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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ciziceno, M. (2021). The Influence of Religion on Life Satisfaction in Italy. *Italian Sociological Review*, 11(2), 467-484.
<https://doi.org/10.13136%2fisr.v11i2.449>

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How to cite

Cizeno, M. (2021). The Influence of Religion on Life Satisfaction in Italy. [Italian Sociological Review, 11 (2), 467-484]

Retrieved from [<http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v11i2.449>]

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v11i2.449]

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3. Article accepted for publication

Date: January 2021

Additional information about

Italian Sociological Review

can be found at:

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The Influence of Religion on Life Satisfaction in Italy

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Abstract

Italy is the cradle of Catholicism and, despite the secularization process, religion continues to be part of its national culture. Although Italian sociologists have investigated the religious paradigm in Italy, there are aspects of such phenomenon still little explored. This paper examines the potential influence religion has on individuals' life satisfaction. Data from the European Value Study survey provides evidence of a two-way interaction between religion and life satisfaction, with a substantial effect only in the case of public religious forms. This association seems to be moved by the mechanism of social support, and it differs across Italian regions. Results confirm the hypothesis that in areas of Italy more exposed to social isolation religion is associated with life satisfaction because, in those areas, religion supplies peoples' need to belong. Further confirmation of this analysis came from the fact that in grey zones of "religious conformism" the influence of religion on life satisfaction is marginal.

Keywords: religion, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, Italy.

1. Introduction

The relationship between Italians and religion is emblematic. Constitutionally, Italy is a lay nation embracing all creeds and religions, but, in practice, it is a Catholic country, where 80% of the population and over belong to the Roman Catholic denomination (Pew Research Center, 2013)¹.

Research started in the 1970s by Burgalassi (1974) and continued by Cesareo et al. (1995), Capraro (1996), Abbruzzese (2000), Cipriani (2003, 2020),

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¹ See at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population/>.

and Garelli (2007, 2013, 2020) over the last few years, reveal some controversial aspects of the religious phenomenon in Italy. On the one hand, Italy is characterized by the progressive individualization of religious forms described as “flexible Catholicism” (Garelli, 2013) and the prevalence of spiritual pathways far from institutionalized religiosity, the “belonging without believing” a term first introduced in the sociological discourse by Davie (1990)² and later by Marchisio and Pisati (1999).

On the other hand, it seems that the decline of traditional religious apparatus is opposed to the spread of individual – and subjective – forms of spirituality, the so-called “invisible religion” (Luckmann, 1967), which parallel the Catholic Church. Cipriani (2017) uses the term “diffused religion” to codify the vastity of religious horizons characterizing contemporary Italian society, such as the choice of intimate forms of religiosity rather than the public ones. From another perspective, the Italian context is also denoted by the presence of alternative forms of spirituality, mostly derived from Holistic or Oriental disciplines, that become authentic lifestyles³ identifying individuals or sub-groups (see Berzano, 2008).

However, survey data⁴ indicates that religious practice and religious identity are still prominent in contemporary Italian society, and they continue to be part of its national culture, despite the presence of new religious expressions and the decline of Catholic hegemony (see Garelli et al., 2003).

Recently, scholars have investigated the effects religion has on individuals’ social and psychological spheres, including its influence on mental health, life satisfaction, and Subjective Well-Being (SWB). Existing literature indicates a positive association between religiosity and well-being in peoples from different countries and cultures (see Graham, Crown, 2014; Peacock, Poloma, 1999). However, investigations in contexts with a long and well-established religious tradition, like Italy, are scarce. In general, the scientific study of religion in Italy has been characterized by numerous theoretical reflections, but, unfortunately, very little empirical research (Marchisio, Pisati, 1999).

In this paper, data from a representative Italian sample of the European Values Study (EVS 2017, *second pre-release July-2019*⁵) have been analyzed to fill

² Davie first uses the concept “belonging without believing” referring to the British context.

³ According to Berzano (2008: 9): “a lifestyle is a set of practices to which an individual gives unitary meaning, a distinctive model shared inside a collectivity. A model that does not have its genesis either in a pre-existing cognitive-value frame or in a pre-determined socio-structural condition”.

⁴ Deserve attention the surveys realized by Cesareo et al. (1994-1995), Garelli (2020) and Cipriani (2020).

⁵ Data available at the following link:

this gap. Based on the distinction between private and public religious forms (see Poloma, Pendleton, 1990, 1991), this study addresses the question of a potential link between such religious forms and individuals' life satisfaction. Results indicate a two-way interaction. While the public religious forms, which usually imply interpersonal relations, are associated with people's life satisfaction, the private ones do not predict people's sense of well-being. Data pooled at the NUTS 1 level indicates that religion influences one's life satisfaction in Northern and Southern Italy (rather than in the Center and Islands). By looking at the municipalities' dimension of respondents, different results emerging from large to small cities, with a prevalence of satisfied religious people in larger municipalities.

This paper sheds some light on the social and psychological effects religion has on individuals. Moreover, it adds further knowledge to this topic providing evidence from a unique context characterized by the historical presence of Catholicism. Religion is an attribute of both persons and societies, and the social resources that it offers can explain its association with life satisfaction. The picture depicted from this study also suggests the presence of "religious conformism" areas (see Burgalassi, 1974, 1990 and Cartocci, 1994), where the association with life satisfaction is impaired.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Private and Public Religious Forms*

Religion is an organized system of beliefs, rituals, and traditions established within a community or a group (Koenig et al., 2012). It includes a subsystem of specific norms, prescriptions, and ethical values. In the case of Catholicism, those values are love, charity, solidarity, and justice, among others⁶. In Italy, religion is intrinsically present in several aspects of people's life, ranging from children's education to moral questions (Garelli, 2007). It is because the process of socialization in Italy has a strong Catholic matrix (Marchisio, Pisati, 1999), and peoples inevitably develop a "religious human capital" (Iannaccone, 1991).

Over the last years, concepts as *religion*, *religiosity*, and *spirituality* have acquired different connotation in the sociological research due to the proliferation of new religious forms that, directly or indirectly, characterize the Italian case. As noted by Palmisano and Pannofino (2020: 1): "whereas for many centuries the terms *spiritual* and *spirituality* were associated with institutional religion, today they designate contexts of experience of the sacred and the

<https://dbk.gesis.org/dbksearch/sdesc2.asp?no=7500&db=e&doi=10.4232/1.13314>.

⁶ See: <http://presidenza.governo.it/USRI/confessioni/norme/87DPR350.html>.

transcendent often experienced outside organized churches and sometimes even in opposition to them”. As result, an increasing number of people combine traditional and nontraditional elements of their religion in “hybrid” forms often far from the traditional ones. For example, it is usual that people who never attend religious mass spend daily time in meditation or prayer and consider themselves a deeply spiritual person, the so-called “spiritual but not religious” (see Fuller, 2001). In other cases (i.e., New Age therapies), beliefs in New Age ideas passing over the spiritual dimension and become medicine for the body and practices concerning health and illness (Berzano, 2004). The inclusion of the body in the religious discourse also involves adopting lifestyles characterized by rigid spiritual and physical exercises, noted as “devotional fitness”. As Radermacher (2017: 190) outlines: “in devotional fitness, the sought after condition of body, soul, and mind is a state of spiritual and physical fitness. Programs speak of this state in terms of several concepts, the most important of which are health, harmony/wellness, fitness, and wholeness. Successfully completing a program implies reaching these goals”. The examples mentioned above show as the modern notion of spirituality – or spiritualities – comprises a wide range of independent practices that sound as “religious”, but are outside from the traditional religious boundaries (Berzano, 2007).

At the same time, national statistics show that about 80% and over of Italians profess themselves as “religious” (i.e., Catholics) (Pew Research Center, 2013), even if studies indicate the presence of religious practices in contrast with the traditional ones. For example, Garelli (2013) has defined “flexible Catholicism” the tendency, diffused among Italian peoples, of considering themselves “convinced, but not always active” Catholics. This flexible and ambivalent relationship with religion, according to the author, has a cultural reason. In some cases, people’s affiliation to Catholicism is purely nominal and moved by “cultural habitus” than a genuine spiritual commitment. Another typical trait of religious practice in Italy includes, for example, the attraction for religious events in the form of manifestations or media events (i.e., the “spectacle of faith”) and the tendency to deviate from the Catholic orthodoxy in the case of sexual and familiar matters (see Garelli, 2013, 2007). From another perspective, age and gender are crucial dimensions for understanding religious participation and religious expression (see Garelli, 2016). For example, Crespi and Ruspini (2014) found that Catholic women are more inclined to experience alternative spiritual forms, like yoga, than men. According to Ruspini (2019), religious participation in the Millennials generation assumes different connotations than in the past because of the ICT use.

Scholars cannot observe religiosity directly, but they may develop self-report instruments to measure it. The inclusion of questionnaire items about religious commitment or religious identification in several social surveys is now

a well-established practice (see, for example, European Social Survey, World Value Survey, or Gallup Daily Pool data). However, what constitutes a reliable measure of religiosity is a disputed and opened question among scholars (Levin et al., 1995).

In this paper, religious items derived from the EVS survey have been analyzed. The conceptual framework of this research is based on the existing classification between public and private religious forms provided by Poloma and Pendleton (1990, 1991). The public forms include all the social and visible expressions of one's religiousness, such as participating in religious mass or being an active member of a religious group (see Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2010). The private ones refer to the intimate relationship individuals establish with their faith, and they often involve praying, reading from a book of prayers, or other spiritual exercises.

Nonnemaker et al. (2003) have examined the effects of public and private religious forms on a sample of U.S. adolescents. The authors found that such religious dimensions differ in preventing health risk behaviors because they activate distinct psychological mechanisms. In support of this hypothesis, Koenig (2009) has found that participating in religious mass is related to fewer depression symptoms, whereas Wulff (1996) has found that prayer frequency and believing in a "divine other" (Pollner, 1989) is associated to better mental health outcomes.

2.1 Religiosity, Life Satisfaction and Subjective Well-Being

In the last few years, research on the influence of religiosity on behavior, personality, and mental health status has increased dramatically. Studies based on international samples indicate that religion plays a crucial role in predicting positive life domains and quality of life. For example, Strawbridge et al. (2001) found that religiosity contributes to maintaining marital stability. Jones (2004) has shown that religious practice serves as a deterrent for alcohol abuse and smoking. Other studies have established that it is also associated with self-esteem (Keyes, Reitzes, 2007) and optimism in adolescents (see Inguglia et al., 2017).

Among those positive correlates of religion, there is physical and mental health. Research has shown that peoples who declare themselves religious suffer fewer anxiety symptoms and stress (Rosmarin et al., 2009; Koenig, 2009; Kendler et al., 2003). Abdel-Khalek (2017), based on Allport's notion of intrinsic religiosity, has validated the Arabic Scale of Intrinsic Religiosity (ASIR). Using a convenience sample of college students from Egypt, Kuwait, and Algeria, he demonstrates that intrinsic religiosity is also significantly correlated with subjective well-being and mental health. According to Banthia et al. (2007),

religious people have more coping skills because their faith helps them facing negative events. In addition, it offers existential certainty and purpose in life (see also Ellison, 1991). However, Bernardelli et al. (2019) have found that high levels of faith were associated with lower health status in Australia. It seems that people who have more conservative religious beliefs are also more inclined to rely on prayer than seek a doctor when they have health problems.

Research from different cultural contexts indicates that religious practice is also important for people's life satisfaction and well-being (see Sinnewe et al., 2015; Kortt et al., 2015). Lim and Putnam (2010) have used panel data (from 2006 to 2009) of a representative U.S. sample to explore this association. According to the authors, religious commitment boosts people's well-being because it provides access to social structures and social support. In other words, religious involvement could constitute a source of social capital (see Putnam, 2000). By contrast, some comparative studies reported higher levels of happiness in secular nations than in religious ones (Beit-Hallahmi, 2009; Zuckerman, 2008) and better health outcomes in not religious people (Ventis, 1995).

Life satisfaction is the cognitive component of Subjective Well-Being (SWB) (Diener et al., 1999). It is based on the individuals' judgments of their own life (Diener et al., 1985). Studies examining the internal structure of SWB (see Lucas et al., 1996) have established that life satisfaction is a separable construct, and it can be analyzed independently. For this reason, many international surveys (e.g., World Values Survey; European Social Survey) and comparative studies (see Ciziceno and Travaglino, 2019; Bjørnskov, 2003) often rely on life satisfaction as proxy of SWB, in the form of a single-item questionnaire. Also, Fujita and Diener (2005) have found that, compared to other components of SWB (e.g., happiness), life satisfaction is more stable and less susceptible to cultural differences. Capone et al. (2019) have analyzed life satisfaction predictors in a large representative Italian sample. This study has shown that the standard of living, household income, and social resources impact on life satisfaction. Notably, religious affiliation explains about the 3% of life satisfaction' variance (combined with other socio-demographic variables).

According to Garelli (2013), in those countries where religion is fully integrated into the national culture (e.g., Italy), the influences of religious values might be more severe because they were interiorized during the socialization process and continue during the life course. Diener et al. (2011) have found that religion is associated with life satisfaction in developing and poorer countries than in economically advanced ones. Similarly, Höllinger and Muckenhuber (2019) have found greater religiousness in poor and repressive countries. However, although evidence indicating such positive influence religion has on

SWB, no empirical research has addressed the same question in a context with a particular religious sensitivity like Italy.

3. Data and Method

3.1 Data

Data used in this study were drawn from the European Value Study (ESV) survey. The EVS has been designed to enable research on a large variety of social and political issues among European countries. The second pre-release of the integrated dataset (July-2019) includes various items on religiosity in Italy. Individuals included in the sample were aged 18 years and over, and they were selected by using a single representative stage (or multi-stage) sampling⁷. Data for Italy were also available at the NUTS 1 level.

Life satisfaction: A single-item was used to measure people's life satisfaction. The variable was assessed by asking respondents the following question: "*All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?*". The item was measured on a ten-point scale, ranging from 0 (*extremely dissatisfied*) to 10 (*extremely satisfied*).

Public Religious forms: Two-items have been used to assess public religious forms: the first item measured the frequency of mass attendance by addressing the following question: "*how often do you attend religious services?*". Participants answered using a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*more than once a week*). The second item used was a dummy variable indicating the respondents belonging to charitable or humanitarian organizations (0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*).

Private Religious forms: Two-items have been used to assess the private religious forms. A seven-point scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*every day*), indicated the respondents' frequency of prayer apart from the religious services. A dummy variable measured respondents' religious faith by asking the following question: "*do you believe in God?*" (0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*).

Control Variables: The covariates included in the model as controls were: sex (0 = *female*; 1 = *male*); the age of respondents (in years); the level of education attained (ES-ISCED classification); household total net income (a ten-point scale ranging from 1 = *lowest household income* to 10 = *highest household income*)⁸ and marital status (coded as 0 = *divorced, separated, widow or single*; 1 = *married*).

⁷ Sample design and other information about sampling were available at: https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA7500.

⁸ The EVS data expressed household net income in deciles ranging from 1 (lesser than 9.000 Eur) to 10 (54.500 Eur and over).

3.2 Method

To explore the association between religiosity and life satisfaction in Italy, OLS (Ordinal Last Square) regressions have been used as a method of analysis. Age, sex, education level, marital status, and household total net income of participants were entered as covariates in the model. Equation (1) express the model for the i-th individual:

$$LIFE_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Attend_RS_i + \beta_2 Belong_CO_i + \beta_3 Pray_i + \beta_4 Believe_God_i + \beta_5 Control_V_i + \varepsilon_1 \quad (1)$$

where β_1 and β_2 are the effects of the two public religious forms on life satisfaction ($LIFE_i$), whereas β_3 and β_4 indicate the effects of the private ones (i.e., Pray frequency and Believing in God). Finally, β_5 is a vector of the control variables included in the model (i.e., sex, age, level of education, households total net income, marital status), and ε_1 is the error.

4. Results

4.1 Preliminary Results

Items' means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1. The correlation matrix of all the study' variables is presented in Table 2. The preliminary analysis shows that life satisfaction is positively correlated with religious service attendance and the charitable organization's membership (i.e., public religious forms). Notably, the correlation between private forms of religiosity and life satisfaction is not statistically significant.

TABLE 1. Means and standard deviations for all items used.

Items	Min	Max	Mean	SD
<i>Life satisfaction</i>				
1. how satisfied are you with your life?	1	10	7.38	1.783
<i>Public forms of religion</i>				
2. how often attend religious services?	1	7	3.90	1.945
3. do you belong to: charitable/humanitarian organization	0	1	.06	.239
<i>Private forms of religion</i>				
4. how often do you pray outside religious services?	1	7	4.13	2.419
5. do you believe in God?	0	1	.84	.364

By looking at the socio-demographic variables, the matrix indicates a negative, but significant, statistical correlation of life satisfaction with age (-.090)

and a positive correlation with marital status (.088), educational level (.147), household income (.290), and life satisfaction.

TABLE 2. Correlation Matrix.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Life satisfaction (1)	-	.067**	.091**	.001	.034	-.090**	.025	.088**	.147**	.290**
Attend religious services (2)	.067**	-	.027	.649**	.510**	.212**	-.182**	.223**	-.065**	-.031
Belong to charitable organization (3)	.091**	.027	-	.029	-.037*	.007	.015	-.026	.096**	.111**
Pray outside religious services (4)	.001	.649**	.029	-	.531**	.218**	-.260**	.209**	-.117**	-.133**
Believe in God (5)	.034	.510**	-.037*	.531**	-	.123**	-.148**	.190**	-.107**	-.049*
Age (6)	-.090**	.212**	.007	.218**	.123**	-	.005	.583**	-.332**	-.096**
Gender (7)	.025	-.182**	.015	-.260**	-.148**	.005	-	-.040*	.006	.027
Marital status (8)	.088**	.223**	-.026	.209**	.190**	.583**	-.040*	-	-.152**	.170**
Educational level respondent (9)	.147**	-.065**	.096**	-.117**	-.107**	-.332**	.006	-.152**	-	.448**
Household total net income (10)	.290**	-.031	.111**	-.133**	-.049*	-.096**	.027	.170**	.448**	-

** $p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$

4.1 OLS Results

A regression analysis with OLS estimates has been used to confirm preliminary results. Controls have been added in the models, and all the continuous variables were standardized before the analyses. Two models were run separately to estimate the effects of public and private religious forms on life satisfaction.

OLS results support the existence of a link between public forms of religion and ones' life satisfaction (see Table 3). However, the mass service attendance seems to have a slightly higher effect on life satisfaction ($b = .076$, $SE = .025$, $p < .001$), than the charitable organization membership ($b = .070$, $SE = .184$, $p < .001$). The block of socio-demographic variables included in the model given that: age is negatively associated with life satisfaction, whereas income is positively associated (see Ellison et al., 1989) and that married people report higher levels of life satisfaction. This last result is consistent with Suhail and Chaudhry (2004). Surprisingly, prayer frequency and the belief in God (i.e., private forms of religion) are not statistically associated with life satisfaction (see Table 4).

For this reason, the subsequent analyses have been focused only on the public religious forms.

TABLE 3. OLS Public religious forms on Life Satisfaction (response variable).

	Standardized Beta (β)	SE	t
Public religious forms			
<i>Attend religious services</i>	.076**	.025	2.729
<i>Belong to charitable organization (1=yes)</i>	.070**	.184	2.625
Control variables			
Age	-.101*	.003	-3.035
Gender (1=male)	.022	.093	.814
Marital status (1=married)	.100**	.121	2.994
Educational level respondent	.031	.030	1.034
Household total net income	.210**	.021	7.000

** $p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$

TABLE 4. OLS Private religious forms of on Life Satisfaction (response variable).

	Standardized Beta (β)	SE	t
Private religious forms			
<i>Pray outside religious services</i>	.024	.025	.709
<i>Believe in God (1=yes)</i>	.007	.159	.210
Control variables			
Age	-.101*	.003	-3.035
Gender (1=male)	.022	.093	.814
Marital status (1=married)	.100**	.121	2.994
Educational level respondent	.031	.030	1.034
Household total net income	.210**	.021	7.000

** $p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$

To better understand the mechanisms by which public religious forms might predict peoples' well-being, data have been pooled at the NUTS 1 level. In consideration that religious model and religious expressions in Italy varies considerably according to geographical areas (see Diotallevi, 1999; Cartocci, 2011), Italian regions were grouped into four macro-areas. The Eurostat classification⁹ has been used as grouping criteria. The final coding scheme was: North, Center, South, and Islands¹⁰.

Results presented in Table 5 show that religious service attendance predicts life satisfaction in the North ($b = .106$, $SE = .034$, $p < .001$) and in the South ($b = .160$, $SE = .061$, $p < .001$) of Italy, whereas it is not statistically significant both in the Center and in the Islands. The belonging to charitable organization seems to have an influence on life satisfaction only in the regions of Center Italy ($b = .194$, $SE = .401$, $p < .001$).

⁹ For further details see: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/background>.

¹⁰ In this study, Northeast and Northwest Italy were grouped in the category "North Italy".

Finally, considering the size-town of respondents' (see Table 6), the impact of public religious forms on life satisfaction is more remarkable in large municipalities with more than 100000 inhabitants than in the medium ones (i.e., from 20000 to 100000 inhabitants). Only in the case of small cities results indicates a weak, but statistically significant, link between mass attendance and individuals' life satisfaction.

TABLE 5. OLS Public religious forms on Life Satisfaction (response variable) by Italian Regions.

	(1) North N= 1041	(2) Center N= 414	(3) South N= 528	(4) Islands N=294
	Standardized Beta (SE)	Standardized Beta (SE)	Standardized Beta (SE)	Standardized Beta (SE)
Public religious forms				
<i>Attend religious services</i>	.106 (.034)**	.002 (.054)	.160 (.061)**	-.063 (.077)
<i>Belong to charitable organizations (1=yes)</i>	.050 (.230)	.194 (.401)**	.046 (.456)	.075 (1.006)
Control variables				
Age	-.072 (.005)	-.106 (.008)	-.171 (.007)**	-.205 (.010)*
Gender (1=male)	.020 (.130)	-.022 (.212)	.073 (.200)	.020 (.291)
Marital status (1=married)	.089 (.172)	.240 (.299)*	.078 (.255)	.115 (.338)
Educational level respondent	.029 (.041)	.076 (.074)	.131 (.061)*	-.209 (.109)*
Household total net income	.235 (.031)**	.110 (.054)	.132 (.053)*	-.063 (.074)*

** $p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$

TABLE 6. OLS Public religious forms on Life Satisfaction (response variable) by size-town of respondents.

	(1) Small= under 5000 to 20000	(2) Medium= 20000 to 100000	(3) Large= 100000 to 500000
	Standardized Beta (SE)	Standardized Beta (SE)	Standardized Beta (SE)
Public religious forms			
<i>Attend religious services</i>	.087 (.037)*	.024 (.051)	.170 (.058)**
<i>Belong to charitable organizations (1=yes)</i>	.050 (.259)	.025 (.452)	.185 (.395)**
Control variables			
Age	-.103 (.005)*	-.033 (.007)	-.279 (.008)**
Gender (1=male)	.046 (.131)	-.014 (.192)	.078 (.243)
Marital status (1=married)	.130 (.167)**	.078 (.251)	.150 (.315)
Educational level respondent	.084 (.044)*	-.007 (.061)	-.060 (.078)
Household total net income	.226 (.029)**	.177 (.046)*	.186 (.055)**

** $p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Starting from the 1970s (see Burgalassi, 1974), Italian sociologists have investigated the evolution patterns of Catholicism in Italy. Those studies reveal that the religious phenomenon in Italy is still vibrant and mutable, even if they provide the image of a complex and, for certain aspects controversial, relationship between Italians and Catholicism.

On the one hand, contemporary Italian religion is dominated by a multi-faced spirituality, a generic (and often formal) adherence to Catholicism, and spiritual pathways far from the official religious doctrine, especially in sex and family matters. On the other hand, in contrast with the thesis of the “decline of Catholicism”, religion continues to be attractive for Italian people, and it exerts a pervasive impact on their daily life. In this paper, a specific life condition (i.e., individuals’ subjective well-being) has been examined under the lens of religiosity. Peoples’ well-being is not only a desirable policy goal but also a sociological relevant theme. However, as noted by Secondulfo (2011), the sociological theory has been mainly interested in social ill-being and its potential causes, rather than peoples’ well-being. In this study, a potential link between religiosity and peoples’ life satisfaction has been examined. Results from the European Values Study survey suggest that this relationship is at least two-dimensional. While the public religious forms promote individuals’ life satisfaction, it seems that the private ones do not affect it. This finding is consistent with previous studies on this topic. For example, Sinnewe et al. (2015) and Kortt et al. (2015), in two different studies and religious contexts (Germany and Australia), provide convincing evidence about the existence of an association between religious involvement and life satisfaction. The most accepted explanation of such finding is that public religious forms are sources of interpersonal relations, social networks (see Lim, Putnam, 2010), and also social capital (Putnam, 2000). According to Sinnewe et al. (2015), this association remains robust even after controlling for the size of individuals’ social resources (e.g., number of close friends, frequency of social gatherings). From another perspective, Okulicz-Kozaryn (2010) has found that social and individual religiosity are also context-dependent and religious persons are happier in religious nations. It seems that religiosity not only influences well-being *per se*, but also the external environment plays a key role on this relationship.

This paper has shown the presence of a religious “localism” in Italy (see Diotallevi, 1999). There are geographical areas (i.e., North and South) where religion has a more significant influence on life satisfaction than other ones (i.e., Center and Islands). The fact that macro-areas culturally and economically different from each other (North vs. South) demonstrate the same life

satisfaction pathways has probably a historical reason. According to Diotallevi (1999), in North and South Italy, the religious legacy has a long tradition, and despite the signals of modernity, the religious sentiment endures for all the individuals' life. Cartocci (2011) notes as the decline of the Catholic Church has been constant in Italy since the post-war period. However, he found that in the South such secularization process is slower than in other parts of Italy. These explanations support the idea that religious people are more satisfied with their lives in areas where religion is more diffused and socially accepted.

Further confirmation in support of this finding came from the fact that in Central Italy, where religious practice is considered a private matter, public religious forms do not predict life satisfaction. Cipriani (2003) has found that in the Italian regions Molise and Abruzzo, religion is an intimate question (see the concept of "diffused religion"), and only occasionally it represents a social experience. Other studies also indicate the presence of "religious conformism" (see Burgalassi, 1974, 1990; Cartocci, 1994), or "grey zones", characterized by a symbolic adhesion to Catholicism. In those areas, mainly diffused in the Islands, the influence of religion on individuals' life satisfaction seems irrelevant.

Lastly, a statistical association between life satisfaction and public religious forms has been found in respondents from large and small Italian municipalities. The interpretation of this finding is twofold, and it involves the mechanisms by which religious institutions operate at the local level.

As noted by Hortulanus et al. (2006), in the larger and economically advanced cities (diffused in the North of Italy), the risks of social isolation, loneliness, or stigmatization, due to modernity, are higher than in the smaller ones (more diffused in the South). Peoples' isolation is a relevant social problem, and its consequences on the quality of life and mental health are well noted. The religious institutions respond to social isolation by enforcing the spirit of community and providing peoples social support (Lim, Putnam, 2010). Therefore, according to Neeleman (1998), religiousness operates as a protective factor against mental illness and suicide risk. Thus, it is plausible to think that in larger municipalities, the influence of religion on life satisfaction is more significant because, in those areas, religion satisfies people's need to belong. On the other hand, in small municipalities, being religious can be important for well-being because religion maintains social cohesion among individuals. In general, less urbanized areas are developed around the religious institutions, and all their social activities (e.g., volunteering activities, events organized for the young, centers for study and debate) revolve around a church or a cathedral (see Garelli, 2007).

In conclusion, this paper confirms that an association between religiosity and life satisfaction exists, demonstrating that religion extends its effects also on people's sense of well-being. It is a significant result because came from a

unique religious context, like Italy. This paper provides evidence of the two-way interaction between religion and life satisfaction, with a substantial effect only in the case of public religious forms. Another interesting finding is that this association varies across Italian regions. Results from this paper could be used to address religious initiatives aimed at contrasting social isolation, loneliness, or stigmatization in more vulnerable areas of Italy. Policymakers might use these results to promote initiatives to increase people's life satisfaction within or outside the religious context.

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