

Article

From Collectivities to Families and Back to the Individual: Religiosity, Migrations and Civic Engagement at the Beginning of the COVID Period in a Multicultural Italian City

Roberta Ricucci *  and Luca Bossi 

Department of Culture, Politics and Society, University of Turin, 10100 Turin, Italy; luca.bossi@unito.it

* Correspondence: roberta.ricucci@unito.it

Abstract: Religions and religiosities are among the various social life spheres being affected by medical and political measures imposed during the health emergency. Involving a wide range of daily life dimensions and intertwining with fundamental aspects of individual and social existence, restrictions hit religions and religiosities in all those spaces where they find expression in our contemporary era. Pandemic restraints induced changes in the use of different public spaces: from school to home, from workplaces to places of worship, from prisons to squares, from hospitals to cemeteries. This also concerned the way religiosity could be performed, lived and shared in everyday life, for communities, families and individuals. In particular, during the pandemic, the role of religious environments became, once again, a place of material as well as spiritual support for migrants. And in this perspective, young people, i.e., second generations, played a prominent role, regaining prestige and recognition from adults. In fact, from being perceived as “far from religion and on the road to secularization”, as one interviewee said, young people have been able to show how it is possible to reinterpret religion in emigration, without abandoning religious values. This paper discusses the results of preliminary research on the topic conducted in the first phase of the pandemic in Turin, a city that, for its history of immigration and consolidated presence of Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox communities, is an emblematic case of the Italian multicultural context.

Keywords: religiosity; public spaces; family; pandemic



check for updates

Citation: Ricucci, Roberta, and Luca Bossi. 2022. From Collectivities to Families and Back to the Individual: Religiosity, Migrations and Civic Engagement at the Beginning of the COVID Period in a Multicultural Italian City. *Religions* 13: 497. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060497>

Academic Editor: John P. Bartkowski

Received: 2 April 2022

Accepted: 19 May 2022

Published: 30 May 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The composite reality of migrant youth has been studied above all with regard to their school, social and work inclusion paths (Bonizzoni and Ruggieri 2020). However, the limits of integration processes and the difficult relationships between different faiths and cultures have been highlighted over time by the main phenomena affecting Western societies (Coccia and Di Sciullo 2020). Rarely has it been under observation dealing with their involvement in religious organisations and religious environments and to what extent this involvement interplays with their religious identities. The role of places of prayer that have arisen as a result of migration processes is an object of analysis that lies at the crossroads of two disciplinary fields, that of religion and that of migration. In line with Hirschman (2004), they perform three important functions, summarised in the words resource, respect and refuge. They are places where one gathers useful information, i.e., important intangible resources, for life in migration (services, work opportunities, housing), but where one also obtains material resources (food, economic aid in serious situations). Prayer halls, churches and temples are also a safe harbour in the face of the storms of insertion and represent an environment of refreshment for the soul for those who feel disoriented in facing the difficulties and labours of rebuilding their life path in a new refuge. Religious circles linked to immigrant communities are also places of advocacy, where migrants' rights are promoted, and campaigns are organised in favour of legal reforms: one can cite the Dreamers Act in the United States or the campaign in support of “sans

papier" in France at the end of the 1980s, or, more recently, the national initiative "*L'Italia sono anch'io*" in Italy to make access to citizenship easier. In organising these actions, as well as managing the activities of places of prayer, participants in ethnic religious associations play roles that allow them to assume positions of pre-eminence in the community and thus regain respect and an upper social position within the reference group, positions which the downward social insertion due to the migration process had eroded. Expanding on this, places of worship are also venues which collaborate with local institutions to strengthen processes of inclusion and insertion. Moreover, part of these initiatives are the youngest, the second generations, who are increasingly privileged interlocutors of local and national administrations: in fact, numerous training projects are aimed at them to acquire leadership skills, group management skills and the skills and knowledge to become actors on the political-institutional scene. In addition, it is to the youngest and their being an important point of contact between ethnic religious associations and migrant communities that many municipal administrations and schools have turned during the pandemic to reach families, children and adults in fragile conditions. Furthermore, within this framework were the initiatives that saw religious communities, born in emigration, involved in city actions to support families and the most fragile during the pandemic. Moreover, young people in the front row are drawing scholars' attention to the way children of immigration express their religious identity.

Studies on countries with a long tradition of migration, such as Australia, Canada and the United States, have highlighted a progressive distancing of the second generations from the modalities, environments and types of religious beliefs of the first. It emerges emblematically across the board—net of the different contexts of life and the various migrant communities involved—how the children of international mobility seem to lose their relationship with the religion of their parents, or at least transform it, to the point of assimilating themselves to the majority positions of the mainstream community (Connor 2008; Bengtson 2013).

In spite of this, there is another element in which religion plays an important role: that of fostering, even indirectly, and in some cases directing the commitment of young people to the society in which they live, and promoting an active role, for example, in paths of commitment to their own community or voluntary work in general (Stoll and Wong 2007; Beaumont and Cloke 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis stressed the importance of this factor, especially with regard to the strong economic and social consequences due to the medical and political measures imposed during the health emergency.

This paper is situated at the crossroad of the fields of sociological ethnic studies and sociology of religion, taking into account the intergenerational perspective. By considering the literature on parent–children relations in immigration and the extent to which first and second generations could differ in their positions on religious identity, especially in a country such as Italy where there are increasing anti-immigrant feelings, we investigated (1) the role of religious environments from the perspective of both first and second generations before and during the pandemic period among migrants in an Italian multicultural city, and (2) how the young develop new and/or keep old we-relations among their religious identities due to the needs that emerged at the beginning of the COVID experience.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework and the methodological aspects of the study, together with its hypotheses and the contextual framework; Section 3 focuses on the two main topics we have decided to investigate, discussing the study's findings; Section 4 deals with the conclusions.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

2.1. *The Religious Variable as a Piece in the Mosaic of Integration*

Religion is considered a relevant variable for the analysis of the dynamics of integration, whether of clear assimilation or ethnic identification, marginality or biculturality. In other words, it is a factor that intervenes in the design of biographical profiles and

inter-ethnic relations, influencing the paths of segregation or inclusion, on a scale ranging from discrimination through tacit tolerance up to full acceptance. The literature on the subject has focused on the different mechanisms underlying the practice and requests for recognition and visibility among different foreign minorities, multiple religious affiliations and first and second generations (Uecker 2008; Vezzoni et al. 2020; Lagi et al. 2021; Crespi and Roberta 2021).

For children and grandchildren of foreign citizens, often the “*processes of social integration, as well as the definition of a cultural identity, in many cases, are filtered through the relationship with religious institutions and educational socialisation paths, and through the support they offer*” (Ambrosini 2016, p. 76). Specifically, and with reference to the children of Romanian immigrants, the relationship with religion needs to be considered from different perspectives: on the one hand, the process of acculturation, i.e., how children fit into the host society; on the other, how they define their identity as young people with a migrant background in a globalised world (Berry 1997).

The ways in which migrant identities change over time and under the influence of the social context, as well as their particular characteristics, are generally considered crucial issues in the study of the integration process of second generations. For the children reunited with their parents who emigrated before them, this process is complex, since it overlaps with the broader task of forming their own identity, which begins in the native country and then continues in the host society, where—from the religious point of view—ethnic places of faith take on importance. They represent not only “*spaces for the soul*”, but also safe havens for those who feel lost in a scenario where diversity is highlighted on every occasion, offering the possibility of attending rituals and a confrontation with religious personnel who are close in language and/or culture. On the other hand, difficulties linked to access to work and problematic interactions with the new living environment transform the religious environments of immigrant communities into places of representation, with activities dedicated to the rights of non-native residents and political commitment (Beaumont and Dias 2008). From another point of view, they often prove to be favourable spaces for collaboration with local institutions, especially with regard to improving citizens’ knowledge of the community.

Churches, mosques and *Musallas* therefore play a social role in emigration that goes beyond the strictly religious one, the latter being important as far as prayer, participation in rituals and the maintenance of traditions are concerned (Massey and Higgins 2011; Hagan and Ebaugh 2003). However, this task is more important in the first phase of the migration path, which—according to a process logic and in line with an assimilationist perspective—gradually leaves room for the participation of immigrants and (above all) of their descendants, sometimes already new citizens, in the host society. Nonetheless, the function of a sort of “community welfare” strongly re-emerged during the pandemic, highlighting a new role for the main actors of different generations.

From this perspective, a peculiar aspect concerns the Romanian community, which is characterised (in addition to its numbers) by being “accepted” in terms of its religious affiliation, perceived as shared, as it is linked to Christianity and felt to be close to the Catholic Church, even when it refers to the religious experiences developed throughout history in Greek and Slavic Europe (Orthodox Churches), as demonstrated by the experience of places of worship made available by dioceses for worship. Citizenship of a European Union country is of course also relevant, not only at a strictly legal level. At the same time, these elements do not protect against a social stigma linked to being foreigners as such (Ricucci 2017).

2.2. Italy, a Multicultural and Multireligious Country

For almost fifty years, Italy has been confronted with the presence of foreign adults and minors, which has rapidly led it to become a country of immigration. Since the 1990s, young people have been attracting the attention of social workers and *policy makers*, because of their growing numbers and the new challenges and issues they pose to the various

local contexts, from reception policies to school policies, from extracurricular activities to relations with parents rediscovered after many years (Sciortino 2016). This attention has been translated into numerous initiatives dedicated, above all, to the integration of foreign minors into the school system, to their language learning and to educational and recreational support. Looking at the situation of the children of immigration, we are able to understand the current dynamics and future challenges that Italy, a multi-ethnic and multicultural reality, must face (Table 1).

Table 1. Italy. Foreign population: total, minors and their incidence on the total (2006–2021), data as of 1 January.

Year	2006	2013	2019	2021
Total foreign population (adults + minors)	2,670,514	4,387,721	5,255,503	5,171,894
Minors	665,625	953,785	1,082,634	1,047,873
Incidence % of minors on the total population	22.6	21.7	20.6	20.2

Source: elaborations of ISTAT data, various years, www.demo.istat.it, accessed on 10 May 2022.

The presence of immigrants is no longer a novelty or a transitory phenomenon. Foreigners have gradually become a structured (and structural) element in Italian society, especially with regard to their children. Although it is the educational sphere to which the greatest energies are devoted, in terms of resources and research, a vanguard of the second generations is about to come of age, going through the delicate phase of transition following the end of compulsory education. They are therefore confronted with a society that is often unable to distinguish between the trajectories of these young people (all of whom are Italian, at least as far as their schooling is concerned) and those of their parents (the result of one or more migrations). The children of immigration, who were born or arrived in Italy at a certain point in their lives, are therefore a central element of the migration phenomenon.

As for adults, present in a heterogeneous manner in the individual local situations, there are important territorial differences, which reflect the different rhythms of migration flows, as well as the effects of migration chains: in areas characterised by long-standing arrival paths, rebalanced from the point of view of gender and with high rates of reunification, there are more minors born in Italy; vice versa, in more recent arrivals and/or with integration projects not yet completely oriented towards definitive stabilisation in Italy, minors born abroad and reunited in adolescence prevail. However, the differences are not only territorial or in terms of place of birth. Other variables contribute to complicate and make each migratory trajectory in some ways unique. Some of these relate to the history of each individual: family type, socioeconomic conditions, future prospects and relationships with the community in Italy and the community back home. Others are more general and refer to the host society's attitude towards immigrant citizens and their various origins, the way they are viewed and the images/stereotypes that characterise this view.

In this scenario, the issue of religious affiliation takes on particular importance, and this aspect represents an element of further differentiation in the relationship with Italian society and the opportunities it offers (Ricucci 2017). In the background is a nation that looks with a certain fear at the growing religious pluralism, a consequence of migration flows.

While it is true that concerns are concentrated on Islam, which is paying a high price for international tensions and fears of teachings perceived as being at odds with shared values considered essential in Western societies, it is the religious fact as such that represents an element of possible tension. In fact, at times, it seems that the centrality of human rights officially declared in post-war Western societies, including the right to profess one's own religion, is not so widely shared. Everyday experiences in different social contexts tell of "attacks", sometimes not explicit, which are subdued and embedded in glances, subdued comments and attitudes suffered by those perceived as religiously

“non-integrated”, culturally “unwelcome” and socially “non-tolerated”. Some surveys on xenophobia and racism reveal, in this sense, a worsening of the collective climate, often put in relation with the consequences of the hard-economic crisis of the last decade and with the estrangement of the social body from traditional institutions, considered increasingly less manageable (Istituto Cattaneo 2018).

2.3. Data and Methods

This contribution fits into two broader research projects carried out in Turin (NW part of Italy) and led by one of the authors: PriMed—Interactions and Preventions in the Mediterranean Area (2019–2020), a huge project funded by the Italian Ministry of Universities, and “Fatti Riconoscere—Be recognizable” (2019–2021), a project funded by the Italian Bank Foundation, the “Compagnia di San Paolo”. In both projects, stakeholders, public civil servants and private social workers working with immigrant communities were interviewed. In particular, the role of religious associations that manage places of worship, the involvement of first and second generations and the motivation of church- and mosque-goers to participate in activities (religious, spiritual, instrumental-informative, socialising) were investigated. With the emergence of the pandemic, questions were added on needs, organised activities and people involved in responding to new and additional requests. Alongside narrative interviews, which retraced the themes mentioned above together with a brief history of the interviewee with respect to the migratory journey and the relationship with religion, focus groups were organised with stakeholders, operators and the staff most active in the various religious realities. The religious realities involved were 5 Muslim associations, considered the most representative in terms of history and participation, 2 Romanian Orthodox associations and 2 Catholic associations linked to the Romanian and Filipino worlds.

All the interviews were collected in accordance with the data protection laws, and all the data were anonymised and stored in a safe server at the University of Turin. The sample used for this paper was composed of 30 interviewees, equally balanced by religious belonging (10 Muslims, 10 Orthodox and 10 Romanian Catholics). Considering the perspective of analysis, the broader definition of second generation is used, which includes those who were born in Italy and those who arrived here within the first years of compulsory schooling, and not Rumbaut’s decimal definition (Rumbaut 1994). The interviews of young people were equally divided by origin and gender. With regard to educational qualifications, 10 respondents had a high school diploma, 15 were university students and 5 were attending a vocational course. Furthermore, 10 interviews with key informants (social workers, ethnic religious association representatives and policy makers, i.e., the City Department of Integration Affairs) were added. The analysis was conducted with Atlas-ti software, and a useful literature review on the characteristics of migrations, religious associations, intercultural policies and inter-religious activities set up by the city administration was carried out in order to better frame the paper. The material on the impact of COVID on religious organisations and youth’s involvement in religious environments was collected as part of two broader projects, as mentioned above, carried out in a specific context, which is the city of Turin. Turin’s centrality to this theme is given by its history as a traditional city of foreign immigration, and the policies of inclusion and management of diversity, including religious diversity, which have characterised it. The city is also defined as a “laboratory” of intercultural policies and innovative policies for the management of religious diversity resulting from immigration (Mezzetti and Ricucci 2020). Specifically, the local administration recognised the growing importance of the immigrant population in the Turin context in the mid-1980s. Since then, policies have been developed in order to face the socioeconomic transformations resulting from the immigration process. In the process, one of the most important characteristics of the city of Turin emerges: the strong collaboration between institutions and associations, both ethnic and inter-ethnic, and cultural and religious, working in the social, education and leisure areas. Turin has coped successfully with various key challenges:

- Building social cohesion in a difficult economic period: the rate of unemployment is rising with the number of Italians looking for work;
- Developing intercultural skills among social servants, teachers, citizens, Italians and foreigners;
- Promoting knowledge of the various facets of the immigrant population living in Turin: from the first generation to the second; from Muslims to Orthodox to Catholics from the Philippines and Latin America; from cleaners to ethnic entrepreneurs; from people with the right to vote to asylum seekers.

The most important lesson emerging from the Turin experience as an important hub for migrants in Italy is the importance of a network of associations, including the religious ones, and institutions working together to define and implement integration in an intercultural way (Premazzi 2021). And this approach has also been well recognised during the pandemic period, as one of the interviewed stakeholders working for the City Department for Integration Affairs stressed: indeed, “the City administration called all the religious associations (including those who specifically work only with immigrants) to play altogether in a kind of “subsidiarity” perspective, helping the municipality and its offices to reach all the families in difficulties, and among them a great number belongs to various migrant communities. And the answer to this call has been enthusiastic and full of participation and involvement. This means that we built a very good relationship with all the ethnic and religious communities and this is one of the trait of the city in managing those diversities coming from the various migratory waves”. The peculiarity of the city of Turin in this perspective has been pointed out in various studies and confirmed by the lack of inter-ethnic conflicts (Mezzetti and Ricucci 2020).

3. Discussion

Looking at the complex relationship between young people and the religious sphere, religious institutions still continue to be a point of reference in the face of the many daily difficulties (Valtolina 2020). The role played by religious institutions is highlighted at the territorial level in the action of priests, nuns, pastors, bishops and imams supporting social activities (often centred on voluntary networks that refer to churches and mosques), but, above all, as a source of support for the faithful and as mediators between the latter and the institutions.

Within this framework, the COVID period represents an important litmus test to reflect on the importance of religious places as environments that perform not only their role of “care for souls” and spiritual support, but also that of supporting material needs, from a community welfare perspective (Lim and Putnam 2010; Storm 2017). On the other hand, the pandemic has brought to the forefront the role of young people who, due to their digital and linguistic skills, have become “natural mediators” between the “world of information, rules and updates” and their compatriots, especially those who are less well equipped in terms of access to and use of the web and in-depth knowledge of the Italian language. For families, adults and, above all, many women, the possibility of having a mosque, church or prayer group as a reference point represented as an important element of resilience, with positive repercussions also on the psychological side, as some interviewees recalled:

“For many families, it was crucial to have the help of our young people who organised activities for the children. Our young people were invaluable, and they were carrying food bags for those who had lost their jobs due to the effects of the pandemic or were unable to go out because they were in isolation [...] seeing young people from the community, hearing their enthusiasm and offers of help for their children was comforting. They felt reassured by young people with whom they were in tune, whom they trusted because they had already seen them in church or because the priest had anticipated their arrival”.
[responsible for youth activities, Filipino Catholic association]

“For many mothers, the UMMA project, which we young people created, has been very useful. Yes, I say young people but we are now adults. They had a good intuition: to

support families, the community, the umma, through online meetings dedicated to parenting, food support, and psychological support. All organised by the mosque association. A different way of expressing our being a community. Especially in the months when it was forbidden to attend places of worship, having moments in addition to Friday prayer on zoom was important. Moreover, it was important that they were activities organised within the framework of the mosque and not by the municipality or other organisations".
[representative of a Muslim association]

These quotations sufficiently introduce two of the crucial elements of this contribution: (1) the importance of religious environments as places of trust and important settings, especially for more vulnerable families and individuals; and (2) the crucial role of youth and young adults in ferrying—albeit following a dramatic event such as the pandemic—the activities carried out by religious places or associations towards a modernisation and greater involvement of the second-generation youth component.

3.1. Religious Associations and Places of Trust

The turning point seems to be family reunifications, particularly of sons and daughters. Often, families, and especially mothers, build a certain stability in the country of immigration with difficulty and only then rebuild the family unit, calling in children who had been entrusted with the care of relatives (usually grandparents). This is certainly not trivial but a difficult moment in which the difficulties of young people who have grown up in an all-in-all “privileged” environment, thanks to the greater economic possibilities granted by their parents’ remittances, are faced, and they find themselves on the weaker side of society, in a country they do not know, often in the complex phase of adolescence. This is a crucial moment for the development of identity and the formation or consolidation of values and practices, and it is precisely religion which families call upon to play an essential role, both at home, where it is seen as an essential factor in the social control of the behaviour of those who are far from their parents, and in the new context of life, where mothers and fathers hope it will represent a tool for maintaining values and traditions. In a scenario that is often perceived as “hostile” (at least in terms of a widespread judgement of “amorality” and distance from the sacred), religious environments are re-inventing themselves as spaces of support and education, also considering the work (and therefore time) constraints of parents (e.g., assignments involving night-time care), and being able to count on rather weak family networks. The religious environment then becomes—in the eyes of the community in the diaspora and especially of the community in the homeland—a guarantor of parental capacity and loyalty to values and traditions even in emigration (Yep et al. 1998).

These environments, in an ideal path of progressive insertion in the new society, can be represented as a stage in a process of profound transformation that leads to the overcoming of being a minority group, also with regard to religious organisations. Like traditional behaviour and habits from the point of view of faith in the passage from the first to the other generations, there would be a progressive abandonment of the need for ad hoc services to arrive at the insertion of immigrants in the religious structures already present, “Structures that—in this perspective—should take on (for their part) intercultural aspects and the choice with which ethnic places of worship would be confronted, would be that between becoming intercultural and being destined to become extinct” (Ricucci 2017, p. 32).

However, this position is not unanimously shared. Many points out that these realities do not appear to be temporary but are capable of structuring their presence over time. In other words, it is a perspective that seems to contradict the assimilationist paradigm often proposed by scholars, according to which, from the ethnic church, migrant believers would become, with time, part of the existing parishes, becoming involved in liturgical and non-liturgical activities and thus abandoning services in ethnically connoted languages and religious initiatives (Gordon 1964; Alba and Nee 2003).

In this debate, which is still unresolved, the social function of ethnic religious spaces is certain, facilitated by the use of a common language. From being the first place of reception,

meeting and service, for example, in terms of the availability of reliable information on regulations and job opportunities, community networks and structures can evolve into a place for reflection on one's own culture and the defence of rights. The aspect of identity in these realities, in which one feels recognised, becomes increasingly significant over time.

"I am Catholic, I go to Mass, although not to pray. It's a way to be together, to get together with other Romanians. I don't go every week. Let's say once a month, because I know my parents care, especially my mother. She says that the parish is the only place that helps us when we need it. She says this because that's how it was for her when she arrived in Italy, and today, if a Romanian has a problem he goes to the priest, he doesn't go to the lawyer, the accountant... he listens to what the priest says, prays and then moves on. Religion is part of being Romanian, especially for our mothers and grandmothers. For us young people it's less so, but it's the same in Italy. For the grandparents of my friends, going to mass was an obligation not to be missed. Today, some of my friends don't even know who the Pope is or what the difference is between Catholics and Orthodox". (Romanian young man, 24, Catholic)

"To you, a Muslim is the figure of a man who always goes to the mosque, who follows only what the imam says, who observes Ramadan. To many of my friends, and me, being a Muslim means coming from a family tied to Islam. Many of us, young people, only observe Ramadan and we participate in festivities, like the Feast of the Sacrifice. We are Muslims in our own way. We live here, not in Morocco or Egypt. We must try to adapt". (M, Moroccan boy, 21, Muslim)

The migratory experience is also a factor of transformation for all the realities involved, both family and ecclesial. Once again, it is possible to see how in the diaspora religious organisations change, adapting to new contexts and new sensitivities of the faithful, especially the youngest. This can be seen, for example, in the Orthodox Church, through a (slow and relative) decrease in the centrality of the liturgical dimension in favour of more markedly pastoral and aggregative initiatives, such as sports activities, school camps, Sunday excursions and musical events.

"The church helps those who come. I didn't like going there in Romania, it was a place for old people, young people didn't have room. Here, it is different. Here, it's not just silence and prayer, you go to be together, to breathe, to be yourself. When you go to church you feel at home: it is like going to a Romanian meeting centre, and then there is the priest, the older boys who help you". (Romanian girl, 22, Catholic)

On the other hand, churches and mosques are not places that are impervious to events and discourses that take place outside them, and even less so are their worshippers. Therefore, the feeling of being needed but not wanted, of being a functional presence in the Mediterranean *welfare* system, but badly tolerated when one wants to leave its borders, is part of the rhetoric that the sons and especially the daughters of immigration have internalised. In particular, young Christians perceive that their path of integration, compared to that of their Muslim peers or those of other religions, is slightly less difficult. In other words, they know that not being stigmatised for their religion is an important advantage, even if they are confronted on a daily basis with a society that is in fact secularised, if not explicitly hostile to the religious message.

"Our parents do not understand. For us it's not easy to talk about religion. If you say that you go to church, you are considered a loser or someone who can't manage on her own. So, you try to find excuses not to go with your parents or you hope that no one will see you. Now that I'm 24, I understand that it doesn't make sense, but when you're at school, the only thing you want is to be accepted and here in Italy not many young people say they go to mass. My sister has been luckier, because she has found in her class those who go to the scouts, those who attend the parish and so she has friends to be with, even if at times she too is ashamed [...] we try to explain it to the parents, but it's no use. For us religion is lived in another way". (Romanian girl, 25, Orthodox)

The words of the above interviewee, a university student born and raised in Italy and proud of her double Italian-Romanian belonging, clearly list the challenges common to that specific group represented by communities other than the majority Catholic one. First, there is the challenge of being the bridge between the community and society, between the environments where the first generations grow old and need the security of being able to pass the baton and the care of the values in which they believe to the “next generation”, which is authoritative only if it is raised and formed strictly by the religious and cultural values transmitted within the families.

“Our young people are interested in not just being ‘the son of the Romanian carer’ or ‘the daughter of the Romanian painter’. They want to have their own new identity, perhaps Italian, perhaps Italian-Romanian, and they don’t find this in the parish where there are only Romanians”.

I: But then they are not far from the religion, but from the places of the Romanians?

“Both. They only speak in Italian, even the children force their mothers to always speak in Italian when they can be heard by others. It is crazy. Religion is seen as a piece of that identity that they want to erase, even if the young people I meet are—so to speak—advantaged, because they are catholic and not orthodox and in Italy they should not have problems. Instead, they say that today, if you want to be accepted, you don’t have to talk or have anything to do with religion. It seems you hear phrases of the time of communism and instead we hear them in Italy, in a Catholic country, strange, eh?”. (Romanian pastoral worker, Orthodox)

3.2. The Pandemic Experience and a Renewal Youth Protagonism

“The pandemic has changed many things in our relationship with the mosque and with adults, the first generations. Before, we were considered young people to be protected, unable to translate the teachings we find in the Koran into concrete actions. During the months of Covid, from the very beginning, it was us young people with what’s-up groups, with communities on Telegram to organise ourselves and think about how to get the Imam’s messages to everyone, how to organise streaming for Fridays, how to collect needs and be of relief to those who were alone or had family members in hospital. These are concrete activities that made us realise that the umma is important to us, too, that our religious values are not lost because we feel more Italian than Moroccan or Egyptian. Our parents, the first generations, must understand that even if we speak a different language or frequent different environments, our values do not change. They change. We cannot live religion as they lived it in Fes or Benin Mellal. First of all, because times have changed and they themselves should admit this when they return to their relatives back home and feel like “fish out of water”, because fewer people wear the veil, people pray much more at home and only on Fridays in the mosque and so on. So, and I mention the second reason, one is not only religious through attendance. One is also religious in one’s behaviour, in one’s way of being. We live in a non-Muslim country and this must always be kept in mind. During the pandemic little was said about Islam, only in relation to the difficulty of burying the Muslim dead, because there is a lack of suitable cemetery spaces, or only when an agreement was drawn up—as for all confessions—for the management of the pandemic in places of worship. Then the silence. Yet we in Turin, like others in other cities, Bologna, Reggio Emilia, Milan, were very active players in the management of the emergency in our religious communities, representing important points of information, material and immaterial aid, thus relieving public structures and services. We were also expressing our religious identity in this concrete way: some of the older generations think that if you don’t recite sure or kneel you don’t pray. We pray with deeds, too”. (Islamic association representative)

“We, members of the Church Youth Group, created a group on Tik Tok for teenagers. We organised activities for school support, but also activities to prepare for Easter. We were not discouraged and, in some cases, we took the initiative and organised educational

outings for children and pre-teens as soon as possible. If before, some had doubts about our religious identity, now they are more likely to say that we are no longer so Catholic because we have assimilated with our Italian peers who are Catholic in name only, but then do not attend the rites or follow the commandments. Compared to our parents, we are religious in our own way. And this is inevitable: we are different generations and live in different cultural and national contexts". (Romanian boy, 24, Catholic)

The two interviews emphasised the activism of young people. Research on civic protagonism and volunteering by migrants and their children is not numerous and often concerns involvement in social or advocacy activities to improve their integration conditions. Sometimes, these engagements do not easily distinguish between working or pseudo-working activities and actual volunteering. In particular, this is true for the first generations, whose involvement in migrant-oriented activities (cultural mediation, bureaucratic assistance services, and orientation and support desks for first integration) is prevalent, a perspective that often allows them to gain trust and esteem in the face of a social downgrading compared to the condition experienced in their homeland, which often exists, given the job placement in professional positions typical of the so-called 3 Ds (Dangerous, Demanding and Dirty) (Khvorostianov and Remennick 2017).

A reading of the phenomenon over time allows us to take a detailed look at the strengths and weaknesses in the relationship between first- and second-generation associations and Italian society. At first, the prevailing dimension was that of "Demand". The associations, which were weak from an organisational point of view and ill-prepared to interact with local administrations, proposed themselves as subjects able to concretise the search for spaces or funds for small initiatives. With younger people, the relationship shifts to the side of collaboration: better prepared both linguistically and in terms of the functioning of the bureaucratic machine, the new generations would like to find recognition as subjects to be consulted and with whom it is possible to collaborate in the realisation of initiatives. They want to be present and active in city events (e.g., cultural and sporting) and to intervene, where possible, in *decision-making* processes. Such aspirations clash with reality, even in those territories where integration policies are more advanced (Caponio et al. 2016). However, there is one space where the presence of young people in the debate on issues deemed to be of interest is prioritised: that of the internet and, in some cases, the organisation of public events. It is here that the children of immigration decline, in a more mature way, their ethnicity/identity and, in some cases, religious belonging. Social networks, communities and websites become the stages from which to express their point of view, as well as the place where they can interact with other young people, even in other countries (Marzana et al. 2019).

Reflection on the reasons that lead first and second generations to devote time to aid and civic promotion activities has recently been enriched, proposing a distinction between self-directed and hetero-directed motivations (Yoon et al. 2008), as summarised in the Table 2.

One aspect that appears to be of interest in the reading of the phenomenon is that of the channels through which social commitment finds concrete expression, in relation to the potential recipients. As already mentioned, this element can be intertwined with the process of transformation of religious organisations that change (more or less consciously) their approach to the community of the faithful with respect to the reality of the motherland. In the diaspora, ecclesial realities often become aware of being called upon to foster links with the territory which they are part of. One of the most striking aspects in this regard concerns the planning and implementation of volunteer initiatives.

Table 2. Motivations and types of volunteering and social engagement activities.

Self-Directed Motivations		
Acquire competences	Personal wellbeing and development	Social integration
Recover socio-professional positions	Strengthen resilience dynamics	Return the help received
Hetero-Directed Motivations		
Contrasting a stereotyped view of young people with a migratory background only interested in actions against the social cohesion (as the topic of gangs in suburban areas time-by-time recalls)	Following parents' and ethnic communities' expectations	Positively answer the city administration's requests of being "active citizens"
Out-group orientation (arrival society)	In-group orientation (own ethnic religious group)	Intercultural Orientation

Source: (Ricucci 2021, p. 78).

It is useful to remember that the decision to engage and participate in different activities intertwines with various origins, traditions and value systems, and also with migrants from countries outside the EU and others from countries that have joined the European Union in recent decades, facing significantly different legal constraints and opportunities. Alongside them are the second generations, grappling with a laborious (and thus far inconclusive) process of citizenship reform. They are often incorrectly assimilated to their fathers, not only from a legal point of view but also in terms of social and employment opportunities, without taking into account characteristics that are, for the most part, more easily related to the reality of their Italian peers.

Traditionally, the main field of activity of young people of immigrant origin is considered to be associationism of an ethnic nature, often linked to religious communities frequented by families: for example, taking care of children during services, after-school activities or support in the organisation of celebrations and events. Nonetheless, there is a growing number of young people of foreign origin who are involved in welfare and cultural activities linked to the most important third-sector organisations, such as the Red Cross, the "Misericordie", civil protection groups and environmental associations. In this case, an important element, more than the link with the community to which they feel they belong, is the search for personal growth and the possibility of acquiring skills that they consider useful, also from a professional point of view (Ricucci 2022).

Other good examples are the involvement in projects carried out by the local administration, and various educational and social public services for improving active citizenship among youth and adults with a migratory background in tandem with national citizens in order to develop social cohesion through a joint volunteering activity. In this perspective, a blind goal is that of contrasting stereotypes and building—at least in the districts where a high rate of immigrant families live—a positive attitude towards the numerous immigrant-related diversities in daily life: religious, ethnic and linguistic (Sacco et al. 2016).

The pandemic that broke out in 2020 has, as in many other fields, highlighted and accelerated this dynamic, representing a strong stimulus for the protagonism of young people, as the words of two interviewees describe well.

"At the beginning, we were all unable to react. The activities in the church stopped, but not the contacts. We younger ones were in contact via social media and wondering what to do. However, this was our chance. The world moved online. Many of our parents learned to use the internet to hear from parents, grandparents, although WhatsApp is the most used way. Talking to relatives and compatriots, however, is different. Everyone says that Romanian is like Italian, but not everyone has the same ease in understanding Italian.

Then, with the pandemic, it was important to circulate messages from Italy. Often our parents continue to read the news in Romanian, to follow what is happening at home, but the conditions in the countries were different. So, we started to use our contacts to translate all the messages into the language and try to keep the families and the elderly updated on what was happening. There are families who are well integrated, but not all of them are". (Romanian volunteer, girl, 26, Orthodox)

"With some volunteers, we took care of the children and their homework. We bought tablets and made ourselves available to help them with their homework using various platforms. We are a group of university and high school students. For some of us, it is like giving back what we have received". (Romanian volunteer, boy, 22, Catholic)

Indeed, many social inequalities and challenges have been exacerbated by the pandemic. They are a threat to social cohesion and a powerful factor in the involvement of young people.

These experiences are still largely sporadic and have not involved the majority of second generations; however, their interest is undeniable, both from the point of view of their concreteness, built up in the daily commitment on the ground, and in a broader sense as part of the construction of paths to integration and recognition in Italian society.

The promotion of youth and young families is one of the liveliest fields of activity. Immigrant communities, gathered around the church or the mosque, understand there is a need to improve young people's knowledge (of the characteristics of the city in which they live, and of its public services) and useful skills at a professional level.

An exemplary project, already mentioned above by an interviewee, on these issues has been carried out in Turin over the last two years. This initiative, called the "UMMA project", is itself a consequence of the increasingly close relationship between the Muslim community and the Italian institutions. In fact, the original idea came from a research project carried out by two young Muslim researchers from the local university, on the question of parenting by Muslim families in a context that is culturally different from the one they came from.

"Parents need to think modalities to reconciling the transmission of traditional, religious values and their children's needs: identity formation, integrating different values, different cultures. A very difficult task indeed, which parents often have to face for the first time and which they themselves had not experienced in their youth". (Moroccan volunteer, 24, Muslim)

The initiative foresees some "pilot actions", including meetings and a training course for "community mediators", with the aim of improving information about Italian institutions for immigrant families. The course was designed in partnership with associations linked to a mosque, the municipality and other non-profit sector actors.

It is interesting to note that the implementation of a planned cycle of training and reflection meetings for the empowerment of Muslim community families has changed due to the health emergency. The pandemic forced the organisation of the meetings on "education and growth between two cultures" to move online, and with a certain surprise, the organisers recorded a large participation that went beyond the local dimension and involved young Muslim parents (especially mothers) from all over Italy.

The impact of the epidemic crisis was undoubtedly wide-ranging and pervasive, for both individuals and organisations. It has also affected the communication dynamics (internal and external) of numerous organisations and associations, the definition of new and, in some cases, innovative ways of commitment and action and the recognition of subjects not traditionally present in local solidarity networks as reliable partners.

4. Conclusions

The pandemic played a "mirror function" (Sayad 2002) in highlighting the multiple characteristics of religious circles linked to immigration, underlining their important role as welfare actors and places of trust. In a perspective of subsidiarity, their activities have

enabled them—in the context studied and also in synergy with the public administration—to play an important role in supporting families and individuals whose path to inclusion has been made even more difficult by the pandemic. In fulfilling this role, migration-related religious organisations have found (or rediscovered) an important help in the civic protagonism and voluntary work of young members. The presence and activity of young people has been valuable both in terms of concrete help, and in bringing to the fore—again in a mirror function—the theme of how, in migration, religiosity and the ways in which it is expressed can be modified and referred to, without losing the link with religion or translating it into processes of secularisation or the transformation of young people into “non-believers/nones”. The results presented here are therefore part of a broader debate that COVID-19 has brought back to the centre of attention of the scientific debate in Italy, where the entry into the adult world of second generations, children of the recent migratory processes that Italy has experienced, calls for reflection on the themes of religious transmission, the generational transition in the management of religious places and the transformation of these places from being places for “migrants” to places open to all those believers interested without any consideration for the migratory background. Indeed, young people of foreign origin have to deal with the traditions and religious practices of their country of origin, which they perceive as elements of their cultural and family identity. At the same time, they represent one of the factors that define them as members of a minority community with respect to Italian society, even when their religious affiliation is Catholic. Those who come from a country with a Christian tradition are, nevertheless, aware of an ethnic religious identity that does not place them at the centre of attention, as happens with their Muslim peers. However, this fact does not make them exempt from the effects of the process of implicit adaptation to the Italian scenario and its dynamics of the relationship with religion. These include the progressive distancing from practices and ways of experiencing the relationship with the sacred experienced by families, and the comparison with an Italian society that is rather hostile to religions perceived as linked to migratory flows, if not (at least as far as the peer group is concerned) to active religious belonging as such (Barbagli and Camille 2011).

From the meeting with the interviewees, it clearly emerged how the construction of their biographies was often indebted to their frequentation of ethnic religious environments, whose limits with respect to their demands for recognition and autonomy they understood—in a clear and transversal manner with respect to a more or less intense religious practice. These environments are the repositories of cultural *humus* that young children of immigration do not deny, but which represents a link with their family and culture of origin, defining profound consequences from the point of view of identity. At the same time, their own reality is seen as different from that of their fathers, including their relationship with the sacred.

In the words of one young Romanian, “I want to have the right to pray in the language I use every day and wherever I want, not just in the Romanian church, where I feel out of place. Our life is now here or in another country, but no longer in Romania, and religion is also something different for us. Maybe we are wrong, but we want to pray when and where we want, in Italian, or even not to pray”. (Romanian boy, 21, Catholic)

“Above all, I am Moroccan, my parents remind me. According to them I must do ‘Moroccan’ things, be like Moroccans are, be religious and be a Muslim, but I want to be Italian AND Moroccan, I don’t want to be identified only on the basis of my religion”. (Moroccan boy, 19, Muslim)

It is a transformation still in progress, the change of a generation following the one that emigrated, which does not want to be caged in the role of “foreigner” and yet feels (at least in part) different from the “Italians”, especially from the religious point of view. In this context, the boundaries of the relationship between young people of foreign origin and faith are still poorly defined and need to be investigated and studied in more depth.

Anyhow, the balances are fragile; they have been affected by the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which, however, has also represented an opportunity for civic engagement and for building, at least potentially, pathways to integration (Ricucci 2022).

The social challenges exacerbated by the epidemic are many and would require greater attention to the already existing critical issues related to the migration phenomenon, as well as to the enhancement of its positive aspects. It is to be hoped that an exclusionary and repressive tendency that is not only verbal will be countered by experiences, built up over the medium to long term, of stabilisation and increasing integration. Health services and schools are thus confirmed as the main places where the conflicts arising from the emergency will have to be addressed and resolved.

Author Contributions: Sections 1 and 3 (and three sub-sections) were written by R.R.; Section 2 (and subsequent sub-sections) and Section 4 were jointly written activities between R.R. and L.B. based on qualitative material collected by R.R., which has already been published and discussed in Ricucci 2021 and in Ricucci 2022. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Interviews have been collected within two projects: PriMed, funded by the Ministry of university (2019–2020) and Fatti Riconoscere, funded by Compagnia di San Paolo (2019–2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study and it is stored accordingly to the DP statements.

Data Availability Statement: Data are stored according to the DP statement defined by the University of Turin.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

References

- Alba, Richard, and Victor Nee. 2003. *Remaking the American Mainstream. Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ambrosini, Maurizio. 2016. Protected but Separate: International Immigrants in the Italian Catholic Church. In *Migration, Transnationalism and Catholicism*. Edited by Dominic Pasura and Marta Bivand Erdal. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 317–35.
- Barbagli, Marzio, and Schmoll Camille. 2011. *La Generazione Dopo*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Beaumont, Justin, and Candice Dias. 2008. Faith-based organizations and urban social justice in the Netherlands. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 99: 382–92. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Beaumont, Justin, and Paul Cloke, eds. 2012. *Faith-Based Organisations and Exclusion in European Cities*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Bengtson, Vern. 2013. *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Berry, John W. 1997. Immigration, acculturation and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 46: 5–68. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Bonizzoni, Paola, and Alice Ruggieri. 2020. I figli degli immigrati, stranieri al quadrato? In *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2020*. Rome: IDOS-Confronti, pp. 206–10.
- Caponio, Tiziana, Roberta Ricucci, and Irene Ponzio. 2016. Policy change or policy re-styling? The case of intercultural integration policy in Turin, Lisbon and Valencia. In *Circulation des Idées et des Modèles: Les Transformations de L'action Publique en Question. Le Cas des Politiques D'intégration*. Edited by Muriel Sacco, Corinne Torrekens, Ilke Adam and Fatima Zibouh. Brussels: Academia-Bruylant, pp. 123–37.
- Coccia, Benedetto, and Luca Di Sciullo, eds. 2020. *L'Integrazione Dimenticata. Riflessioni per un Modello Italiano di Convivenza Partecipata tra Immigrati e Autoctoni*. Rome: San Pio V Institute and IDOS.
- Connor, Phillip. 2008. Increase or decrease? The impact of the international migratory event on immigrant religious participation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47: 243–57. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Crespi, Isabella, and Ricucci Roberta. 2021. Giovani, religione e pluralismo culturale: Percorsi identitari e socializzazione. *Culture e Studi del Sociale—CuSSoc* 6: 3–12.
- Gordon, Milton M. 1964. *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hagan, Jaqueline, and Helen Rose Ebaugh. 2003. Calling upon the sacred: Migrants' use of religion in the migration process. *International Migration Review* 37: 1145–62. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hirschman, Charles. 2004. The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States. *International Migration Review* 38: 1206–33.
- Istituto Cattaneo. 2018. *Immigration in Italy: Between Reality and Perception*. Milano: Istituto Cattaneo.

- Khvorostianov, Natalia, and Larissa Remennick. 2017. By helping others, we helped ourselves: Volunteering and social integration of ex-Soviet immigrants in Israel. *Voluntas* 28: 335–57. [CrossRef]
- Lagi, Sara, Chiara Maritato, and Roberta Ricucci. 2021. *Religione e diritti umani nell'Italia multiculturale*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Lim, Chaeyoon, and Robert D. Putnam. 2010. Religion, social networks, and life satisfaction. *American Sociological Review* 75: 914–33. [CrossRef]
- Marzana, Daniela, Sara Martinez Damia, Sara Alfieri, and Elena Marta. 2019. Youth and their challenge to promote a fairer multicultural society: A qualitative study of African immigrant activists. *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 20: 557–76. [CrossRef]
- Massey, Douglas S., and Monica Higgins. 2011. The Effect of Immigration on Religious Belief and Practice: A Theologizing or Alienating Experience? *Social Science Research* 40: 1371–89. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Mezzetti, Giulia, and Roberta Ricucci. 2020. Political opportunity structures and the activism of first- and second-generation Muslims in two Italian cities. In *Governing Religious Diversity in Cities: Critical Perspectives*. Edited by Julia Martinez-Arino. London: Routledge, pp. 42–59.
- Premazzi, Viviana. 2021. Islam in Italia tra pregiudizi e riconoscimenti. In *L'Islam Plurale. Percorsi Multidisciplinari tra Migrazioni, Diversità e Dialogo Culturale*. Edited by Luca Bossi, Stella Pinna Pintor and Wisam Zreg. Torino: Aaccademia University Press, pp. 36–54.
- Ricucci, Roberta. 2017. *Diversi dall'Islam. Figli Dell'immigrazione e Altre Fedi*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Ricucci, Roberta. 2021. *Protagonisti di un Paese Plurale*. Torino: SEB27.
- Ricucci, Roberta. 2022. Giovani romeni e religione di fronte alla pandemia. In *Le Chiese Romene in Italia*. Edited by Marco Guglielmi. Rome: Carocci Editore, pp. 81–98.
- Rumbaut, Ruben G. 1994. The crucible within: Ethnic identity, self-esteem, and segmented assimilation among children of immigrants. *International Migration Review* 28: 748–94. [CrossRef]
- Sacco, Muriel, Corinne Torrekens, Ilke Adam, and Fatima Zibouh, eds. 2016. *Circulation des Idées et des Modèles: Les Transformations de L'action Publique en Question. Le Cas des Politiques D'intégration*. Brussels: Academia-Bruylant.
- Sayad, Abdelmalek. 2002. *La Doppia Assenza*. Milano: Raffaele Cortina Editore.
- Sciortino, Giuseppe. 2016. Le migrazioni nel Mediterraneo e in Europa. In *Storia d'Europa e del Mediterraneo: Sezione 6: L'età Contemporanea: 13: Ambiente, Popolazioni, Economia*. Edited by Gustavo Corni. Rome: Salerno Editrice, pp. 453–94.
- Stoll, Michael A., and Janelle S. Wong. 2007. Immigration and civic participation in a multiracial and multiethnic context. *International Migration Review* 41: 880–908. [CrossRef]
- Storm, Ingrid. 2017. Does economic insecurity predict religiosity? Evidence from the European Social Survey 2002–2014. *Sociology of Religion* 78: 146–72. [CrossRef]
- Uecker, Jeremy E. 2008. Religious and spiritual responses to 9/11: Evidence from the add health study. *Sociological Spectrum* 28: 477–509. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Valtolina, Giovanni G. 2020. *Islam e Pandemia*. Milano: ISMU.
- Vezzoni, Cristiano, Riccardo Ladini, Francesco Benvenuto Molteni, Giulia Maria Dotti Sani, Ferruccio Biolcati, Antonio Maria Chiesi, Simona Guglielmi, Marco Maraffi, Andrea Pedrazzani, and Paolo Segatti. 2020. Investigating the social, economic and political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic: A rolling cross-section approach. *Survey Research Methods* 14: 187–94.
- Yep, Jeanette, Peter Cha, Susan Van Riesen Cho, Greg Jao, and Paul Tokunaga. 1998. *Following Jesus without Dishonoring Your Parents: Asian American Discipleship*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Yoon, Eunju, Richard M. Lee, and Michael Goh. 2008. Acculturation, social connectedness, and subjective well-being. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 14: 246–55. [CrossRef] [PubMed]