

14. THE IMPACT OF THE CHILD ABUSE SCANDALS ON TRUST IN THE CHURCH:

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM BELGIUM

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Abstract

Over the last decennia, the position of the Church and religion in Western societies has become less central to social, cultural and public life. On top of structural processes of secularization, the Catholic Church has, more recently, faced painful moments of deep crisis because of child sexual abuse scandals. This contribution investigates how the child abuse scandal involving Roger Vangheluwe (the bishop of Bruges), has affected institutional trust in the Catholic Church in Belgium. To do this, we analyse panel data from EVS wave 4 (2009) and a follow-up survey among the same respondents in 2010. This panel design -with the child abuse scandal as a natural experiment in between the two measurements- allows us to study conjunctural changes in trust in the Church. Our results indicate that the loss of trust in the church-as-institution is especially outspoken among the religiously more involved persons. Those who are convinced that the church authorities did not fulfill their role as ‘guardians of trust’ in dealing with the pedophilia cases report the strongest decrease in trust. These results are illustrative of churchgoers’ disappointment with the behavior of priests and indignation about the improper functioning of church hierarchies.

14.1 Introduction

Over the last decennia, the position of the Church and religion in Western societies has changed drastically. Through processes of secularization, religion is less central to social, cultural and public life, while its moral authority and impact on the citizen's personal life have profoundly diminished. Secularization and the wider value changes has figured prominently on the research agenda of the *European Values Study (EVS)*, the project in which Loek Halman played an invaluable role. But Loek has also more directly contributed to the empirical research into secularization. Loek, together with Veerle Draulans (2006), studied religious practices and beliefs among Europeans, and conclude that secularization is taking place across Europe, but that the speed and trajectories vary substantially across countries. Furthermore, together with Erik van Ingen, Loek (2015) found that the moral guidance of churches is no longer self-evident nowadays and seem to be collapsing.

Also in Flanders-Belgium, the Catholic Church is losing its privileged religious and moral authority. Particularly fundamental shifts in religious practice have taken place in the period 1967-2020. First, the number of Flemish people who regularly go to church has fallen to below five percent in the last fifty years, while in the late 1960s more than half of population were active churchgoers (Verschraegen & Abts, 2022). Secondly, there is also a strong decline in the number of church baptisms, marriages and funerals. While these figures were still above ninety percent in the late 1960s, in the 2020s the number of religious baptisms and funerals fell below 40%, while just over one in seven couples still enter into a church wedding (cf. De Maeyer & Abts, 2013; Verschraegen & Abts, 2022). These statistics illustrate the exodus of the church, and at the same time that Flemish society is strongly secularizing. Some groups are almost completely alienated from Catholic Church and faith; only very few young people are still going to church, while also the belief in God is withering away (Dobelaere, Voyé & Billiet, 2011). This evolution illustrates the waning authority of the Catholic Church in Belgium.

In addition to these structural trends, the Catholic Church has, more recently, faced painful moments of deep crisis because of child sexual abuse scandals.

In the case of Belgium, the Catholic Church experienced its *annus horribilis* in 2010. On April 23rd, 2010, Roger Vangheluwe (the bishop of Bruges) had to resign because it was discovered that he had committed years of child abuse in the past. In the aftermath of the Vangheluwe case, hundreds of new complaints about child abuse in the church surfaced. This led to the establishment of an investigative commission into child abuse in the Church, led by child psychiatrist Peter Adriaenssens. The investigation sketched a shocking picture of what had gone wrong over the past decades with respect to child abuse within the Church. The discovery of audio tapes on which Cardinal Godfried Danneels can be heard trying to convince a victim to forgive Vangheluwe and to keep the abuse secret exacerbated atmosphere of scandal even further. During the scandal, the dominant picture is that of a Church that seems more concerned with protecting its own interests than offering a helping hand to the victims. During this crisis, the church hierarchy failed to act resolutely and transparently and missed the opportunity to make a public *mea culpa* (cf. Loobuyck, 2011, pp. 26-28; Mettepenningen, 2011, pp. 15-24).

As a tribute to the work and academic career of Loek Halman, we investigate how the child abuse scandal have changed institutional trust in the Catholic Church in Belgium. By coincidence, the Vangheluwe scandal occurred in between the fieldwork of EVS wave 4 (2009) and a follow-up survey among the same respondents in 2010. This panel design – with the child abuse scandal as a natural experiment in between the two measurements – allows us to study conjunctural changes in trust in the Church.

14.2 Sources of (Dis)trust in the Church

To assess the impact of the child abuse scandals, the population's trust in the Church as an institution is a more proximal indicator than religious practices or beliefs. Trust is a way of dealing with the freedom of others. Trust enables persons to take risks and to deal with the unknown, uncertain and uncontrollable future. In general terms, trust is the voluntary act of making oneself vulnerable to the (unlikely) possibility of being disadvantaged in situations where one is dependent on the other. Trust is therefore always a leap of faith, express-

ing belief in the competence, sincerity and good intentions of others and the belief in the proper functioning of social systems (Luhmann, 1979; 1988; Misztal, 1996; Seligman, 1997; Sztompka, 1999; Möllering, 2001; Abts, 2005).

Systemic trust and confidence in institutions is contingent on three conditions. First, the institution must be experienced as meaningful and seen as fulfilling its social function. As a religious institution, the Church is expected to “make definite the indefinite, to reconcile the immanent and the transcendent” (Luhmann, 2013). Second, trust in an institution depends on the behaviour of its officials. The so-called authority figures – as representatives of a social system – need to be competent and sincere about their function. Consequently, trust in the Church is not independent of the competence, vigour and morality of the authorities who represent it (Giddens, 1990, p. 88). Third, trust in an institution presupposes that one is able to assume that others have confidence as well, which is highly dependent on the proper functioning of control institutions. Institutional trust therefore also depends to a large extent on confidence in the proper functioning of internal control mechanisms and ‘guardians of trust’ (Luhmann, 1979, pp. 56-58; Shapiro, 1987). The failure of internal supervision, for example, often proves to be an important source of distrust. In the latter case, distrust transcends the disappointment in particular authority figures, but spills over to the institution as a whole.

These three sources of institutional (dis)trust are useful to distinguish the structural and conjunctural decline in trust the Catholic Church is confronted with. Secularization theory assumes that the structural crisis of confidence mainly relates the first source, namely the fact that the Church is perceived by the population to be less and less useful and meaningful in the exercise of its religious function. The doctrine of faith no longer offers convincing answers to the religious questions people struggle with. It seems that traditional religious doctrine leaves too little room for the personal search and religious interpretation of each individual. The child abuse scandals directly erode the two other foundations of trust as well. Trust in the Church assumes that clergymen do no harm and do not abuse the vulnerability of the believer – an assumption that is clearly contradicted by the cases of child abuse. Furthermore, the Church authorities are blamed for taking little decisive action in tackling child

abuse in their own circles. This is a clear failure as internal guardians of trust (cf. Abts, 2005).

14.3 Data and Indicators

Data collection of EVS wave 4 in Belgium offers unique opportunities to analyse how the child abuse scandals have affected trust in the Church. In 2009, a two-stage probability sample of the Belgian population older than 18 years were approached by means of a computer assisted personal interview (CAPI) for the EVS fieldwork (realized sample size: 1509; response rate: 50.0%). This survey took place before the child abuse scandals. Between November 2010 and January 2011 – after the child abuse scandals – the EVS respondents were re-contacted with the request to fill out a short follow-up survey. 641 respondents participated in this self-completion postal survey, implying that a serious level of attrition may threatening the generalizability to the whole Belgian population (external validity). However, the panel design combined with the occurrence of important events between the measurements provides an interesting picture of the changes that have taken place among the respondent group as a result of the scandals (internal validity).

The dependent variable is the trust in the Church item that is part of the EVS core questionnaire since 1981: “Please look at this card and tell me, for each item listed, how much confidence you have in them, is it a great deal, quite a lot, not very much or none at all? The Church”. The variable is re-scaled so that higher scores indicate a higher level of trust (a great deal = 4, quite a lot = 3, not very much = 2, none at all = 1). This item was measured at both time points.

To understand changes in trust, a series of explanatory factors is used. As socio-demographic variables, we include *gender*, *birth cohort* (born before 1945, 1945-1959, 1960-1975, 1975-1991), *educational level* (left school before 14, before 18, before 20 or after 20 years of age) and *living area* (rural / town smaller than 20,000 inhabitants vs. urban / larger towns and cities). Of particular interest is the variable *religious involvement*. Following Billiet (1995) we combine religious denomination and individual attendance of religious services into a single

indicator, distinguishing between regular churchgoers (Catholics attending services at least once per month), irregular churchgoers (Catholics attending services only on specific holy days), marginal Catholics (Catholics attending services even less frequently) and non-Catholics.

Besides these socio-demographics, we also investigate the effect of various subjective and attitudinal dimensions. *Ethical permissiveness* is a composite score of six items asking to what extent particular situations or acts can be justified: married men/women having an affair, homosexuality, abortion, divorce, euthanasia, suicide, and prostitution. *Religious beliefs* measures whether respondents believe in God, life after death, hell, heaven, and sin. Whether respondents see the Church as *meaningfully fulfilling its function* is operationalized based on whether respondents think the churches are giving adequate answers to the moral problems and needs of the individual, the problems of family life, people's spiritual needs, and the social problems facing our country today. All these variables were measured during the main EVS fieldwork, that is before the child abuse scandal. In the follow-up survey (carried out after the media coverage of the child abuse scandals), the questions asking whether the Church fulfils its function were retaken – for this predictor we have repeated measurements.

In addition, the follow-up survey contains two statements regarding way in which the Church responded to the child abuse scandals – ‘*The leadership of the Catholic Church has covered up paedophilia cases too much*’ and ‘*The leadership of the Catholic Church still gives the impression that the institution is more important than the victims.*’ Agreement with these statements (measured on a five-point agree-disagree answer scale) is combined into a composite score. All these scales are transformed to range from 0 to 10.

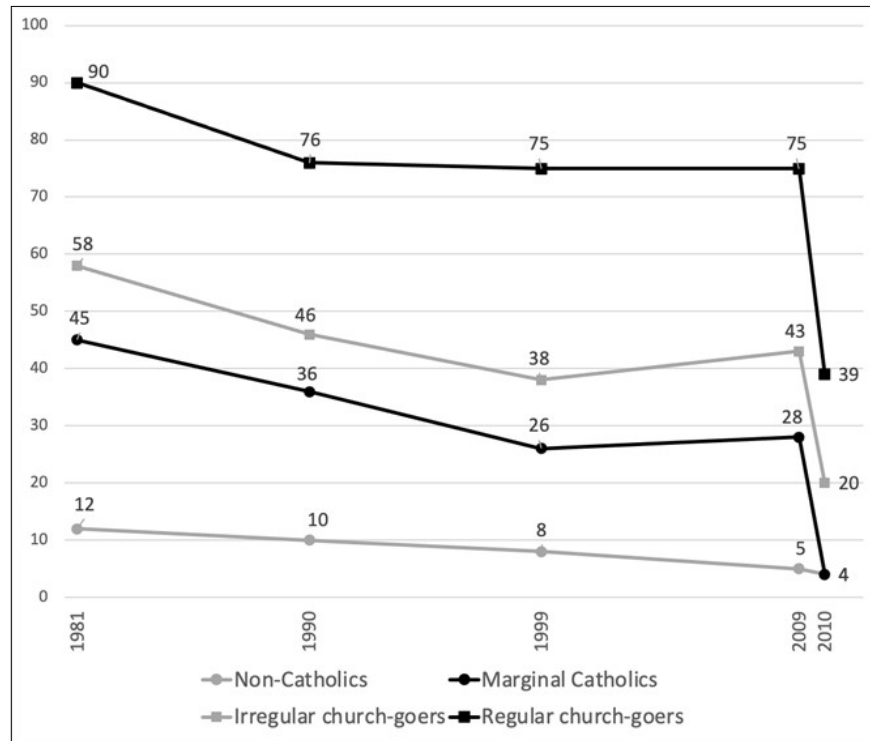
14.4 Structural and Conjunctural Changes in Trust in the Church

To distinguish structural from conjunctural changes in trust in the Church, a long-term perspective is needed. Figure 14.1 combines information from various EVS waves and displays the percentage of Flemish respondents re-

porting high levels of trust in the Church (answer categories ‘a great deal’ and ‘quite a lot’ combined) over the period 1981-2010. The figure suggests that the Church experienced a structural crisis of confidence in the period 1981-2009, which was substantially reinforced by a conjunctural confidence shock after the 2010 child abuse scandals. In fact, three phases in trust in the Catholic Church over the past three decades can be distinguished. The first phase is a period of sharp decline in trust in the 1980s. In 1981, 62% of the Flemish people still trusted the Catholic Church, as opposed to 44% in 1990. In one decade, the institution lost about twenty percentage points. The second phase refers to the period 1990 to 2009, characterized by a slowing down but steadily eroding trust. Over two decades, trust in the Church declines by more than ten percentage points, to around 31% in 2009 (Verschraegen & Abts, 2022). The third phase seems to be the phase of completely imploding confidence in the wake of the child abuse scandals within the Church and the way in which the Church authorities dealt with them. In the short period between 2009 and 2010, trust in the Church fell by as much as 16 percentage points. With this low score, the Church finds itself at the bottom of the trust ladder of all institutions.

Figure 14.1 also shows the evolution in trust by religious involvement. For some time now, the Church has really appealed to a few irregular churchgoers and fringe churchgoers only. Those who have been suspicious of the Church for years are confirmed in their distrust by the paedophilia cases. More striking is that the trust of a whole group of churchgoers, who still believe in the high moral values of the Church, has been shaken profoundly. While confidence in the Church remained relatively high and stable between 1990 and 2009 among churchgoing Catholics, since 2010 institutional confidence has been in free fall for the first time among this group. This makes the crisis of confidence all the more serious. The role of the Church as an authoritative body that can credibly promulgate philosophical, ethical, social and moral views is thus increasingly threatened and questioned - not only by the secularists but also by church-going Catholics.

Figure 14.1 Percentage reporting 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' of trust in the church (EVS waves 1981-2009 and ISPO-EVS 2010 panel respondents – Flanders)



14.5 Explaining the Decline

To gain deeper insight in the erosion of trust, we zoom in on the panel data that contains measurements among the same respondents in 2009 (t_1 ; before the child abuse scandals) as well as 2010/11 (t_2 ; after the child abuse scandals). Table 14.1 presents a model analysing the change in trust between these two time points. The model shown is a fixed effect difference model (Allison, 2009, pp. 7-10). The model exploits the panel nature of the data and explains the change in trust individuals experienced. Most of the predictors are time-invariant and measured at t_1 , with two exceptions: (1) the evaluation of the reaction of the

Church to the crisis is measured at t_2 ; (2) views on whether the Church is fulfilling a meaningful function are measured in both surveys, allowing us to include a time-invariant and a time-varying component in the model. The specifications the model can be summarized as follows:

$$Trust_{i2} - Trust_{i1} = \alpha + \beta_1 X_{i1} + \beta_2 Z_{i1} + \beta_3 (Z_{i2} - Z_{i1}) + \varepsilon_i$$

where X is an example of a time-invariant and Z a time-varying predictor.

In Model 1, the effects of religious-involvement and several sociodemographic factors are estimated. The intercept indicates that trust in the Church decreased with almost 0.3 points for the reference group (that is, non-Catholic males born between 1960 and 1974 who left school before the age of 14 and live in a rural environment). This shift is statistically significant and substantially relevant, given that trust is measured on a scale from 1 to 4. The effects of religious involvement confirm the pattern displayed in Figure 14.1: respondents that are religiously more involved, experience a more outspoken decrease in trust. Among churchgoers (both regular and irregular) as well as marginal Catholics, the decline in trust following the child abuse scandals is about 0.3 points stronger than the change observed among non-Catholics. Besides religious involvement, none of the socio-demographics is significantly related to the change in trust. Apparently, the impact of the child abuse scandals on trust in the Church is rather similar across socio-demographic categories.

Model 2 adds several attitudinal predictors that shed more light on how the scandals eroded the sources of trust. First, whether respondents think the Church is able to fulfil its function meaningfully is included both as a time-invariant and as a time-varying factor. The results show that especially the latter is relevant to understand the erosion of trust. The positive effect ($b = 0.045$, $p < .0001$) indicates that respondents who became more convinced that the Church fulfils its function in a meaningful way have gained trust in the Church. In other words, the observed drop in trust can be linked to perceptions that the Church loses its social function as it is giving less adequate answers on the moral and social problems of our society. Second, disapproval of the way in which the Church responded to the cases of child abuse surfacing is signifi-

cantly linked to a decline in trust as well ($b = -0.039$, $p = .0412$). The loss of trust is more marked among those who are convinced that the internal guardians of trust did not function properly. The effect parameters in Model 2 show also that the recent decline in trust is not significantly related to ethical permissiveness.

Table 14.1 Results from a fixed effects difference model explaining change in trust in the Church ($N = 610$) – unstandardized regression coefficients

	Model 1			Model 2		
	Par.Est.	Std.Err.	p-value	Par.Est.	Std.Err.	p-value
Intercept	-0.293	0.120	0.0149	0.039	0.231	0.8667
Religious involvement						
Regular church-goer	-0.309	0.085	0.0003	-0.235	0.105	0.0265
Irregular church-goer	-0.291	0.090	0.0013	-0.199	0.099	0.0442
Marginal Catholic	-0.316	0.074	<.0001	-0.230	0.079	0.0038
Non-Catholic (ref.cat.)				-0.007	0.059	0.9086
Gender						
Female (ref.cat.)						
Male	0.014	0.059	0.8128	-0.007	0.059	0.9086
Birth Cohort						
Born before 1945	0.007	0.094	0.9391	-0.036	0.094	0.7013
1945-1959	0.115	0.079	0.1484	0.086	0.078	0.2708
1960-1974						
1975-1991	0.000	0.089	0.9987	-0.072	0.088	0.4171
Education						
Left school before 14 (ref.cat.)						
Left school before 18	0.074	0.102	0.4684	0.095	0.103	0.3543
Left school before 20	0.113	0.117	0.3372	0.112	0.119	0.3466
Left school after 20	0.202	0.110	0.0655	0.221	0.112	0.0489
Living area						
Rural (ref.cat.)						
Urban	0.022	0.059	0.7106	0.024	0.059	0.6839
Ethical permissiveness				0.012	0.019	0.5370

Religious beliefs	-0.030	0.011	0.0081
Meaningful function of Church			
Situation at t1	0.020	0.011	0.0739
Change between t1 and t2	0.045	0.010	<.0001
Disapproval response Church to crisis			
	-0.039	0.019	0.0412
R-squared (adjusted)	0.038	0.090	

14.6 Conclusion

Religious decline is often related to shifts in moral outlooks. In this sense, secularization theory argues that the Church-prescribed rules and moral standards do not fit any longer with mainstream opinions among Western European population. Loek Halman has mainly studied the degree to which European people are secular, not only focusing on religious practices but also on beliefs, and has looked into the consequences of church attendance on values and moral permissiveness. We would like to add that secularization does not only mean that Catholic religion has lost its impact on public life, and its moral authority over issues related to personal life, but has also lost trust over the recent decades.

Our analysis supports the general diagnosis of the structural decline of Catholicism that the Church-as-institution (and its doctrine of faith) is no longer perceived by the general population as giving useful and meaningful answers to all kind of moral, religious and existential issues, which results in an ongoing decline of institutional distrust. However, our analysis illustrates that there is not only disillusionment regarding the Church's moral and religious function, but also disappointment with the behaviour of priests and indignation about the improper functioning of church hierarchies acting not resolutely and transparently. Our results indicate that, in the case of the child abuse scandals within the Catholic Church, the loss of trust in the Church-as-institution is more outspoken among those who are convinced that the Church authorities as 'guardians of trust' did not function properly in dealing with the pae-

dophilia cases. Besides, it became clear that these scandals have eroded institutional trust predominantly among those who are religiously more involved. Those who were already suspicious are only confirmed in their mistrust by the child abuse cases, while the regular churchgoers are shocked about the abuse of power and the conduct of their own institution. These results give insights into the different mechanisms generating institutional distrust. An important question is whether this decline of trust as a result of the child abuse scandals within the Church will turn out to be temporary or permanent. Or, in other words, will the Church be able to restore the shocked distrust, or will it be an irreversible phenomenon?

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