

# Chapter 6

## Migration and religious diversity in Italy. Exploring an evolving and contentious process

*Samuele Davide Molli*

Università degli Studi di Milano

Department of Social and Political Sciences

samuele.molli@unimi.it

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6651-1706>

DOI <https://doi.org/10.54103/milanoup.196.c370>

### Abstract

The surprising and rapid growth of religious pluralism can be considered one of the main transformations driven by migratory processes in Italy. Elaborating on original results collected for different research projects, we discuss the ways in which migrants have re-settled and re-adjusted their faiths in a new political and social context as well as we explain how State institutions and local territories have reacted to this historical change. The analytical themes will be, on the one side, (a) the modes of re-sacralisation of Italian geography and (b) the lived experience of migrants in their religious places. On the other side, we examine (c) the current and main ways of regulating religious diversity, including the institutional barriers that these express, and the (d) counterstrategies that migrants adopt to continue to practise their faith despite fears and forms of opposition. To grasp the intersection of these dynamics, we consider what we also call the «Italian paradox»: a diffused presence of religious minorities in cities or post-industrial areas which, however, frequently lacks adequate juridical and civic recognition. The analysis of this misalignment, between «*de iure* and *de facto* religious pluralism», will be the final argument this essay proposes.

### Italy and its changing religious soul: between transition and tension

The Italian religious scenario has rapidly changed as a direct result of migratory flows (Pace, 2013; Ricucci, 2017; Zanfrini, 2020; Ambrosini, Molli &

Naso, 2022). Especially in the last three decades, the settlement of international migrants has produced a new and increasingly complex religious geography, leading to one of the main social and cultural novelties for a country with a strong mono-religious background.

In Italy, pluralism is not a completely new phenomenon but, in terms of composition, it was historically limited to the presence of Evangelical churches, especially Methodist and Waldensian churches, various Jewish communities and some Pentecostal movements. In this sense, data from ISTAT (Office of National Statistics) are quite eloquent: almost the entire Italian population (99.6%) was constituted by Catholics in 1931 (Naso, 2022).

Looking at the present, the coming of new migrant minorities and their religious traditions has profoundly changed this (quasi) mono-religious configuration. At the end of 2023, we may trace the presence of a population of just over 5,300,000 officially resident foreigners. According to statistics provided by Idos-Confronti (2024), we discover that half of them (2.480.000 – 50 %) are Christians<sup>3</sup> and a third are Muslims<sup>4</sup> (1.760.000 - 34%). Among Christians, more than half are (a) Orthodox (55 % - equal to 1.400.000 people) who precede (b) Catholics (800.000, a third of all Christians) and (c) Evangelicals belonging to different congregational areas (200.000, about a tenth of Christians). To complete this picture, there are also Eastern religions, for example: Hindus (170.000), Buddhists (140.000) and Sikhs (about 90.000). In light of these data, we may grasp why migrations represent the major factor of change for «the religious soul» of Italian society.

This transition, like any other form of social and cultural change, is not an easy process to accept and recognise. Various fears are spreading, gaining success in the public opinion, such as the apprehension that new minorities may threaten social cohesion, or the idea of incompatibility of their religious traditions with the public sphere. We can also mention the more recent «claim» for the defence of the Christian identity of the Italian society, presented as the true, and unique, cultural basis with which our country should identify itself. Reaffirming its value, especially (but not only) against Muslim communities, has become a recurrent anathema used by right-wing populist movements in Italy and elsewhere in Europe (Ambrosini & Molli, 2023).

---

3 These data on religious belongings show also that we are not facing an Islamization of the country given that the majority of migrants are estimated to be Christians. In this sense, we can observe that religious diversity, in reality, is not an issue of «a less Christian Italy, but of a Christianity that is ever less Italian».

4 According to ISMU (2024), Moroccans are the main national group among Muslims in Italy (27.4% of the total). Then, we find the Albanians (10.3%), Bangladeshis (8.9%), Pakistanis (8.5%), Senegalese (7.2%), Egyptians (6.7%) and Tunisians (6.6%). In terms of religious gatherings, local communities can be monoethnic or mixed; it depends on how their local leaderships have decided to structure and shape the same realities, a theme we elaborate on the next sessions.

Another key and, at the same time, controversial issue concerns instead the legal and political governance of pluralism. Even if the religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, the current law that regulates the relations between the Italian State and religious minorities presents critical barriers, especially for their formal recognition (see, for details, Ferrari 2012). Its «juridical architrave» is represented by the *intesa*, namely an official agreement stipulated with the State which, however, has a strong discretionary power in deciding whether to accept or reject the proposal to negotiate it. Beyond the (im)possibility of stipulating an *intesa*, the other legal source that could offer a form of recognition to new religious minorities shows similar limits. Over the last eighty years, few changes have been made to this law dated 1929 (and introduced during the fascist period), whose name is quite emblematic: «admitted faiths». Thus, the current legislative body conditions the chance to be formally recognised by public institutions, especially when eventual «applicants» are migrants, whose political citizenship is a weak point to recall.

Starting from these premises, the chapter focuses on the role of migrant populations for the expansion of religious diversity in Italy, and it examines what will be also called the «Italian Paradox»: a diffused pluralism in Italian cities and their urban scenarios which, however, frequently lacks adequate recognition. The analysis of this gap between «*de iure* and *de facto* religious pluralism» relies on data gathered in various studies on this subject, including a large research project<sup>5</sup> conducted in Lombardy – the main Italian region for what concerns the presence of migrants and their faiths – and sustained by the Waldensian church.

For framing the Italian case, the chapter discusses four main arguments. The first inquiries into (a) the practices of re-sacralisations of spaces, presenting the ways in which migrants tried to intercalate their faiths in Italian urban and extra-urban landscapes; the second intends to shed light on (b) the lived experience of migrants in their religious places, identifying meanings and functions that religion re-acquires in migration; the third examines the Italian institutional context and (c) the main ways of recognition of religious diversity, including the problems and conflicts that minority religions can encounter at local level. Finally, we explore the (d) counterstrategies and tactics that minorities use to continue to experience their faith despite stigmatisation and lack of an adequate recognition. As we will see, the main analytical guidelines will be «transition and tension».

---

5 The author wishes to thank the «Confronti Study Centre» and its associated journal «Confronti. Religions, Politics and Society» (<https://confronti.net/centro-studi>) for having promoted the research project on «religious pluralism and immigration» in Italy, and for all the supports and suggestions received during the development of the study by colleagues.

## **Migrant minorities' practices of re-sacralisation: modes of change of the Italian religious geography**

The sociological study of space becomes particularly useful for exploring the ways of transformation of Italy from «a mono to a pluri-religious country» (Ambrosini, Molli & Naso 2022). In search of a site where to gather and worship, migrant populations tried to re-create their faiths in existing geography. In this sense, they transformed the meaning and use of urban and extra-urban scenarios in religious terms, generally by re-adapting neglected and abandoned buildings, such as old churches and sanctuaries as well as disused warehouses, factories or shops.

This religious activism led by ethnic minorities represent an interesting (and often overlooked) «counter-history» of migration. In the last three decades, the strong economic demand of new workforce in various sectors of the labour market has incentivized the arrival of new populations. Consequently, Italy has received the religious diversity they bring with them. Pace and Da Silva Moreira, commenting on the famous sentence of Max Frisch: «we asked for workers, we got people instead», have also added: «we discovered they have a soul» (2018: 3). As we will see, this also led to a sort of schizophrenic attitude: we wanted workers, but not their prayers.

The impact of migrants' religions on urban landscapes is the focus of a growing and interdisciplinary literature (Cancellieri & Saint-Blancat 2012). Along with the pioneering works of R. Orsi (1999; 2002) and L. Kong (2001; 2010), scholars like J. Eade (2012) and D. Garbin (2023) started to explore how minorities re-shaped the religious contours of contemporary cities. As commented by J. Eade, «while mobilities have been extensively analysed in terms of secular processes, the role of religion is becoming ever more evident» (2012:1). Similarly, Burchardt and Becci invited to «interrogate and partially reject earlier generalized assumptions about the secularizing effects of urbanization» (2013:1).

Here the point is that the coming of migrant minorities revitalised the presence of religions in the city, leading to the formation of «micro-laboratories of pluralism» where boundaries between «sacred and secular» have become ever more porous and fluid because of processes of reconversion and readaptation of the existing urban fabric (Garbin & Strhan 2017). Another correlated point concerns the fact that religion is a key dimension for the intertwining of «locality with transnationality» (Sheringham 2013; Vásquez and Knott 2014) and for the juncture of two different geographies of sense in the same place. The research of Levitt (2007): «God needs no passport», gives interesting interpretations of these processes, as religion, par excellence, represents one of the major forces that transcends the physicality of national borders.

Taking inspiration from this literature, it is possible to examine the Italian case and the religious revivals promoted by immigrants. These are discussed by using findings gathered in a comparative research project. Thanks to detailed work of mapping, we can compare the settlement of 71 Orthodox parishes, 41 Pentecostal churches (among 410 identified), 85 Catholic communities, 128 Muslim centres, 17 Sikh temples and 6 Buddhist centres, for a total of 348 new religious communities in Lombardy, which is the main Italian region in terms of number of migrants (a quarter of them reside in this region). Precisely, it is possible to discuss what I term «practices of re-sacralisation», namely the ways in which migrants try to obtain and readjust a place of worship according to their spiritual needs. The empirical analysis shows three recurrent spatial patterns that occur in: 1) city central areas, 2) urban neighbourhoods and 3) extra-urban industrial or agricultural areas.

In the first case, we found the process of «re-sacralising already sacred spaces», namely the reuse and revitalisation of abandoned or less used churches. Both Catholic (Molli 2020) and Orthodox migrant communities (Guglielmi 2022) are key examples. Specifically, Italian parishes typically possess a wide assortment of places of worship in urban central areas, which, due to secularization trends and the decreasing in birth rate, today are less attended, and, in some cases, left empty. Christian migrants, after not easy processes of negotiation with local parishes, have reopened «vacant churches», where they can converge from city suburbs on weekends (Molli 2020). Milan – with the presence of 22 Orthodox parishes and 40 catholic ethnic communities – has become the main «epicentre» for the development of a new Christian geography. Its religious centre represents the hub for an important urban mobility that attracts faithful who come from a vast surrounding area and who organise long spiritual journeys to participate in Sunday meetings. Forgotten corners of historic centres were therefore revived by Christian immigrants.

Another version of this spatial pattern is the «church sharing» (Ambrosini 2019), that is the use of the same place between different migrants' communities or between migrants and Italians who frequent the same local parish; here we find an intercultural but not easy spatial interchange between ethnically and socially different groups of faithful.

In the second case, we have the process of «sacralising suburbs». This is the reuse and readaptation of empty shops or commercial structures (like offices) as well as apartments in popular areas. Pentecostal communities in peripheries are an emblematic example. We mention the experience of Latin-Americans who work in city suburbs – like the case of family caregivers, nurses in hospitals as well as workers in the logistic sector – and their efforts to collect money and look for places where to re-create churches. With respect to the religious revitalization of disused buildings in urban areas, we can observe that a facilitating factor was the economic crisis initiated in 2008. Our study can confirm that it

was a watershed moment also in sacred terms. More precisely, it posed (unexpected) premises for the availability of spaces, since Italians were less interested in new investments and property trading, leading to new opportunities for migrant minorities in search of a place (e.g., auctioned properties). Recurring in various interviews was the reference to the period after 2008; as emblematically commented by a Pentecostal pastor: «the crisis helped us».

Another case of interest for the same pattern in suburban areas is that of ethnic Buddhist temples (Molli 2022a). These were established by Sri Lankans who decided to dispose of their own place of worship separately from other Buddhist centres founded by Italians in the 80s and 90s. They gathered resources for acquiring apartments or buildings where to re-create their worship halls.

In the third case, we have the «sacralization of extra-urban spaces», generally in industrial areas, as in the case of Muslim communities (127) who often (but not always) reconverted old and disused warehouses or factories (see also El Ayoubi & Paravati 2018; Mezzetti 2022). This is a process that develops «from inside» through practices of redecoration, while «from outside» buildings often maintain the profile of an industrial unit. As we will see in the next paragraphs, since in Italy the possibility of creating a religious space *ex-novo* is subject to a complicated legal procedure (especially in Lombardy), they were forced to find this kind of solution by reusing factories or warehouses, not without tensions and political conflicts.

Another important example is that of Sikh temples which are concentrated in extra-urban agriculture zones, often in medium-small municipalities. This type of geolocation is associated to the fact that Indian immigrants are frequently employed as milkers in Lombardy (Gallo 2021; Bertolani 2013; Naso 2021). Over time, they have replaced the Italian workforce in this specific segment of the labour market, creating an «ethnic occupational niche» (Molli 2024), like in the emblematic case of the «Bassa Bergamasca», a large livestock area that confines with the city of Bergamo, Brescia and Mantua. Here, temples are not buildings created *ab origine* for religious practices but are instead «secular structures», such as deposits or warehouses no longer used. In this sense, Sikhs have re-adjusted abandoned or vacant structures situated in agricultural districts for new spiritual purposes.

Thus, these three different spatial patterns show the efforts of minorities to find a sacred place in Italy and, at the same time, their active role in re-shaping Italian territories, giving them a new sense and use. The ways in which these spaces are re-signified, especially in terms of hubs where to find spiritual and social answers for the experience of migration, are the following analytical points; as we will see, religions in diaspora «recover and rediscover» important functions.

## The meanings of religion in migration: roots and routes

*«When the fog begins to thicken on the horizons of our lives, and the flash of lightning and boom of thunder announce the outbreak of the hurricane of our suffering, of grief, of sorrow, and of anguish, we turn our eyes and our thoughts to this sanctuary, and we find here safety, relief and peace».*

The passage is taken by R. Orsi's book (2010: 165) and, in origin, comes from an Italian periodical: the *Bollettino*, September 1929. It commemorates the history of the «Madonna of 115th Street» and her devotion in New York City. Behind this cult, we find the experience of Italian emigrants, who arrived in Manhattan in the 1870s to work on the First Avenue's trolley tracks.

In a short time, they formed a large working-class enclave along the East River, an area which took the emblematic name of «Italian Harlem». The Marian devotion they transplanted in the city served as a «tool» for reimagining their mother-country, representing in this sense a temporal and transnational bridge: «for Italians the Madonna stood between the United States and Italy, severed memories and emergent aspirations» (Orsi 2010: 163). Beyond the idea, the chaplaincy re-created in honour of «Our Lady», over time, was transformed by emigrants into a meeting point, becoming a source of practical help for the challenges that they met during the process of adaptation and inclusion to the American society: it was a secure port in the «tempest».

After decades, religious institutions perform a similar role in the experience of migration (Ambrosini, Bonizzoni & Molli 2021). As we have seen for the case of Italian emigrants, one of the first functions is the reproduction, maintaining and transmission of cultural traditions (Tweed 1997; Levitt 2007). In sociological terms, religion is a «chain of memory» that serves to re-produce a set of meanings and practices that link «past, present and future». In other words, through this chain, migrants can reactivate and experience «a home away from home». For example, national or civil holidays are frequently celebrated in combination with religious appointments. This form of reincorporation also includes the use of musical instruments, songs, choirs, clothes and native foods which together create the impression of continuity with the mother country.

Along with ethnic traditions, religious gatherings offer a protected space to rely on for combating loneliness and disorientation that derive from the loss of social ties. A familiar atmosphere gives, in this sense, the possibility to find existential security and inner force (Reyes-Espiritu 2023). At the same time, participation in places of worship contributes to the chance to develop relations and strengthen social capital during emigration (Foley & Hoge 2007; Stepick, Rey & Mahler 2009), with significant repercussions in emotional and psychological terms (Connor 2012). This is the motive why, beyond spiritual practices, socializing activities and community events are regularly incentivized in religious spaces. These serve to share the difficulties faithful face in everyday life,

providing them the opportunity to soften sufferings and rebuild a positive image of themselves (Gozdiack, 2002; McMichael 2002). Thus, places of worship are re-transformed into «safe shelters», and religion into a source of «resilience».

In addition to these functions, we also find the response to material and practical needs that migrants meet during the settlement process (Ambrosini, Bonizzoni & Molli 2021). Thus, religious institutions tend to assume a multi-functional profile in diaspora as, often, are the first points of reference to which migrants turn for questions relating to work, documents, housing, bureaucratic procedures and healthcare assistance (Ley 2008). In this sense, solidarity becomes a central motif of their «mission abroad» (Molli 2022b) and the migratory experience promotes a revision and enlargement of their religious mandate in terms of welcoming and listening. For example, we find the organisation of practices of help, promotion of fundraisings for those who are in need, but also language courses and citizenship classes for sustaining faithful in their new lives.

As we can see, religious minorities combine roots with new functions. In other terms, transplantation is also transformation. Beyond their activism for finding a place and re-organising new spiritual and social services, the national and local context where they arrive is another important factor to consider, especially for what concerns institutional dynamics and juridical norms.

## **Religious diversity in Italy: *de iure* vs *de facto***

The regulation of religion – or at least the tentative of regulate it – by the State is a central and recurring element of European social history (Barbalet, Possamai & Turner 2011). As clearly observed by G. Baumann: «religion, with its claims to ultimate truths and its potential social divisiveness, is the oldest problem of the nation-state» (2002: 42). This is the reason why, when we concentrate and reflect on contemporaneity, we should always consider the implications of earlier periods and past institutional dynamics (Eade 2011). During the process of construction and reinforcement of modern States, phases of «co-operation and conflict» have characterised their rapport with religions. These dynamics, with varying intensity, have led to different types of juridical and political agendas, introduced with the intent to (try to) govern the place of religion in the public sphere.

We may observe that the same issue (or dilemma) is back in the limelight today (Breskaya, Giordan & Richardson 2018; Triandafyllidou & Magazzini 2020) for the fact that minorities, «from below», are questioning existing institutional ways of regulating pluralism (Molli & Eade 2024). Whether and how their religious communities reduce or reinforce trust in and compliance with public institutions represents one of the main contentious themes, especially if we consider – as we have seen before – the role and meaning of faith in the construction of migrant minorities' identity. Italy, in this sense, represents a case of



particular interest, given its historical background as a (quasi) mono-religious country (Magazzini 2020) and, at the same time, given the rapidity of change towards a highly multi-religious scenario. This is the reason why we now inquire into the current legislation and its main instruments in terms of governance of religious diversity.

First, we recall that Italy shows some analogies with other European countries; a *primus inter pares* religion – namely a religion with consolidated and privileged relations with public institutions – exists for historical and symbolical reasons. On the other side, the country shows, instead, peculiarities for what concerns the regulation of relations with religious minorities and the ways in which these can be recognized. These specificities deserve to be explored for comprehending the barriers that migrants meet when they transplant their faiths.

We now succinctly discuss the major sources. The republican constitution affirms and defends the freedom of religion in individual terms (see articles 19 and 20). The article 7 rules the relations between the Italian State and the Catholic Church (according to the Lateran Treaties) and the successive article (n.8) provides the juridical framework in terms of how a religion different from that Catholic can be formally recognised. As commented by A. Ferrari and S. Ferrari, this article «gives a special emphasis to the institutional profile of religious freedom» (2010: 6). More precisely, it offers to non-Catholic faiths the opportunity to be juridically recognised as formal organisations – if they are in accord with the fundamental principles of the Italian legal system – but, and this is the point to consider, their relations with the State are defined by bilateral agreements on the basis of what in Italian is called *intesa*.

The real and controversial question is that the first phase for reaching an agreement begins and develops at a governmental level, between an *ad hoc* commission and representatives of that religion. A draft of the agreement is then prepared, and it is evaluated or revised by the *ad hoc* commission which – it is worth remembering – depends on the government and not on an independent institutional power. After this step, the text passes to the Presidency of the Council, to then be submitted to the Parliament. Thus, we have an asymmetry, namely the government has a strong discretionary power, especially in deciding whether to accept or reject the proposal to negotiate a treaty. Over time, the possibility to have it (i.e. the *Intesa*) has become a critical barrier<sup>6</sup>. The Idos-Confronti dossier (2024) calculates that this legal solution is today accessible to only 10% of those who declare a faith other than Catholic.

Beyond the article n. 8 and the juridical instrument it provides, we can also recall another tool in terms of formal recognition. Religions without official

---

6 Only thirteen religions have reached an agreement with the Italian state from 1984 to 2019: for details see: [https://presidenza.governo.it/USRI/confessioni/intese\\_indice.html](https://presidenza.governo.it/USRI/confessioni/intese_indice.html).

agreements with the State (namely without an *Intesa*) are ruled by the (obsolete) law on «admitted cults», which, we remember, dates back to the fascist period (law n. 1159, 24 June 1929). This model is of second order since it limits the access to a series of key benefits (for example, economic supports, religious festivities or relations with public bodies) reserved instead to those religions that have an *intesa* with the Italian State. Moreover, this model has produced an asymmetry among minority religions in Italy: among those who have stronger or weaker forms of recognition.

Considering these juridical sources and their barriers, we find another type of solution that religious communities tend usually to adopt, namely registering in the various formulae of association recognized by common law: as if they were volunteering or civil society actors. This solution has also been called a «mimetic strategy» by Ferrari (2011) since minorities may, in this way, continue to organise meetings, aggregations and activities by following the model of cultural/social associations. In other terms, this can be considered an *obtorto collo* preference.

This type of (forced) option creates, however, a series of problems. One of these relates to a delicate theme we have introduced before, such as the establishment or use of buildings for religious purposes. Creating *ex novo* places of worship (or readapting existing places) is a very controversial issue in Italy because there is no national law that regulates with precision their opening. More precisely, it is a contentious juridical matter between «State and regions», and the key problem is that the Italian State has never dictated general guidelines. The result is that we find different laws at regional level. For example, Lombardy – where data were gathered – used, for a long period of time, several limiting regulations, most of which were, step by step, sanctioned by the constitutional court. Specifically, the law n. 2, approved on 3 February 2015, entitled «amendments to the regional law n.12, approved on 11 March 2005» introduced a series of administrative bans against the opening of new places of worship as well as the reconversion of existing buildings for religious purposes. Muslim communities were, especially but not only, the real target of this law; indeed, various political figures called it in interviews and public declarations: *legge anti-moschee* (namely, anti-mosques law).

Beyond the case of Lombardy, we can draw some conclusions in line with the aims we proposed in this paragraph. First, as we can comprehend, religious diversity suffers from lack of legal recognition, especially for those confessions imported by migrant populations. The Italian law poses various limits, and the possibility to negotiate a treaty (the main juridical instrument) depends on government intents. Second, an essential part of religious freedom is the possibility to exercise it in collective forms. Consequently, practicing a religion requires an appropriate place of worship. But, in absence of an updated as well as adequate law, this possibility is limited. More precisely, this right has become a «local level

affair» (Ambrosini, Molli & Cacciapaglia 2024) as it often depends on territorial administrations and their PGTs (planning urban rules) that have a crucial role in determining the possibility for a religious community to obtain and use a place of worship in Italian cities. In other terms, «an urban norm can be used to limit a constitutional right».

The conclusion, therefore, is that religious pluralism encounters important legal restrictions in term of formal recognition but, as the previous paragraphs have demonstrated, exists, and it is widely rooted in various cities. This is what can be called the Italian paradox, or the gap between *de iure* and *de facto* pluralism; in synthesis, reality has gone beyond the rule.

## **A precarious equilibrium: conflicts, and tactics of acceptance**

The hiatus between *de iure* and *de facto* is not only a juridical but a sociological matter. As we have introduced before, this gap has created tensions and conflicts in local territories which, in turn, have often attracted the attention of media and public opinion. On the other hand, migrant minorities try to navigate in this ambiguity for continuing to have a place where to gather and pray. They can use different strategies, such as avoiding visibility, showing a positive image of their role and/or seeking informal recognition through the development of positive relationships with key actors which can guarantee them some forms of protection from conflicts.

The success of these strategies, however, depends on various factors. Among these, we can recall the type of confession, for example Muslim communities are usually under the public opinion radar in terms of phobias (Allievi 2014), or the political attitude of the territorial context and its main players, like institutions or civil society associations, in supporting or denying migrant minorities' efforts in achieving stability and recognition. Our research in Lombardy has identified variable situations, both negative and positive. We start from the problems that minority religions encounter, here summarised in a «hierarchy of exclusion».

The first position in this scale is occupied by Islam. Even if Muslim communities generally follow the mimetic strategic – namely they adopt the model of cultural associations for continuing to organise spiritual activities – various conflicts may arise, especially for the readaptation of secular buildings (like old factories or warehouses) for religious purposes. Not always but often, municipality bans are used with the intent to close these sites, producing a series of juridical disputes in administrative courts. Some of these confrontations gain national visibility, other remain invisible (a theme we discuss further).

Beyond Islam, also the presence of Sikh minorities may create tensions. Eight of the seventeen temples we studied for our research in Lombardy declared to have met unwelcoming reactions by the local communities, including administrative restrictions for the readaptation of buildings in temples. Not differently, we also met cases of Pentecostal churches (generally those frequented by African groups) that were sanctioned and closed (see also Pace 2021).

Buddhism was an interesting case. Although in common ideas it represents, *par excellence*, the «religion of peace», when temples are recreated by migrant minorities (principally by Sri Lankans) there can be difficulties, especially in terms of perceived security. In the neighbourhoods where migrants readapted their places of worship, we registered that local communities have initially expressed preoccupations and anxiety for the presence of «foreigners».

The case of Christian immigrants is quite different as they use sites (churches) that are existing buildings which don't require specific administrative permits. However, it is interesting to elaborate on their experience as «familiar minorities» in local territories. Generally, the Orthodox have in use churches conceded by Catholic dioceses (in line with good ecumenic relations). While we didn't observe (overt) discrimination against them (this is especially true in the last decade, when East European migrants have gained a good public image), they however expressed problems in terms of space, since that they generally use old or disused churches which are not always the setting that they prefer for organising spiritual and social activities. In this sense, they often perceive limits since they are hosted, and they would like to expand their potentiality in terms of aggregation given the large presence of Orthodox in various Italian cities. For catholic migrants, even though their presence is «unnoticeable» and not object of (overt) discriminations, they are often considered as «a parallel body» by the Italian parishes. Their religious life typically develops without strong interactions with the local catholic communities who consider them more as guests than as brothers.

As we can see, the settlement of minority religions and their recognition is not without criticisms. At the same time, it is equally interesting to discuss how these communities try, despite problems, to continue to promote worships and social activities. Some of them adopt the strategy of distancing themselves from Islam. For example, Sikhs and Buddhists often declare that they are not like Muslims, namely those who are generally stigmatised in common discourses and media. Moreover, also among Muslim associations, some try to distance themselves from what they call «bad Muslim communities». Sociologically, this is a «game of mirrors»: a rhetorical strategy for demonstrating to be different from what people consider dangerous.

In addition, migrants try to combat local discriminations and attain recognition by stressing a good image of «decorum, impeccability and order». In this sense, religious spaces are also sites where to (try to) show a respectable image,

especially in terms of secure contexts away from marginality and deviance: all representations that Italians often associate to foreigners. They can also stress their role as promoters of welfare practices (see previous paragraphs) working for the social integration of members. Some communities started to promote school projects or guided tours, in the form of what we can define the «aestheticization of religious diversity», namely they organise events in which to present the theological contents of their religion to local people, or they open the doors of their spaces to the public, showing that these are not a dangerous place, as well as they promote cultural appointments based on music and traditional food.

These are all strategies aimed at creating a sort of «tacit acceptance». In other terms, these are the ways they adopt to continue to pray avoiding conflict and tension, promoting a different image of their presence in territories. Not always these efforts work, as in the case of Muslim communities, but they serve to maintain a «precarious equilibrium».

## **Conclusion. Problems and premises for the future.**

We discussed religious pluralism in Italy and in direct relation to migratory processes as these, in the last three decades, were the principal reason for its significant enlargement. For framing this transition, which is an historical novelty for a country with a strong mono-religious background, we considered four key arguments which were explored thanks to a series of data gathered in a comparative research project.

The first interpretative lens concerned spatial dynamics, as the arrival of minority religions has changed the sacred geography of urban and extra-urban territories. We identified three different patterns of how migrants have both readjusted and revived old or abandoned buildings for their religious purposes. Why they reused these places has been another subject. Precisely, we found that religious spaces have become multifunctional hubs for a wide range of spiritual and secular needs. In this sense, religion re-acquires various functions in migration, and we have also seen interesting processes of «transformation in transplantation» (Ambrosini, Molli & Naso 2022).

Another pivotal issue regarded the question of recognition. Here the discussion considered the main legal sources and their intrinsic limits. The Italian law is, in this sense, out of focus compared to a reality in evolution. We have also specified the role of the local level (Giorgi & Itcina 2016; Becci, Burchardt & Giorda 2017) given the fact that a constitutional right, the religious freedom, can be conditioned by an administrative veto. In this sense, there is an evident hiatus between *de iure* pluralism, namely how diversity is juridically ruled, and *de facto* pluralism, that is the capillary presence of new minorities in various cities. In other terms, we have an «Italian paradox».

This is the reason why, in the last paragraph, we also used the oxymoron of «precarious equilibrium» to grasp how migrant minorities, despite they often lack adequate juridical and civic recognition, continue to experience their religious traditions. They try to navigate this sort of ambiguity by adopting strategies of «tacit acceptance», based on avoiding an excessive visibility and showing «deservedness».

More in general, we can observe the fact that current ideas and modes of regulation of religious diversity are challenged by the arrival of new minorities (Colombo 2015). National policies on the issue are hesitant and distant for the moment in Italy, especially in a period marked by strong conflicts for many phenomena linked to migration. Also at the local level, the creation of new places of worship has often generated political and media controversies. Here, we can also see the implications of a type of populism that uses Christianity as an identitarian tool. Religion becomes a question of folkloric messages deprived of their theological content and exploited in defence of «our cultural roots». These messages serve to present a renewed (and pathological) sense of community against the coming of new minorities in local territories or, in other terms, against those are violating the historical «sacredness» of our geography.

Beyond «policies», some important «practices» of religious diversity are however growing in Italy. Courageous attempts to create channels of interaction and dialogue with new minorities can be observed (e.g., Colombo & Peano Cavasola 2023). These are usually promoted by civil society actors and representatives of the Catholic Church who organise interreligious meetings. How these «practices» promoted from below will evolve towards more institutionalised results will be a fact to monitor and analyse.

Even if dealing with religious pluralism is not an easy issue to resolve for modern European states, innovative solutions that can go beyond the closure towards the arrival of new minority religions or the idea of a *tabula rasa* against the presence of any religious identities in public sphere can be imagined and negotiated. The geographical movement of people around the world is enriching and renewing the panorama of religions in many and unexpected ways (Levitt 2007): this process can be viewed as a *crisis*, but also as a *chance* for the future.

## References

- Allievi, S. (2014). Immigration, religious diversity and recognition of differences: The Italian way to multiculturalism. *Identities*, 21 (6), 724-737, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2013.828623>
- Ambrosini, M., Molli, S.D & Cacciapaglia, M. (2024), *Institutional discrimination and local chauvinism. The combative role of pro bono lawyers in defence of migrant minorities'*

- welfare rights*, in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50 (20): 5009-5028, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2024.2366304>
- Ambrosini, M., & Molli, S.D. (2023). National Identity, Cultural Diversity, and Immigration. In J. C. Chennattuserry, M. Deshpande, & Hong (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of New Populism and Responses in the 21st Century*. Springer, Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-9859-0\\_248-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-9859-0_248-1)
- Ambrosini, M., Molli, S.D. & Naso: (Eds.) (2022). *Quando gli immigrati vogliono pregare: comunità, pluralismo, welfare*. Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Ambrosini, M., Bonizzoni, & Molli, S.D. (2021). How religion shapes immigrants' integration: The case of Christian migrant churches in Italy. *Current Sociology*, 69(6), pp. 823-842. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392120979018>.
- Ambrosini, M. (2019). Fratelli ma non troppo. La chiesa cattolica e gli immigrati in Italia. *Mondi Migranti*, 1, 9-27. DOI: 10.3280/MM2019-001001.
- Barbalet, J., Possamai, A., & S Turner, B. (2011). *Religion and the state: A comparative sociology*, London, Anthem Press.
- Baumann, G. (2002). *The multicultural riddle: Rethinking national, ethnic and religious identities*. New York, Routledge.
- Becci, I., Burchardt, M., & Giorda, M. (2017). Religious super-diversity and spatial strategies in two European cities. *Current sociology*, 65(1), pp. 73-91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116632030>
- Bertolani, B. (2013). The Sikhs in Italy: a growing heterogeneous and plural presence. In G. Giordan & W. H. Swatos (Eds.), *Testing Pluralism. Globalizing Belief, Localizing Gods*, pp. 75-93. Brill.
- Breskaya, O., Giordan, G., & Richardson, J. T. (2018). Human rights and religion: A sociological perspective. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 57(3), pp. 419-431. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12544>
- Burchardt, M., & Becci, I. (2013). Introduction: Religion takes place: Producing urban locality. In I. Becci, M. Burchardt & J. Casanova (Eds.), *Topographies of Faith. Religion in Urban Spaces*, pp. 1-21. Brill.
- Cancellieri, A., & Saint-Blancat, C. (2012). La scrittura religiosa della città. In A. Cancellieri & G. Scandurra (Eds.), *Tracce urbane. Alla ricerca della città*, pp. 78-86. Milano, FrancoAngeli.
- Colombo, M., & Peano Cavasola, F. (2023). La chiesa nel contesto interculturale. Risultati da una ricerca. *Rivista del Clero Italiano*, 6, pp. 460-472.
- Colombo, E. (2015). Multiculturalisms: An overview of multicultural debates in western societies. *Current Sociology*, 63(6), pp. 800-824. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115586802>
- Connor, P. (2012). Balm for The Soul: Immigrant Religion and Emotional Well-Being. *International Migration*, 50(2), pp. 130-157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2010.00623.x>

- Eade, J. (2012). Religion, home-making and migration across a globalising city: Responding to mobility in London. *Culture and Religion*, 13 (4), pp. 469-483. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2012.728142>
- Eade, J. (2011). From race to religion: Multiculturalism and contested urban space. In J. Beaumont & C. Baker (Eds.), *Postsecular Cities: Space, Theory and Practice*, pp. 154-167. A&C Black.
- El Ayoubi, M., & Paravati, C. (Eds.) (2018). *Dall'islam in Europa all'islam europeo. La sfida dell'integrazione*. Roma, Carocci editore.
- Ferrari, A. (2012). *La libertà religiosa in Italia. Un percorso incompiuto*. Roma, Carocci editore.
- Ferrari, A. (2011). Libertà religiosa e nuove presenze confessionali (ortodossi e islamici): tra cieca deregulation e super-specialità, ovvero del difficile spazio per la differenza religiosa. *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, 2011: July 4th. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13130/1971-8543/1213>
- Ferrari, A., & Ferrari, S. (2010). Religion and the secular State: the Italian Case. *Cardozo Electronic Law Bulletin*, 16(1), SI, Italian National Reports to the 18th World Conference on Comparative Law Washinton.
- Foley, M. W., & Hoge, D. R. (2007). *Religion and the new immigrants: How faith communities form our newest citizens*. Oxford University Press.
- Gallo, E. (2012). Creating Gurdwaras, narrating histories: Perspectives on the Sikh diaspora in Italy. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, (6). <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.3431>
- Garbin, D. (2023). *Migration and the Global Landscapes of Religion. Making Congolese Moral Worlds in Diaspora and Homeland*. Bloomsbury Publishing
- Garbin, D., & Strhan, A. (Eds.) (2017). *Religion and the global city*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Giorgi, A., & Itcaina, X. (2016). Religion and local politics in Southern Europe: a research agenda. *Religion, State & Society*, 44(3), pp. 276-295.
- Gozdziak, E. M. (2002). Spiritual emergency room: the role of spirituality and religion in the resettlement of Kosovar Albanians. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 15 (2), pp. 136-152. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/15.2.136>
- Guglielmi, M. (2022). *The Romanian Orthodox Diaspora in Italy: Eastern Orthodoxy in a Western European Country*. Cham, Springer Nature.
- Idos-Confronti (2024). *Dossier statistico Immigrazione 2024*. Centro studi e Ricerche Idos, in collaboration with Centro Studi Confronti and Istituto di Studi Politici "S. Pio V".
- ISMU (2024), Fondazione ISMU ETS, *Ventinovesimo Rapporto sulle migrazioni 2023*, Milano, FrancoAngeli.



- Kong, L. (2010). Global shifts, theoretical shifts: Changing geographies of religion. *Progress in human geography*, 34 (6), pp. 755-776. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132510362602>
- Kong, L. (2001). Mapping 'new' geographies of religion: politics and poetics in modernity. *Progress in human geography*, 25 (2), pp. 211-233. <https://doi.org/10.1191/030913201678580485>
- Levitt, P. (2007). *God needs no passport*, New York, The New Press.
- Ley, D. (2008). The immigrant church as an urban service hub. *Urban Studies*, 45(10), pp. 2057-2074. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098008094873>
- Magazzini, T. (2020). The Italian case. "Baptised laicità" and a changing demographic. In A. Triandafyllidou, & T. Magazzini (Eds.), *Routledge handbook on the governance of religious diversity*, pp. 59-73, New York, Routledge.
- McMichael, C. (2002). 'Everywhere is Allah's place': Islam and the everyday life of Somali women in Melbourne, Australia. *Journal of refugee studies*, 15(2), 171-188. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/15.2.171>
- Mezzetti, G. (2022). La presenza islamica. Tra radicamento e trasformazioni. In M. Ambrosini, S. D. Molli & Naso (Eds.), *Quando gli immigrati vogliono pregare: comunità, pluralismo, welfare*, pp. 87-148, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Molli, S. D., & Eade, J. (2024). Resisting, Reacting and Reinventing: Exploring the Role of Minority Religious Solidarities in Milan and London during the Pandemic. In M. Caselli M., J. Eade & J. Dürrschmidt (Eds.), *Migrants' (Im)mobilities in Three European Urban Contexts. Global Pandemic and Beyond*, pp. 139-158, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Molli, S. D. (2024) Ora et labora. I sikh e la produzione lattiero-casearia nella Bassa Bergamasca, In M. Ambrosini, R. Devole.: Naso & C. Paravati (eds), *Made in ImmigrItaly. Terre, culture, culture. Primo rapporto sui lavoratori immigrati nell'agroalimentare*, pp. 235-262. Agrilavoro Edizioni srl - Edizioni Com Nuovi Tempi
- Molli, S. D. (2022a). L'Oriente in Occidente. L'insediamento e il ruolo dei templi nella diaspora sikh e buddhista. In M. Ambrosini, S.D. Molli & Naso (Eds.), *Quando gli immigrati vogliono pregare: comunità, pluralismo, welfare*, pp.239-286, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Molli, S. D. (2022b). Immigrant Women's Protagonism: Exercising Leadership Roles in Ethnic Churches at the Time of the Pandemic in Italy. *Religions*, 13(8), 696. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080696>
- Molli, S. D. (2020). Immigrant Religious Networks in Milan: Ethnic Churches as Source of Social Capital. *Mondi Migranti*, 1, 97-116. DOI: 10.3280/MM2020-001006
- Naso, P. (2022). Pluralismo religioso, un investimento ad alto rendimento sociale. In M. Ambrosini, S. D. Molli & Naso (Eds.), *Quando gli immigrati vogliono pregare: comunità, pluralismo, welfare* (pp. 23-53). Il Mulino.

- Naso, P. (2021). I sikh, “calvinisti” in Val Padana. *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, 13, 167-179. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13130/1971-8543/16024>
- Orsi, R. A. (2010). *The Madonna of 115th Street: faith and community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (3rd ed.). Yale University Press.
- Orsi, R. A. (Eds.) (1999). *Gods of the city: Religion and the American urban landscape*. Indiana University Press.
- Pace, E. (2021). Le nuove Chiese evangeliche e pentecostali in Italia, senza fissa dimora, esposte a ragionevoli discriminazioni. In *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, 13, 151-166. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13130/1971-8543/16023>
- Pace, E., & Da Silva Moreira, A. (2018). Introduction - Religious Diversity in a Global Religious Field. *Religions*, 9 (95), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9040095>
- Pace, E. (Eds.) (2013). *Le religioni nell'Italia che cambia: mappe e bussole*. Roma, Carocci editore.
- Ricucci, R. (2017). *Diversi dall'Islam. Figli dell'immigrazione e altre fedi*, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Reyes-Espiritu, M. A. M. (2023). Homemaking in and with Migrant Churches as Communities of Care. *Religions*, 14(2), 257. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020257>
- Sheringham, O. (2013). *Transnational religious spaces: Faith and the Brazilian migration experience*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stepick, A., Rey, T., & Mahler, S. J. (Eds.). (2009). *Churches and charity in the immigrant city: Religion, immigration, and civic engagement in Miami*, Rutgers University Press.
- Triandafyllidou, A., & Magazzini, T. (Eds.) (2020). *Routledge handbook on the governance of religious diversity*. Routledge.
- Tweed, T. A. (1997). *Our lady of the exile: Diasporic religion at a Cuban Catholic shrine in Miami*. Oxford University Press.
- Vásquez, M. A., & Knott, K. (2014). Three dimensions of religious place making in diaspora. *Global Networks*, 14(3), pp. 326-347. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12062>.
- Zanfrini, L. (Eds.) (2020). *Migrants and Religion: Paths, Issues, and Lenses. A multi-disciplinary and multi-sited study on the role of religious belongings in migratory and integration processes*, Leiden, Brill.