

Devotion and Development Religiosity, Education, and Economic progress in 19th-Century France

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Abstract

This paper uses a historical setting to study when religion can be a barrier for diffusion of knowledge and economic development, and through which mechanism. I focus on 19th-century Catholicism and analyze a crucial phase of modern economic growth, the Second Industrial Revolution (1870-1914) in France. In this period, technology became skill-intensive, leading to the introduction of technical education in primary schools. At the same time, the Catholic Church was promoting a particularly anti-scientific program, and opposed the adoption of a technical curriculum. Using data collected from primary and secondary sources, I exploit pre-existing variation in intensity of Catholicism (i.e., religiosity) among the different French districts. I show that, despite a stable spatial distribution of religiosity over time, more religious districts had lower economic development only during the Second Industrial Revolution, but not before. Schooling appears to be the key mechanism: in more Catholic areas there was a slower introduction of the technical curriculum, and instead a push for religious education. Religious education, in turn, was negatively associated with industrial development about 10-15 years later, when school-aged children would enter the labor market, and this negative relationship was more pronounced in skill-intensive industrial sectors.

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