attendance”, whose effects on interpersonal trust have been theoretically examined in the first part of the article. The main socio-demographic variables – age, recoded in six categories, education, recoded in four categories, gender and geographical areas (North-West, North-East, Centre, South, Islands) – have been included in order to control for interaction effects.

The dependent variables in the two models are two indexes of trust, based on factor analysis' results. One refers to *thick trust* and is based on the neighbour and police wallet questions; the other refers to *thin trust* and is based on the stranger wallet question and the trust in others question. For both indexes, we summed up the relevant discrete indicators and then we dichotomized them (trustful vs. non-trustful): therefore, we consider trustful the people who give a “positive” answer to *both* questions that make up an index. For instance, in the case of *thick trust* we consider trustful the people saying that it is likely that the wallet will be returned by the police *and* by the neighbour (those who think that only the police or the neighbour, or none of them, will return it are considered non-trustful)¹⁵.

Here Table 3

The B coefficients reported in Table 3 show a positive relation between church attendance and both forms of trust. Indeed, the B coefficients of all the different categories of church attendance are negative both in the case of thin and thick trust¹⁶. This means that all the categories of church attendance are less likely to trust others than the reference group (people who attend church every day). The difference between the two types of trust lies in the strength of the relation. As to *thin trust*, the coefficients are quite strong (for instance, for those who go to church only sometimes a year the value of B is $-.845$). On the other hand, in the case of *thick trust* only those who never attend church seem to detach themselves from the rest of the sample, while the difference between the reference category and other categories of church attendance are of little relevance and significance.

The easiest way to interpret the logistic regression coefficients is to look at odds ratios. They tell us the likelihood of each group to be more or less trustful than the reference group. In our case, if the odds ratio is greater than 1 the group has a higher likelihood to trust other than the reference category. If we look at the thin trust index, each category is *less* likely than the reference group to trust other people and strangers (the odds ratios of every category is lower than 1). We can also observe that the relation is not a monotonic one: the odds ratio of those who never go to church is higher than the one of those who go sometimes a year or sometimes a month. On the other hand, in the case of the thick trust index the relation has the same shape, but all the odds ratios are close to 1, so we can state that the effect of regular church attendance on this measure of trust is much weaker.

Having confirmed that regular church attendance has a positive effect on *thin trust*, what might account for such a relationship? In the literature there are two kinds of explanation, not mutually exclusive. The first one refers to individual values and orientations derived from religious

socialization, practice and doctrine. From religion teachings, through socialization, a moral imperative would derive to put trust in fellow human beings.

The second type of explanation refers to the organizational context of church attendance: from this perspective, the church is a “relational space” where frequent interaction with other (and possibly diverse) people fosters trust. Let’s remember the obvious: in church (and this is especially true for regular church-goers) people sharing similar attitudes and moral stances are met. It is reasonable to argue that attending regularly the church has a reinforcement effect on social trust. Furthermore, attending the church might imply several activities different from attending religious services, such as voluntary work and other kind of interactions based on trust. Unfortunately, as we already remarked, our dataset does not include variables on values, religious attitudes and orientations. Therefore, we are not in a position to test the first hypothesis *as such*. We can only analyse the interaction between churchgoing and other variables that could affect trust.

As we said in section 3, in order to be sure that church attendance has an independent effect on interpersonal trust, we have to introduce in our model other two variables that theorists consider as factors that foster trust.

The first one is voluntary participation. In Italy which relation exist between church attendance and voluntary participation? AVQ data tells that people who attend more frequently the places of worship are more likely to participate in voluntary associations. As one can see in Table 4, all the indicators clearly point to a strong relation.

Church attendance, as previously anticipated, is not only an indicator of participation in religious rites, but also an indicator of being part of a network of relations that push to engage *with* other people and *for* other people.

Here Table 4

Those who attend the church frequently tend to participate in voluntary activities (in its different forms) more than those who attend it only sporadically do. As made clear by the above-mentioned “tocquevillian” tradition of studies, it could then be social participation (rather than church attendance as such) the key variable in the explanation of social trust and distrust.

Going back to the logistic regression model, if we add an indicator of social participation as a further independent variable we could observe if and to what extent church attendance’s coefficient changes. Among the questions about voluntary activity in the AVQ dataset we selected the one that

asks people whether they do unpaid work for a voluntary association as the most appropriate for this purpose.

As it can be seen in Table 5, associational participation has quite a strong and highly significant effect on both indexes (though much stronger on the thin trust index). After adding this variable to the model, all the B coefficients regarding church attendance decrease, but they remain – in the case of the index of *thin* trust – quite strong and highly significant. This means that the influence of church attendance on interpersonal trust cannot be reduced to the effect of the intervening variable.

Here Table 5

As anticipated in section 3, life satisfaction is another variable whose effect in the relation between religion and trust must be explored. Therefore, we add to the previous model two further indicators. The first one is the standard overall life satisfaction (expressed in an eleven-point scale, from 0 to 10, reduced to five). The second is the satisfaction with one's relational life (we use as indicator of this the answers to the question about the degree of satisfaction of a person's relationship with friends) (see in Table 4 the bivariate relations between these variables and church attendance). The hypothesis is that a friends' network of which a person is satisfied is a network that concurs to create, consolidate and spread trust (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Uslaner 1998), especially towards individuals with close relationships with the interviewee (we could expect that its influence would be greater with reference to trust in neighbours)¹⁷.

Here Table 6

As we see in Table 6, high levels of life satisfaction and satisfaction for one's friends both have a positive effect on trust. We can observe that these indicators of satisfaction seem to have a quite strong effect on thick trust: life satisfaction (being based more on individualist motivation) seems therefore to promote a quite different pattern of trust. On the other hand, B coefficients of church attendance suffer a further decrease, but only a minor one (and the odd ratios, conversely, increase a little). The significance remains very high and the odds ratios still confirm that as church attendance decreases also trust in generalized others does: those who go to church only sometimes a year – the least trustful category – are 45% less likely to be a trustful person according to the thin trust index (OR = .545). The B coefficients of voluntary activity undergo a minor decrease as well.

6. Conclusions.

The relation between trust and religion needs to be understood with reference to a specific cultural and historical context. So far, the studies about it have been conducted mainly with reference to the United States, a country in which the role of religion(s) is quite peculiar. Thus, the results of the research about religion and trust conducted in the US cannot be automatically generalized to other contexts. In the social sciences the need to replicate a study in different contexts is often neglected but it is very important (Neuliep 1991).

In this article we put at the centre of the analysis the relation between religion and trust at the individual level in a Catholic country (Italy). The data show that increasing church attendance encourages increasing social trust. In addition, the richness of the available data allowed us to draw a distinction between two types of interpersonal trust (*thin* and *thick*) and show the differential effect of individual religiosity on each of them. To our knowledge, this is the first time that such a conceptual distinction has been put to an empirical test (in relation to religiosity).

As we said earlier, the data we used have two great advantages and one drawback compared to other researches. The advantages concern, firstly, the magnitude of the sample, which gives to the estimates robustness that rarely social research can achieve. A second, and more relevant, advantage is that the concept of trust is measured with more than one indicator, as is usually done; in this way, it is possible to clearly distinguish between two different kinds of trust.

The drawback comes from the fact that only one aspect of an individual's religious experience is explored in the survey. Only church attendance is measured, while the attachment to religious norms and values is not taken into specific consideration. However, despite this limitation, we have seen that church attendance is an indicator capable of disclosing features of religious experience other than its ritualistic aspect. Especially, church attendance is strongly associated with organizational participation in its different forms: to go frequently to church does not mean (only) to take part on a regular basis in the Mass and in other religious rites, but also to enter a relational space that promotes participation and engagement and, in the end, fosters interpersonal trust.

Although they lose some of their strength, coefficients referred to the effects of church attendance on interpersonal trust maintain a remarkable significance also when other variables, such life satisfaction and associational participation, are taken into consideration. This means that, as far as interpersonal trust is concerned, church attendance does not measure only the potential of religious membership and involvement to create an interpersonal space conducive to greater associational

participation. We assume that church attendance can favour also the diffusion of attitudes and values of trustfulness as well. To understand and verify these aspects would require a specific research design enabling – also through qualitative instruments (as in-depth interviews – see for instance Warner *et al.* 2018: 155-156, which, among other issues, address also the relation between Catholicism and trust) – a deeper understanding of the (changing) meanings that attending a church can have in the life of an individual.

Overall, our analysis appears to convey a picture of religion's (and Church's) role in Italian society very different from the standard account. According to our analysis, religious involvement does not create a closed space, which destroys social solidarity and participation, but, quite on the contrary, it fosters them by creating favourable conditions for their development. Indeed, the relation with trust is a positive and quite strong one. Even more remarkable is the fact that, contrary to some theories, the influence of religious involvement is strong in the case of generalized trust, while it is almost irrelevant and scarcely significant in the case of particularistic trust, usually associated with familism.

This conclusion should not come as a surprise. Although the empirical literature on this topic reports mixed results, the prevailing conclusion by scholars is that of a positive influence of religion and religiosity on trust. According to our analysis, Catholic religion in Italy – negatively associated with social capital by Putnam (1993) – does not appear any more as a deviant case in the general theory of social capital and trust. Nowadays, we find that religion fosters a disposition to trust other people. The standard portrait of the role of religion in Italy was influenced by the negative role the Church played in the historical process of Italian unification towards the State and civic life. Since then, things have changed considerably. Indeed, the role and the teachings of the Church's upper echelons are no longer shaped by the conservative and integralist stances of the past, but instead by a growing openness towards non-believers and followers of other religions and by a growing acceptance of pluralism in the public sphere. As a consequence, the way people live their religious involvement has changed accordingly in a more individual direction. These changes, in the positions of the Church hierarchies and in the way believers live their religious life, can affect trust in a positive way.

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¹ Berggren and Bjørnskov cite as exceptions works such as Iannaccone, 1998; Wald et al., 2005; McCleary and Barro, 2006; Wald and Wilcox, 2006.

² On the importance of social ties in religious groups see also Buskens and Raub, 2002; Coleman, 1988; Cook and Hardin, 2001, Sztompka, 1999.

³ It is quite surprising that many texts about trust cite as first source of this question not the book by Morris Rosenberg (1957), but an article of another social psychologist, Milton J. Rosenberg (1956), that actually does not contain any reference to trust.

⁴ This general formulation sees trust as the relation between two people concerning a particular action or range of actions.

⁵ A few exceptions could be found in comparative studies such as Bahovec et al., 2007; Halman and Pettersen, 2003; Lam, 2006; Ruiter and De Graaf, 2006, Berggren and Bjørnskov 2011 and in some case studies on Finland (Yeung, 2004), Germany (Traunmüller, 2009) and the Netherlands (De Hart, 2001)

⁶ In many writings of a number of important Catholic figures we could find an explicit call to the need to trust other people. Let's take as examples the texts of two representatives that stand on the opposite sides as Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, founder of the Opus Dei, and Enzo Bianchi, the prior of the community of Bose. The first one (*Friends of God*, Scepter, London, 1981) exhorted to be “prudent, but not suspicious” and invited to “give everyone the utmost credit for what he says”. The second one saw a diffuse “trust crisis” in contemporary societies and gave to Christians the task to “help to regain trust. If Christians want, they can grow trust everywhere”. Francis the I, the current Pope, has put trust at the centre of many of his speeches, but also his predecessors frequently put the emphasis on it (see, for instance, the encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate*, 2009, by Benedict XVI). From these teachings should derive the need to give trust to other, leave aside rational motivation and evidence about the true trustworthiness of other. Of course, the relation between Catholic religion and interpersonal trust could not be understood only with the above-mentioned quotations. Each person could interpret in many different ways these teachings. However, these sentences can be considered indicative of the kind of socialization to which is exposed people who attend more frequently the places of worship of Catholic religion.

⁷ A clear explanation of this terminology can be found in Corbetta (2014: 613-614).

⁸ In AVQ this indicator is measured through a scale ranging from 0 (no satisfaction) to 10 (maximum satisfaction). We recoded this scale into a five-category variable.

⁹ Among the researches that suggest the opposite relation see, for instance, Campbell *et al.* (1976).

¹⁰ A vast literature has made a distinction between church attendance and other aspects of religious beliefs and behaviour. See, among others, De Jong, Faulkner & Warland 1976, Starck and Glock 1968, Davie 1994

¹¹ Here we wish to briefly draw attention to the neglected difference between “attending religious services” (the question as it is worded, for example, in the WVS) and “attending the church” (or, more precisely “going to the church”, as in the AVQ survey). In most literature on this subject the two formulations are treated as interchangeable. We think this is a serious fault for survey research, which could lead to misinterpretations of religious involvement and participation. While apparently related, the two questions refer to different situations and contexts. First, to “attend a religious service” there must be a service performed by a properly qualified cleric. On the contrary, “attending a church” does not entail per se that any religious service is being performed. For example, one might “attend the church” for personal prayer or meditation outside of any formal ritualistic context. The difference between the two types of behavior and context are

neither small nor insignificant. The problem is not one of estimating how many people “attend the church”, but of the very different *meanings* respondents could attach to the two questions.

¹² The AVQ survey covers population aged 6 and more; we excluded from our dataset and analysis the age cohort 6-15. After list-wise deleting the missing values on the dependent and independent variables, the dataset we use contains about 190,000 observations

¹³ On trends in Church attendance in Italy see Vezzoni and Biolcati-Rinaldi 2015.

¹⁴ Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in three iterations. The answers to the wallet items have been dichotomized (likely-unlikely) before performing factor analysis.

¹⁵ Identical analyses have been performed separately also on the four original indicators. The results are wholly similar to those presented in the paper concerning the two synthetic indexes (see Supplementary material).

¹⁶ In our dataset the trust option of each index has been coded as 1 and the distrust option has been coded as 0. Therefore, a positive B coefficient means that this group has a higher likelihood than the reference group to choose the trustful option.

¹⁷ In relation to life satisfaction and satisfaction with friends’ network, the (weak) differences between those who frequently attend the church and those who attend it sporadically are showed in table 4.