



Five-factor personality traits in priests



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ABSTRACT

Several studies have demonstrated that religiosity is associated with specific personality traits, such as high Agreeableness/Conscientiousness or low Psychoticism. However, this evidence emerged by investigating active churchgoers with high religious practice or clerical individuals using Eysenck's taxonomy. This study explores, for the first time, personality profiles in Priests ordained by the Roman Catholic Church (N = 200) using the Five-Factor Model of personality in an Italian population. Priests were compared with demographically matched non-clerical with high religious practices (HRP, N = 301) and non-religious men (NR, N = 213).

Analysis of variance demonstrated that both Priests and HRP men shared similar personality traits, such as higher Agreeableness, lower Extraversion–excitement seeking and Openness, with respect to NR. However, Priests have distinct traits, such as the highest values of Agreeableness and the lowest Neuroticism sub-facets of angry hostility and impulsiveness, in comparison with other groups. Finally, although high Conscientiousness characterized both the Priest and HRP groups, surprisingly, we found that this psychological trait was only more evident in the latter group. Differences in religious order would seem to influence this trait.

This study demonstrates that Priests' personality differ from those of HRP men, although some important personality (sub-) facets are similar.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Relationship between religiousness and health

A plethora of studies investigating the relationships between religiousness and health has clearly demonstrated that religion influences peoples' moral judgments and prosocial behaviors (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). What has been reported is that individuals who score higher on measures of religiousness are less likely to drink and smoke (Benjamin & Wulfert, 2005; Hill, Burdette, Ellison, & Musick, 2006) and show a 25–30% reduction in mortality (Musick, House, & Williams, 2004) as well as lower rates of depressive symptoms, crime and delinquency (Baier & Wright, 2001).

A number of attempts have been made to explain the mechanisms underlying the association between religiousness and psychological wealth, which can be summarized according to the popular conundrum

“Which Came First - the Chicken or the Egg?” In other words, “Does religiousness promote healthy behaviors facilitating self-control and self-monitoring through long-term practices and teachings or are people with specific psychological characteristics more predisposed to religious precepts and behaviors?”

For theorists of the psychology of religion this remains an important matter of debate. However, as researchers seek to understand individual differences in people's religiousness, *personality traits* have emerged as important predictors of sustained well-being and psychological wealth. Broad personality factors have pervasive influences on thoughts, feelings and actions and may define what can be called *personality styles*. Self-regulation and self-control are crucial facets of religious personality style (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009) and people with high self-control have better self-assessed health and behaviors (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004).

1.2. Relationship between religiousness and personality traits

Self-regulation and self-control are sub-facets of a broad personality trait called *Conscientiousness*. Conscientiousness is the personality trait of being thorough, careful or vigilant and one of the five traits of the Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality (McCrae & Costa, 2008). During

Abbreviations: HRP, high religious practices; NR, non-religious individuals; FFM, Five-Factor Model.

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the past decades, a general worldwide consensus has emerged that variations in human personality may be best captured across five dimensions: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Extraversion and Neuroticism. The FFM postulates that these five traits are “endogenous dispositions that follow intrinsic paths of development essentially independent of environmental influences.” (McCrae et al., 2000). From a FFM of personality perspective, religiousness is viewed as a cultural adaptation of specific personality traits, such as Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. Indeed, different meta-analytic reviews (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007; Saroglou, 2002, 2010) supported the notion that high Agreeableness and Conscientiousness emerged as the major personality characteristics of religiousness. People with prosocial tendencies (Agreeableness) are likely to invest in religious beliefs, feelings and practices that emphasize social harmony and the idea of a protective and loving God. Again, people characterized by orderliness and self-control (Conscientiousness) are likely to invest in religious beliefs and practices that emphasize the meaningfulness of life and order in the universe through a sense of transcendence (Saroglou, 2010). This kind of relationship between personality traits and religiousness has been observed across informants, genders, ages, cohorts, religions, countries and psychological tests (Saroglou, 2010). However, the large amount of these findings emerged essentially investigating active churchgoers with high religious practice rather than clerical men directly.

On the contrary, Eysenck's taxonomy (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985) has a long-standing tradition in the psychological study of religious personality (Francis, 1992, 2009; Piedmont, 2005). Although, the vast part of this literature has attempted to summarize the personality characteristics of Roman Catholic Priests in terms of the general construct of femininity (low Extraversion combined with high Neuroticism) (Francis & Wilcox, 1996), the emerging personality profile of religiousness from an Eysenck perspective speaks about the presence of low Psychoticism (Francis, 1992, 2009; Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007). People with this trait are charming, emphatic and tender-minded, follow group expectations and apply learned rules and traditions. Eysenck's personality trait of Psychoticism is, thus, consistent with some aspects of the FFM of personality, such as Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. This evidence was clearly described by Loudon and Francis (1999) who investigated a large sample of Catholic Priests in England and Wales ($N = 1168$). In terms of Psychoticism, Priests had higher emotional stability. However, these authors also found that Priests as being less extraverted and more cold, impersonal and insensitive than non-clerical men. Extending evaluations on other religious ministers (Anglican, Methodist and Pentecostal in England) Francis and colleagues confirmed that low Extraversion is another consistent trait of personality in clergy (Francis, 1991, 2009; Francis & Kay, 1995). Indeed, high Extraversion was more evident in people who are members of charismatic religious groups (i.e., those emphasizing ecstatic experiences, inspiration, and gifts from the Holy Spirit; Francis & Jones, 1997) or in female ministers (i.e., Methodist clergy; Robbins, Francis, Haley, & Kay, 2001).

Evidence provided by the FFM's and Eysenck's taxonomies have also been confirmed by Ferrari (2015) using the HEXACO personality model (Ashton & Lee, 2009). Studying 1717 ordained, permanent deacons in the U.S.A. Catholic Church, this author found higher Honesty–Humility dimension scores (a personality factor consistent with the FFM-related Agreeableness) compared to a community sample.

However, moving on a psychopathological perspective, controversial findings have been reported. Indeed, using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI-2), Dunn (1990) reviewed the literature concerning Catholic Priests and concluded that these men tended to be more perfectionistic, worrisome, introverted, socially inept and, in more extreme cases, perhaps more isolated and withdrawn. Plante, Aldridge, and Louie (2005) confirmed this hypothesis describing U.S.A. Catholic applicants to the priesthood as tending to maintain elevated scores on overly controlled hostility, defensiveness and repression. Additionally, Plante and Lackey (2007) reported that

applicants to the Catholic diaconate score high on defensiveness, repression, naiveté and a strong need for affection.

1.3. “Who do you Say I Am?” Matthew 15:16

A lot of studies had attempted to apply the insights of personality theory for understanding psychological traits of clerical individuals. Unfortunately, as stated by Loudon and Francis (1999), the integration of such studies has been prevented by the range of personality theories employed (MMPI, Eysenck's, HEXACO's and FFM's taxonomies) that had provided several pieces of a complex puzzle to assemble.

2. Overview of the present study

To shed new light in this field of study, we investigated the individual personality basis of clerical men compared with demographically matched non-clerical (churchgoers with high religious practices [HRP]) and non-religious individuals [NR] (atheist, agnostic, non-believer, humanistic) men by a FFM of personality perspective. This exploratory study has three particular characteristics: This is the first personality study that investigates, simultaneously, three groups of people with different affinities to religion. Indeed, in the large part of literature, studies have only focused on students or on non-clerical men with high religious activities (i.e. applicants to the diaconate, seminarians) or on clerical men (Saroglou, 2010). Moreover, this is the first personality study that uses the FFM on a large sample of clerical men, whereas previous studies primarily employed Eysenck's model (Francis, 2009; Francis & Kay, 1995). Finally, this is the first personality study on Italian clerical men. Indeed, the majority of prior literature was on populations from North American and North Europe.

Following previous evidence on the personality profile of Saroglou, 2010 religiousness as defined by the FFM perspective (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007; Saroglou, 2002), one might expect that Priests should demonstrate higher or almost similar personality characteristics than that detected in HRP men (high Agreeableness and Conscientiousness). Alternatively, considering previous findings based on Eysenck's dimensional model of personality in clergy (Francis, 1992, 2009; Loudon & Francis, 1999) or based on other models of personality (i.e. MMPI; Plante et al., 2005) we could expect the presence of reduced Extraversion or high Neuroticism. Moreover, we could not necessarily interpret the Priests' personality as only very highly religious, but also the personality who exerts responsibilities in jobs that are clearly socially oriented and focused on those other than one's self. Therefore, we further evaluated the impact of some religious orders (typically characterized by high and low pastoral responsibility) on the detected personality profile of clerical men.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Two hundred Priests (70% Diocesan, 27% Franciscan, 1% Neocatechum, 1% Salesian, 1% Missionary; mean age of ordained ministry: 18.6 ± 12.3 years), 301 individuals with HRP and 213 individuals with NR were enrolled in the study. Inclusion criteria for all participants were: 1) male, 2) ages 18–80 years and 3) able to complete the questionnaire independently. The only exclusion criterion was the presence of pathological medical conditions, such as tumor, diabetes, heart disease and hypertension that could affect questionnaire delivery.

Priests were members of churches in south-central Italy. All Priests were ordained ministers in the Roman Catholic Church. We categorized non-clerical men as HRP or NR. We recruited individuals with HRP from congregations of well-known Catholic associations. Only individuals who regularly attended church activities and had strong religious habits and practices were included in this group. Moreover, all these subjects reported that they spent most of their spare time dealing with several religious activities (e.g., praying, assisting Priests in routine church

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