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How Religious Faith Affects Beliefs on Poverty A Study in Italy

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Abstract— This study examines causal attributions and perceptions of poverty to enhance our understanding of people’s views and inform effective, broadly supported interventions. Our analysis is based on data from a 2012 study conducted with 1,000 participants in Italy. Initial analyses sought to uncover the relationship between causal attributions for poverty and religious beliefs. Subsequent multivariate analysis further explored these relationships, controlling for variables such as economic status (income), gender, and education level.

Index Terms—Poverty, causal attribution for poverty, religion and poverty.

I. INTRODUCTION

“In our daily lives, we are constantly faced with the challenge of determining whether the events that occur are a consequence of our own actions or if they are influenced by factors beyond our control, such as luck, the intervention of others in positions of power, or unknown elements”, Every individual is perpetually faced with the challenge of discerning whether the outcomes they experience are a result of their own actions or due to factors beyond their control such as luck, the influence of powerful others, or incomprehensible forces [1]. Julian Rotter uses the concept of causal attribution to explore this phenomenon, suggesting that throughout life, individuals strive to understand the origins of events and conditions around them to develop appropriate coping mechanisms. This paper delves into the causal attributions associated with poverty, examining societal perceptions regarding the determinants of such conditions. Specifically, it addresses whether individuals attribute poverty to a lack of personal effort or to systemic failures.

The significance of these attributions extends to a broad spectrum of behaviors, as articulated by Furnham. The beliefs individuals hold about the causes of poverty influence decisions ranging from political participation to charitable giving, highlighting the intricate relationship between attribution and action [2]. Unlike traditional analyses focused solely on economic metrics, this paper adopts a multidimensional approach to poverty that encompasses economic deficits as well as

social and psychological dimensions. Recognizing poverty as a multifaceted phenomenon underscores the need to consider not just financial hardship but also educational attainment, personal aspirations, and the availability of social support networks.

Social stratification, a fundamental societal construct, has prompted extensive sociopsychological and economic research since the 1960s, as noted by Wilson. This body of work has explored the impact of social perceptions and welfare programs on poverty, leading to diverse theoretical frameworks [3], [4]. Bradshaw’s analysis of community anti-poverty programs reveals how different conceptualizations of poverty’s causes inform the design and implementation of interventions, illustrating the practical implications of theoretical debates [4, p.8].

The literature identifies three primary perspectives on the origins of poverty. The first perspective emphasizes individual responsibility, suggesting that poverty results from personal choices and efforts. The “Just World Theory” and notions of “Social Darwinism” exemplify this view, positing that individuals’ circumstances are direct outcomes of their actions [6], [9]. Conversely, a second viewpoint highlights structural factors, attributing poverty to systemic issues rather than individual failings. This perspective includes discussions on the “culture of poverty” and the “Dominant Ideology Thesis”, which argue that societal structures and cultural values play a significant role in perpetuating poverty [4], [10].

Moreover, the “Public Arena Theory” suggests that societal understandings of poverty are shaped within specific public forums, where social issues are debated and framed, influencing public perception and policy [11]. Discussions on “Welfare Dependency” further complicate the picture, pointing to the potential for social assistance programs to inadvertently discourage workforce participation [12].

Interestingly, some theories propose intangible factors such as divine will or fate as explanations for poverty [14], [15]. However, research indicates that individuals’ beliefs about poverty often reflect a combination of these perspectives, recognizing the interplay of various factors in determining poverty. This aligns with the “Cyclical Theory”, which views poverty as the result of a complex interplay of issues that fuel a cycle of decline at both the community and individual levels [4].

This paper aims to contribute to the discourse by exploring the nuanced and varied attributions for poverty, emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive understanding that incorporates individual, structural, and intangible factors. Such an approach not only enriches our theoretical understanding of poverty but also informs more effective and empathetic policy responses.

II. WHAT INFLUENCES BELIEFS ABOUT POVERTY?

Poverty and deprivation are recognized as multifaceted phenomena that transcend simple economic measures, encompassing psychological and social dimensions alongside the more readily quantifiable aspects of income and assets. Recent decades have seen a surge in research emphasizing the role of factors such as limited social capital and a diminished sense of control in contributing to conditions of deprivation. This body of work highlights the complexity of poverty, revealing the diverse factors that shape individuals' perceptions and understandings of it. Notably, there is a significant correlation between cultural, social, economic, and demographic characteristics and the attributions individuals make regarding the impoverished and poverty itself. Numerous studies have explored the impact of actual or perceived socioeconomic status, age, gender, education, political ideology, and religious beliefs on these perceptions [4], [17], [18], [19].

Surprisingly, research exploring the intersection between religion and attitudes toward poverty remains relatively underdeveloped [19]. This oversight is particularly intriguing given the significant role theodicy plays in explaining societal dynamics and the distribution of life's opportunities and rewards [20]. Initial studies examining the relationship between religious beliefs and attributions for social inequalities have considered a variety of faiths—including Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and atheism—across different contexts such as the United States and Australia, intersecting religious faith with socioeconomic factors like race and age [21], [22]. These investigations reveal that Catholics and Protestants are more inclined toward individualistic attributions for poverty than others. Additionally, both Catholics and Jews show a tendency to attribute poverty to fatalistic causes. Race emerges as a critical factor in shaping these attributions, with Black Protestants displaying less individualistic and more structuralist perspectives than their White counterparts, suggesting a “religious underdog” perspective where minority religions challenge systemic issues contrary to pro-status quo beliefs.

In their comprehensive study in the United States, Kluegel and Smith found that atheists exhibit less individualistic attitudes compared to religious individuals, with Catholics and Protestants ranking highest in individualistic beliefs [22]. This research also

noted that religious individuals often attribute personal traits or skills to divine gifts [23, p. 1138]. Hunt's extensive research in California, involving nearly 3,000 interviews, demonstrated that Catholics and Protestants predominantly adopt individualistic explanations for poverty. Protestants were found to be less structuralist than Catholics and Jews, yet more so than nonreligious individuals, and less fatalistic than Catholics—the most fatalistic group—Jews, and non-religious people. Hunt's findings further support the “religious underdog” thesis, indicating that dominant religious groups tend to adhere to an individualistic interpretation of poverty, whereas religious minorities are more inclined toward a structuralist viewpoint [19].

This article aims to delve into the relationship between religious beliefs and perceptions of poverty, noting the scarcity of international literature on this subject, especially concerning Italy. Given Italy's deep religious roots and the presence of the Roman Catholic Church, the lack of studies in this context is particularly noteworthy. Catholicism is the predominant religion in Italy, with nearly 90% of the population identifying as Catholic in 2006 [24]. Recent studies reveal diverse levels of faith among Italians, with approximately 50% describing their faith as “granitic”, 25.1% as faithful albeit with doubts, and 11.8% experiencing fluctuating faith, acknowledging God's presence only during certain periods [25]. Examining the interplay between religious faith and poverty attributions in Italy offers insights into the complex, multidimensional, and contextual nature of poverty. Understanding how perceptions of poverty and related policies are deeply intertwined with specific cultural contexts underscores the importance of examining unique settings like Italy, highlighting the challenge of applying universal perspectives to diverse social and cultural landscapes.

III. METHOD

This investigation utilized data collected from January to March 2012 in the Lazio region. The study engaged nearly 1,000 participants, providing a comprehensive and diverse sociodemographic sample. This sample was stratified based on three sociodemographic variables: the size of the municipality of residence, gender, and age. Stratification was informed by census data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) regarding the resident population in Lazio as of January 1, 2008. The demographic details of the general sample are presented in the table below (Table I).

TABLE I. THE SAMPLE

Education ¹			Age (years)		Sex			Total			
Low	Mid	High	0-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	M	F	
N 390	421	181	108	172	190	154	143	225	478	514	992
% 39,3	42,4	18,2	10,9	17,3	19,1	15,5	14,4	22,7	48,1	51,9	100

¹ Education levels: Low (primary and middle school); Mid (high school); High (degree and post-degree).

Our analysis focuses on a specific subset of respondents, comparing individuals who identify as Catholic with those who declare themselves non-religious (atheists). Within the Catholic group, we further narrowed our focus to individuals reporting a medium to strong faith level or engaging in “religious behaviors” such as consistent participation in religious practices and living in accordance with religious values. This distinction aims to elucidate the differences between groups more clearly, considering that in Italy, a significant number of individuals are baptized as Christians by tradition but do not actively practice or identify as believers. The demographic characteristics of this subsample are detailed in the following table (Table II).

TABLE II. THE SUB-SAMPLES

	Education			Age (years)					Sex		Tot.	%	
	Low	Mid	High	0-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	F			M
Ath.	35	73	63	25	51	37	24	19	17	76	97	173	22,4
	% 11,7	23,2	42	31,3	44	24	19,2	17,1	9	18,8	26,2		
Cath.	263	241	87	55	65	117	101	92	171	328	273	601	77,6
	% 88,3	76,8	58	68,8	56	76	80,8	82,9	91	81,2	73,8		
N	298	314	150	80	116	154	125	111	188	404	370	774	

IV. POVERTY PERCEIVED CAUSES

To explore the perceived causes of poverty, we posed an initial question to all participants: “In your opinion, what factors could lead people to experience poverty?” Respondents were presented with a range of potential attributions for poverty, including lack of ability, bad luck, insufficient effort, loose morals, discrimination, absence of equal opportunities, and the economic system’s failure. Participants were then asked to rate their agreement with each attribution on a 5-point Likert scale.

The results of the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) explained more than 62% of the variance, revealing three primary dimensions of poverty attribution. The first dimension was identified as internal attribution, encompassing personal factors such as effort or ability. The analysis also highlighted two distinct aspects of external attribution: one labeled “Powerful Others”, referring to external agents like other people, government, or labor market influences, and a “Fatalistic” dimension, encompassing supra-individual but non-structural factors such as divine will or luck.

These categorizations, inspired by Levenson [26], help distinguish between attributions that focus on the individual’s control versus those emphasizing external or chance elements. Crucially, the PCA factor loadings indicated an important insight: there is no significant inverse relationship between internal and external attributions. In other words, individuals prone to internal

attributions do not necessarily eschew external explanations for poverty.

V. FAITH AND PRACTICE

In this study, participants’ religious beliefs and their level of religious practice were assessed using two distinct questions, each prefaced with the prompt: “If you are a believer, how do you categorize yourself?” Respondents were then presented with two five-point scales ranging from “non-believer” to “strongly believer” and “not practicing” to “practicing”, respectively. For the purposes of our analysis, we focused exclusively on Catholics who reported medium to high levels of belief and practice (ranging from steps 3 to 5 on our scales).

Our findings reveal patterns similar to those reported in the 2008 European Value Study [27] for individuals with low to medium levels of faith, as illustrated in Table III. However, our data indicates a higher prevalence of individuals with strong faith compared to the earlier study.

TABLE III. COMPARISON WITH 2008 EUROPEAN VALUE STUDY

Levels ²	Present study (%)	2008 EVS (%)
“not believer” / “not at all important”	3,7	2,5
“low faith” / “not important”	6,1	10,5
“medium faith” / “quite interested”	39,4	47,7
“strong faith”, “really strong faith” / “very interested”	50,8	39,3

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE IV. CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION FOR POVERTY IN MEDIUM-STRONG FAITH CATHOLICS AND ATHEISTS

Respondents Attributions	Atheists	Catholics	Tot.	χ^2	df	p
E-P ³	Δ^4 9,5	-9,5	418	13,749	2	,001
E-F	Δ -17,2	17,2	163			
I	Δ 7,7	-7,7	122			
Total	169	534	703			

Our analysis, as depicted in Table IV, reveals that Catholics with strong beliefs are significantly more inclined toward fatalistic explanations for poverty compared to what was anticipated. In contrast, atheist respondents demonstrate a propensity to attribute poverty to both internal and external factors more frequently than expected. Further examination in Table V delineates the differences in causal attributions between practicing Catholics and atheists, mirroring the trend observed in Table IV. Here, atheists are shown to favor both external and internal explanations for poverty more than Catholics, who tend to lean towards

²The sentences before the slash refer to this study. On the contrary, sentences after the slash refer to the 2008 EVS.

³From now on, following acronyms will be used: “E-P”: “External – Powerful others”; “E-F”: “External – Fatalistic”; “P”: “Internal”.

⁴“ Δ ”= difference between observed frequency and expected (theoretical) frequency.

explanations that invoke a transcendent dimension, suggesting a reliance on divine or providential reasons.

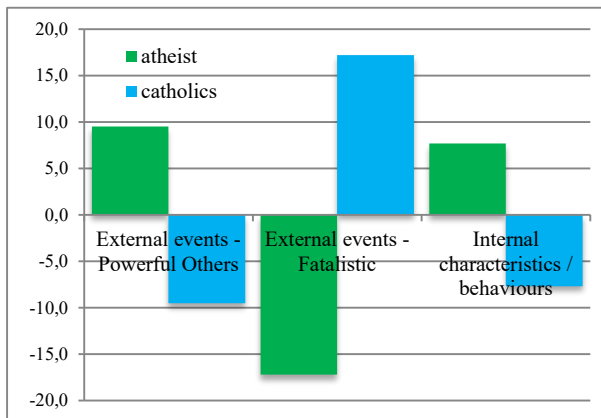


Fig. 1 Causal attribution for poverty in medium-strong faith Catholics and atheists

This distinction underscores a fundamental divergence in worldview: atheists generally dismiss the notion that life’s outcomes are determined by forces beyond human control, emphasizing instead that personal or others’ actions are the primary drivers. This perspective aligns with the “underdog thesis” [19], [28], which posits that individuals or groups outside the mainstream (e.g., atheists in predominantly Catholic Italy) are more disposed to challenge established ideologies, preferring explanations for poverty that eschew fatalism for more tangible, either external or internal, causes.

TABLE V. CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION FOR POVERTY IN PRACTICING CATHOLICS AND ATHEISTS

Respondents	Atheists	Catholics	Tot.	χ^2	df	p
E-P	Δ 10,8	-10,8	307	12,66	2	,002
E-F	Δ -15,8	15,8	117			
I	Δ 5	-5	99			
Total	169	354	523			

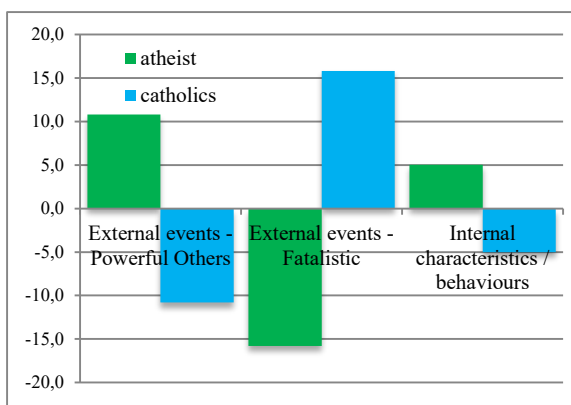


Fig. 2 Causal attribution for poverty in practicing Catholics and atheists

Conversely, it can be surmised that Catholic respondents might eschew internal attributions out of a form of compassion that alters their perspective depending on whether the subject is wealth or poverty [17]. The literature presents seemingly contradictory findings on this topic: Hovemyr [29] discovered that atheists tend to

embrace both internal and external explanations for poverty, though not to a statistically significant extent. On the other hand, Hunt’s study [19] indicates that Catholics in California predominantly select individual and fatalistic factors to explain poverty.

Given the complex impact of socioeconomic factors on attributional perspectives [30], it is plausible that these discrepancies arise from cultural influences acting as intervening variables in the relationship. Numerous studies [21], [31] emphasize the American cultural proclivity, rooted in Protestant tradition, for attributing greater importance to individual responsibility over contextual factors in poverty discussions. This perspective champions the “self-made man” ethos, wherein the poor are primarily held accountable for their circumstances.

To further elucidate the role of these intervening variables, our study segmented the sample into sub-groups based on additional variables (income level, gender, education level) and examined the frequency of responses. This segmentation aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how cultural, socioeconomic, and educational factors influence the relationship between religious beliefs (or lack thereof) and causal attributions for poverty.

A. Income

TABLE VI. INCOME AND CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION – STRONG FAITH RESPONDENTS

Respondents	Income			Atheists	Catholics	Tot.	Atheists	Catholics	Tot.
	Low	Medium	High						
E-P	Δ 9,9	-9,9	88	-0,2	0,2	177	0,6	-0,6	36
E-F	Δ -6,9	6,9	37	-6,7	6,7	68	-0,8	0,8	10
I	Δ -3	3	21	6,9	-6,9	60	0,3	-0,3	16
Total	35	111	146	102	203	305	30	32	62
	χ^2	df	p	χ^2	df	p	χ^2	df	p
	15,5	2	,01	6,6	2	,04	,34	2	,85

TABLE VII. INCOME AND CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION – PRACTICING RESPONDENTS

Respondents	Income			Atheists	Catholics	Tot.	Atheists	Catholics	Tot.
	Low	Medium	High						
E-P	Δ 8,5	-8,5	126	0,3	-0,3	236	1,3	-1,3	44
E-F	Δ -5,3	5,3	41	-10,9	10,9	108	0,2	-0,2	10
I	Δ -3,2	3,2	29	10,6	-10,6	66	-1,5	1,5	25
Total	35	161	196	102	308	410	30	49	79
	χ^2	df	p	χ^2	df	p	χ^2	df	p
	10,992		,004	14,93	2	,001	,557	2	,757

Sub-groups for income were determined using two thresholds: 60% and 200% of the median income of the

total sample, paralleling Eurostat's criteria for identifying low-income and wealthy individuals [31]. As shown in Tables VI and VII, income does not seem to significantly alter the relationship between faith and causal attributions for poverty.

The observed trends are consistent with the overall sample in six out of nine comparisons. Notably, among the wealthier segment, the difference between observed and expected frequencies is minimal, suggesting that income neutralizes the relationship between faith and fatalistic attributions. A similar pattern is observed with internal attributions, where observed frequencies align closely with expected values. However, the row marginal totals in these categories are among the lowest in the table, which could account for the non-significant chi-squared values. Interestingly, income appears to have a negligible impact on the attribution styles of practicing individuals, as seven out of nine comparisons align with the general sample trends. This observation indicates that being atheist or Catholic does not significantly affect how poverty is attributed to internal factors among individuals with medium incomes.

B. Gender

When analyzing the data by gender, the patterns observed largely mirror those of the entire sample. However, distinctions emerge with respect to external attributions linked to powerful others among females and internal attributions among males. Gender appears to exert a more pronounced influence on those attributions it traditionally affects, while in other instances, its impact seems negligible.

TABLE VIII. GENDER AND CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION – STRONG FAITH RESPONDENTS

	Females			Males		
	Atheists	Catholics	Tot.	Atheists	Catholics	Tot.
Respondents						
Attributions						
E-P	Δ -4,3	4,3	185	15	-15	233
E-F	Δ -3,2	3,2	68	-13,2	13,2	95
I	Δ 7,5	-7,5	83	-1,9	1,9	39
Total	95	241	336	74	293	367
	χ^2	df	p	χ^2	df	p
	4,620	2	,099	17,844	2	,000

TABLE IX. GENDER AND CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION – PRACTICING RESPONDENTS

	Females			Males		
	Atheists	Catholics	Tot.	Atheists	Catholics	Tot.
Respondents						
Attributions						
E-P	Δ 12,2	-12,2	185	1,1	-1,1	120
E-F	Δ -9,3	9,3	57	-5,9	5,9	56
I	Δ -2,9	2,9	33	4,8	-4,8	62
Total	74	201	275	93	145	238
	χ^2	df	p	χ^2	df	p
	4,18	2	,124	13,2	2	,001

C. Education

Furthermore, categorizing the sample based on educational levels does not significantly alter the differences in attributions of poverty between Catholics and atheists. This suggests that education level may not play a crucial role in shaping how individuals attribute the causes of impoverishment.

TABLE X. EDUCATION AND CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION – STRONG FAITH RESPONDENTS

	Education								
	Low			Medium			High		
Respondents									
Attributions									
E-P	Δ 1,9	-1,9	156	5	-5	168	0,6	-0,6	90
E-F	Δ -6,7	6,7	67	-6	6	64	-2,6	2,6	28
I	Δ 4,8	-4,8	48	1	-1	52	1,9	-1,9	18
Total	35	236	271	71	213	284	61	75	136
	χ^2	df	p	χ^2	df	p	χ^2	df	p
	10,3	2	,006	3,9	2	,143	1,8	2	,407

Interestingly, the influence of practice on attributional styles appears to be less pronounced than that of faith, despite their clear connection (see Table XI). Segmenting the sample by gender reveals consistent and significant trends for males, whereas for females, notable changes occur in internal attributions: atheists lean less towards internal causes, while Catholics show a stronger inclination towards internalist explanations than expected. Similar to the observations related to faith, the educational level does not markedly affect the relationship between practicing Catholics and atheists in their attributional styles. While there is a slight decrease in significance for one category, the overall trends closely align with those seen in the full sample analysis.

TABLE XI. EDUCATION LEVEL AND CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION – PRACTICING RESPONDENTS

	Education								
	Low			Medium			High		
Respondents									
Attributions									
E-P	Δ 1,9	-1,9	106	4,9	-4,9	121	2,6	-2,6	78
E-F	Δ -6,1	6,1	43	-3,9	3,9	40	-4,8	4,8	30
I	Δ 4,2	-4,2	36	-1	1	43	2,1	-2,1	16
Total	35	150	185	71	133	204	61	63	124
	χ^2	df	p	χ^2	df	p	χ^2	df	p
	9,12	2	,010	2,66	2	,264	4,51	2	,05

VII. CONCLUSION

This research delves into the attitudes towards the causes of poverty, a complex issue influenced by a myriad of socio-economic factors including political orientation, educational level, age, income, gender, and notably, religious beliefs. The influence of religion on perceptions of reality is profound [19], [21], [29], [30], [33], and our analyses confirm its significant impact on causal attributions for poverty.

A critical aspect of our study was examining the relationship between religious beliefs and attributional beliefs, accounting for other socio-economic variables such as education, income, and gender. Education plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of poverty, suggesting that a higher educational level or age-related experiences may foster a broader understanding of the factors contributing to poverty. Contrasting findings in literature highlight the complexity of this relationship: Kreidl [6] observed a negative correlation between education levels and fatalistic explanations, whereas Lever [34] found that individuals with advanced education perceive poverty as an individual's failing. Slagsvold and Sorensen [35] argue that higher education correlates with a greater sense of control over life events. Economic status also influences attributions for poverty, consistent with the concept of 'defensive externality'. Individuals with lower economic status are more inclined to external explanations, whereas those in better financial situations attribute their social status to personal efforts, echoing the Learned Helplessness Theory [36]. This theory examines the impact of uncontrollable adverse events on an individual's motivation, cognition, and emotional state, with low-income individuals attributing their circumstances to factors beyond their control.

Gender emerges as a significant variable, with studies indicating that women tend to adopt more externalist views compared to men's internalist perspectives [17], [18], [37], [38]. This distinction may be rooted in cultural norms, where traditional roles influence perceptions of control and responsibility.

In Italy, where this study was conducted, the relationship between religious faith or lack thereof and perceptions of poverty remains significant, even when considering other socio-economic characteristics. Certain variables, especially gender, modulate this relationship, highlighting the intricate interplay between personal attitudes and broader social factors [39].

These findings contribute to our understanding of how religious beliefs, or their absence, shape individuals' approaches to social phenomena in contexts where religion plays a crucial role. The relevance of such studies is underscored by Schiller's assertion that our perspectives on poverty directly influence public policy choices [19]. The manner in which we conceptualize the causes of poverty—whether as personal deficiencies or as a result of external circumstances—guides policy interventions. For instance, policies might focus on enhancing individual capabilities or, as Rank suggests, on creating job opportunities to address external factors contributing to poverty.

Moreover, interventions derived from comprehensive discussions and shared understanding are more effective as they are integral to a participatory process aimed at fostering involvement and empowerment. This approach emphasizes the importance of considering the multifaceted nature of poverty and the diverse factors that contribute to its persistence in society.

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