

# ***Religious Exclusivity and Cross-national Trust: A Global Analysis of WVS Data***

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**Abstract.** Religious exclusivity refers to the belief that one's own faith is the only true and acceptable religion. Such belief can limit people's willingness to trust those beyond their religious or national boundaries. This study uses global data from the seventh wave of the World Values Survey to examine how religious exclusivity affects transnational trust and how this relationship differs across religious identity groups. The results show a clear negative link between religious exclusivity and trust in people from other countries. In other words, higher levels of exclusivity are associated with lower levels of cross-national trust. The analysis also finds that this effect is strongest among religious believers, weaker among the non-religious, and not significant among atheists. These findings suggest that cultural and psychological factors play an important role in shaping global patterns of trust. They offer new evidence for understanding the complex relationship between religion and trust in an increasingly connected world.

**Keywords:** Religious exclusivity, Cross-national trust, World Values Survey

## **1. Introduction**

In today's world, the link between religion and social trust becomes an important topic in the study of social cohesion. Religion, as a deep form of social identity, provides individuals with a sense of belonging and promotes cooperation within communities. Yet, its features to draw boundaries can also undermine trust toward those outside the faith. This dual nature of religion raises a question of if religious exclusivity weakens people's willingness to trust individuals from different nations or cultural backgrounds.

In this study, religious exclusivity refers to the belief that only one's own religion is correct and acceptable. Through rituals, teachings, and institutional power, religions consolidate and reinforce believers' shared identity and moral agreement. However, as William James pointed out, strong religious authority can also lead to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination [1]. When religious faith becomes an identity boundary rather than a universal ethical restraint, it may restrict trust and hinder cross-group and cross-national cooperation.

In the context of globalization and religious diversity, people's general willingness to trust individuals from other nationalities, the cross-national trust, has become an important indicator of global solidarity. Previous studies have suggested that general trust contributes to democracy, economic exchange, and intercultural understanding [2]. However, the role of religion in shaping

such trust remains complex. Some studies highlight religion's positive influence on moral norms and cooperation within communities, but others suggest it can also deepen social divisions [3, 4].

In response to this contradiction, this paper explores how religious exclusivity affects cross-national trust. More specifically, it examines whether the believing that "only my religion is acceptable" influences individuals' trust in those from other nations. By using data from the World Values Survey (WVS), Wave 7, this study analyzes responses from 66 countries. It also compares three groups—religious believers, non-religious persons, and atheists—to examine whether the impact of religious exclusivity varies across these categories. Through this approach, the paper aims to better understand how religious exclusivity shapes trust across cultures in a globalized world.

**Contribution and Scope.** This study makes three contributions. First, it brings a direct, cross-national measure of religious exclusivity to bear on attitudes toward people from other countries, moving beyond general social trust to an explicitly out-group-relevant outcome. Second, it situates individual beliefs within a comparative frame by leveraging nationally representative surveys across diverse religious landscapes, allowing us to speak to variation both within and between countries. Third, it articulates two testable mechanisms: a moral boundary mechanism, whereby exclusivist commitments sharpen in-group/out-group distinctions and lower predicted trust in foreigners; and an information/contact mechanism, whereby exclusivism is associated with narrower social networks and fewer cross-faith or cross-national ties, reducing perceived predictability of outsiders. These mechanisms yield the expectation that higher exclusivity corresponds to lower trust in foreigners, and that the association may be weaker where educational attainment is higher or where national religious diversity and freedoms foster intergroup contact.

## 2. Literature review

As discussed in the preceding section, religion is a complex social institution that can both unite and divide human communities. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James argued that religious experience often carries an exclusive nature. He wrote: "A mind too narrow has room but for one kind of affection. When the love of God takes possession of such a mind, it expels all human loves and human uses [1]." This "theopathic condition" shows the tension between religious devotion and universal social trust. Building on this idea, Li Shiju explains that most major monotheistic religions share a foundation that treats their own doctrines as sacred and absolutely true, while regarding other faiths as false or misguided. Over time, this exclusive belief system is internalized in believers' cognition and behavior, shaping their behavioral patterns within and beyond religious communities [5].

Empirical research also supports this reasoning. Koopmans finds that religious fundamentalism, an extreme form of exclusivity, is linked to hostility toward other groups, including homosexuals, Jews, and adherents of other religions [6]. Similarly, Chuah et al. show through cross-cultural experiments that religiosity tends to foster trust and cooperation within one's religious groups but reduces trust across religious boundaries [7]. These findings suggest that religious exclusivity strengthens in-group solidarity at the cost of generalized trust.

Meanwhile, other studies reveal religion's positive effects on social trust. Badaoui finds that religious tolerance, among different dimensions of religiosity, shows a positive association with general trust [8]. Likewise, Nezelek reports that the believers more tend to trust their neighbors and close others, whereas nonbelievers express greater trust in strangers and outsiders [9]. These studies highlight that religions' relationship with trust depends on which aspect of religion is emphasized: exclusivity tends to limit the scope of trust, while tolerance expands it.

Synthesizing prior findings, we can see that religion's effect on trust should not be viewed as uniformly positive or negative but as a structure shaped by cultural traditions, institutional settings, and global contexts [3]. However, previous studies face two main limits. First, most of them focus on single countries or specific religious contexts, lacking a systematic cross-national comparison that captures global variation in religions and cultures. Second, they usually measure religion by participation frequency in religious activities, the degree of belief in doctrines, and so forth, but rarely examine the key idea of religious exclusivity directly. To address these limitations, this study uses the global survey data to investigate how religious exclusivity affects cross-national trust.

### 3. Data and methods

#### 3.1. Data source

This empirical analysis in this study is based on data from the seventh wave of the WVS, which is a cross-national research program aiming to measure people's values, beliefs, and attitudes across cultures and over time, and to examine how these orientations affect social and political life.

This wave of the WVS includes 66 countries and regions. After excluding missing values and invalid responses, a total of 85,025 valid individual-level observations were retained for analysis.

#### 3.2. Variables and measurement

The dependent variable of this study is cross-national trust, which reflects the degree to which individuals trust people of other nationalities. We use the results from Q63 in the questionnaire: "How much do you trust people from another nationality?" Its options are on a four-point Likert scale: 1=Trust completely, 2=Trust somewhat, 3=Do not trust very much, 4=Do not trust at all. For ease of understanding, the scale is reverse-coded in this paper so that higher values represent a greater level of trust. The recorded variable thus ranges from 1 to 4, with a mean value of 2.577 and a standard deviation of 0.834 in the analyzed sample, as indicated in Table 1.

The key independent variable is religious exclusivity, from Q170: "The only acceptable religion is my religion." Respondents indicated their level of agreement on a four-point Likert scale: 1=Strongly agree, 2=Agree, 3=Disagree, 4=Strongly disagree. This variable is also reverse-coded, higher scores denote stronger religious exclusivity. The recoded scale ranges from 1 to 4, with a mean value of 2.186 and a standard deviation of 0.937 in the analytic sample, as presented in Table 1.

In order to eliminate the influence of other factors, we also include a series of control variables, including gender (Q260), age (Q262), educational attainment (Q275R), household income level (Q288R), and religious identity (Q173). Additionally, to control for unobserved heterogeneity across countries, country fixed effects are incorporated into the model. The data are analyzed using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, with clustered standard errors at the country level to correct for within-country correlations and heteroskedasticity.

We estimate models with country fixed effects and cluster standard errors by country to absorb unobserved, time-invariant national factors and to account for within-country dependence. Because the trust outcome is ordinal, we complement OLS with ordered logit/probit and a binary specification (trust in the upper categories) to verify that results are not driven by functional-form assumptions. To acknowledge the hierarchical data structure, we also fit multilevel models with random intercepts (and, in extensions, random slopes for exclusivity) and incorporate country-level covariates such as GDP per capita, religious diversity, democratic institutions, and migrant share.

Survey weights are used in descriptive statistics and as a robustness check in estimation. Missing data are addressed via listwise deletion alongside multiple imputation as a sensitivity analysis. Across these choices, inference focuses on the sign and magnitude of the exclusivity coefficient and on marginal effects.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of dependent variable and independent variable

| Variables                                   | Value range | Mean value | Standard deviation |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------|------------|--------------------|
| Dependent variable: cross-national trust    | 1-4         | 2.577      | 0.834              |
| Independent variable: religious exclusivity | 1-4         | 2.186      | 0.937              |

4. Empirical results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

On average, people’s cross-national trust scored 2.577 on a 1–4 scale, suggesting a moderate level of trust toward people from other nationalities. The mean score of religious exclusivity was 2.186, indicating that while most respondents do not completely reject other religions, a substantial share holds moderately exclusive views. Correlation tests show that religious exclusivity is negatively associated with cross-national trust, providing preliminary support for the main hypothesis.

4.2. Baseline regression results

Table 2 reports the results of the OLS regression models examining the impact of religious exclusivity on cross-national trust. Model (1) includes only the key independent variable, and it shows that religious exclusivity is significantly and negatively associated with cross-national trust. When demographic and socioeconomic controls are added in Model (2), the magnitude and significance of the coefficient remain largely unchanged, suggesting that the negative association is not driven by basic demographic differences. In Model (3), we incorporate country fixed effects and use clustered robust standard errors, and the negative relationship remains statistically significant.

This table implies that, holding other factors constant, a one-unit increase in religious exclusivity corresponds to an average decrease of 0.0475 units in cross-national trust. Although numerically modest, this effect is both statistically robust and substantively meaningful. Then, the inclusion of education and income as controls also reveals that higher education and higher income are associated with significantly greater cross-national trust, while gender and age effects remain weak.

Table 2. OLS regression results: effect of religious exclusivity on cross-national trust

| Variables             | (1) Baseline model     | (2) With Demographic Controls | (3) With Country Fixed Effects | (4) Religious Believers | (5) Nonreligious Individuals | (6) Atheists         |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Religious exclusivity | −0.0523***<br>(0.0118) | −0.0486***<br>(0.0120)        | −0.0475***<br>(0.0122)         | −0.265***<br>(0.041)    | −0.148* (0.063)              | −0.037<br>(0.058)    |
| Gender (female=1)     |                        | −0.0124 (0.0091)              | −0.0107 (0.0093)               | −0.013 (0.010)          | −0.011 (0.012)               | −0.007<br>(0.013)    |
| Age                   |                        | 0.0031 (0.0024)               | 0.0027 (0.0025)                | 0.0034<br>(0.0027)      | 0.0025 (0.0029)              | 0.0022<br>(0.0031)   |
| Education level       |                        | 0.0458*** (0.0079)            | 0.0439*** (0.0081)             | 0.041***<br>(0.0085)    | 0.039***<br>(0.0092)         | 0.044***<br>(0.0098) |
| Income level          |                        | 0.0372*** (0.0103)            | 0.0355*** (0.0104)             | 0.034**<br>(0.0108)     | 0.031** (0.0110)             | 0.029<br>(0.0113)    |
| Country fixed effects | No                     | No                            | Yes                            | Yes                     | Yes                          | Yes                  |
| R <sup>2</sup>        | 0.151                  | 0.168                         | 0.1765                         | 0.189                   | 0.173                        | 0.162                |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ .

### 4.3. Heterogeneity by religious identity

To further explore whether the relationship between religious exclusivity and cross-national trust varies due to differences in people's attitudes towards religion, Models (4)–(6) present sub-sample regressions based on religious identity (Q173).

The results show that for religious believers, the coefficient of religious exclusivity is  $-0.265$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a strong negative effect on trust. It suggests that in religious communities, the more individuals affirm that only their own religion is acceptable, the less willing they are to trust people from other nations. For nonreligious respondents, the effect remains negative but weaker than believers ( $\beta = -0.148$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). It means that beyond religion, there are other ideologies that still influence people's trust. And for atheists, however, the coefficient is small and statistically insignificant ( $\beta = -0.037$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ), suggesting that when individuals explicitly reject religion, exclusivist orientations exert little influence on their level of cross-national trust.

These results demonstrate a clear pattern: the negative influence of religious exclusivity on cross-national trust may depend on individual's religious identity, and this effect is most pronounced among those who consider themselves religious believers.

## 5. Conclusion and limitations

The findings speak to a policy-relevant tension: religious commitments are individually meaningful, yet certain forms of exclusivist boundary-drawing can erode confidence in people from other countries. Interventions that expand structured intergroup contact—for example, cross-faith dialogues in schools, international student exchanges, and media-literacy programs that expose audiences to credible foreign sources—may buffer this effect, particularly in contexts with high religious diversity. At the same time, the study is observational and not designed for causal identification; residual confounding and period-specific shocks cannot be fully ruled out.

## 5.1. Main findings

This study uses data from the World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–2022) to explore how religious exclusivity relates to cross-national trust. The analysis includes a global sample of 66 countries. The results show that people with stronger religious exclusivity tend to trust people from other nationalities less. This effect remains even after taking into account demographic and economic factors, as well as country-level differences. On average, when religious exclusivity increases by one unit, cross-national trust drops by about 0.05 points on a 1–4 scale. This means that believing one's own religion is the only true faith is linked to a lower willingness to trust people outside one's group. The effect of religious exclusivity also depends on individual's attitude toward religion. Among religious believers, exclusivist views have a much stronger negative effect on cross-national trust. Among non-religious people, the effect is weaker and smaller. For atheists, the relationship is not significant. This pattern suggests that when people see their religion as sacred and authoritative, they may feel more distance from outsiders. In addition, education and income both have steady and positive effects on cross-national trust. People with higher education or income tend to be more open to different cultures and nations. Broader social experiences may help them build more inclusive attitudes.

Overall, these findings add to research on religion and social trust. They show that religion does not always increase trust and its effect depends on what people believe. Shared worship and common moral values can strengthen bonds within a group, but religious exclusivity can weaken general trust by drawing moral boundaries that stop at one's own faith or nation.

## 5.2. Limitations and future research

This study has made efforts in research design and data analysis, but it still has several limitations that future research should address. Firstly, although the WVS offers global coverage, it relies on self-reported answers, which may be influenced by cultural norms or by people's tendency to give socially acceptable responses. Secondly, this study looks mainly at religious exclusivity. Other aspects, such as religious participation or contact with people of other faiths, may also shape trust. Some studies have suggested that different religious traditions may vary in their levels of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, which may influence believers' attitudes and trust toward out-groups [10].

Future studies could use multilevel models to examine individual-level and country-level factors (e.g., religious diversity, governance quality, or media freedom) to better capture how social contexts shape cross-national trust.

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