

## Article

# «We Are Alone»: Intergenerational Religious Transmission and the Effect of Migration in Italy

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**Abstract:** Although research shows a general decrease in religiosity in Western societies, religious transmission still seems to be a poorly studied phenomenon, especially in Italy. We do not know much about the dynamics of socialisation that take place in the family and the main factors that determine the success or failure of religious transmission from one generation to the next. Yet, the family context represents the first agency of socialisation to religion, from an early age, through experiences with parents, grandparents and relatives. On the other hand, in the age of religious diversification, the migration factor is becoming increasingly crucial for national religious landscapes. Nevertheless, religious transmission in foreign families and the impact of migration on family religiosity are still little studied. This contribution presents some research perspectives that have emerged from a wide-ranging survey, still in progress, on intergenerational transmission of religion in Catholic, Muslim and Orthodox families in Italy.

**Keywords:** religious transmission; migrations; family; Islam; Orthodoxy; Italy



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## 1. Introduction

Within the framework of the wide-ranging debate on the future of religion and the processes of secularisation in Western societies, intergenerational religious transmission in the family is one of the aspects that has been least considered to date, especially in Italy. Yet, the family is where religious socialisation and the transmission of beliefs and practices take place, directly contributing to religions, communities and traditions' perpetuation (Vermeer 2014). Nevertheless, little is known about the family's internal dynamics, such as the influence of friendships, school, free time, work, critical moments and turning points that might mark people's lives, either positively or negatively. Yet, religious transmission appears to be one of the crucial factors in the decline of religiousness. The comparison between generations in the same family context can help to highlight both the distinctive features of each cohort, reconstructing their needs, horizons and worldviews, and the concrete dynamics that, within individual biographies and in the intergenerational turnover, allow continuity, change or break in the link with religion (or non-belief). The research project from which we move<sup>1</sup> aims to understand the transmission of religiosity and non-religiosity across generations in Italy, and to provide a better explanation of religious change.

As it was the case of other European countries, from the second half of the 20th century, Italy experienced thoroughgoing changes in its demographic composition, becoming, to all intents and purposes, a multicultural context. Its historical mono-confessional character, with the dominance of Roman Catholicism and the survival of small minorities perceived as separate, when not persecuted, enclaves, has been replaced by a plural religious field, where Catholicism is just one component of the confessional range with which the believer can legitimately confront himself. In this context, migrations have played a key role: they have made the previously homogeneous religious panorama plural and have revived religion in Italian society, conferring it a renewed role. Considering the experience of migration, one can focus on its impact on the religious field of the host countries, and on

the religiosity of the natives, and, on the other hand, on its influence on the migrant as well as on his/her relationship with religion.

This paper focuses on the second aspect, aiming at reconstructing the effect of the migratory experience on migrants' religiosity. Religious transmission's dynamics at work in the populations with foreign origins seem to be little investigated, whereas the transformations of which they are protagonist have a leading role in showing the undeniable influence on the overall host countries' panorama. Assumed as a disruptive experience in which a person's behavioural, cultural and religious values are severely tested in every aspect of everyday life, migration can provide valuable comparative insights that broaden the analysis dedicated to the native groups, investing foreigners with a «mirror function» (Sayad 2002) that helps to grasp more accurately the pivotal issues of contemporary Italian society (Ricucci 2017).

More specifically, we intend to investigate three dimensions of the relationship between religiosity and migration: the impact of environmental changes on the migrants' religious life; the effect of migration on family religious transmission; and the experience of need and well-being in the personal relationship with religion.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

For a long time—and at least until the 1970s (Stark and Finke 2000)—the international scientific debate deemed secularisation an unequivocal and definitive process, taking people's departure from belief for granted. Italians seem to be distancing themselves from the majority denomination both in practice, with the depopulation of churches and communities (Marzano 2012; Cartocci 2011), in doctrine, with a growth in religious illiteracy (Melloni 2014), and in belonging, with a diffused disaffection towards ecclesiastical authority. On the other hand, globalisation has widened the range of denominational options to which believers can turn, and migration has led to the birth of other religious groups, which are now an integral part of the Italian social fabric.

Rather than witnessing the eclipse of the sacred (Acquaviva 1961), the death of God (Bruce 2002), the decline of faith and the secularisation of every aspect of life, religion seems to have returned to being a relevant dimension of Western societies (Berger 1999), including the Italian one. Alongside the research on institutional secularisation, and the typically North American strand of studies on the religious market, starting at least from Berger's (1967) and Wilson's (1966, 1977) works on the privatisation of religious experience and Luckmann's (1967) studies on the invisible religion, progressively in Europe, and also in Italy, greater attention has been paid to the micro dimensions of religiosity (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Hervieu-Léger 1999; Davie 1994; Cipriani 1989). On the other hand, it still needs to be shown whether this historical phase of de-secularisation (Berger 1999), post-secularisation (Rosati 2015; Habermas 2008; Taylor 2007) or multiple secularities (Burchardt et al. 2015; Beckford 2012; Stepan 2011), will indeed lead to the revenge of God (Kepel 1991); or, if anything, what we are witnessing is a re-emergence of the public relevance of religion (Casanova 1994), even if only in the reduced sphere of scientific debate (Pollack 2006), in a time still characterized by an undeniable ongoing process of secularization (Köhrensen 2012; Marzano 2012).

In the meantime, also in Italy, scholars seem to have started to focus on lived religion—rather than only on that represented by the agreements and institutional relations between State and Church—looking at the concrete, empirically observable dynamics of the pragmatic experience of individuals, families, groups and communities. Thus, alongside the broader surveys on values (Sciolla 2005; Garelli et al. 2003), the most recent research has been oriented towards the detection of some indicators of religiosity, understood as individual religiously oriented attitudes or behaviour.

Although analyses show that collective religiosity and religious practice is steadily declining in most European countries and, more recently, also in the United States and Canada (Wilkins-Laflamme 2015; Schwadel 2013), the dynamics by which belief, belonging, practices and doctrine emerge in an individual and are transmitted from one person to

another—reproducing, modifying or abandoning religiosity in time and space—are still little studied. While the international literature deems patterns and the quantity and quality of family relationships a relevant factor in the success or failure of the transmission of religion and values from parents to children (Smith 2020; Dollahite et al. 2019; McPhail 2019; Patacchini and Zelou 2016; Kim-Spoon et al. 2012) and from grandparents to grandchildren (Voas and Storm 2012; Bengtson et al. 2009), not so much attention has been paid to date in Italy to intergenerational family dynamics.

However, in more recent times, some authors have started to focus more on the issue of family socialisation and the impact of the environment and friendship circles, with a special consideration for the migration's dimension and the subject of second generations (Bichi et al. 2018; Ricucci 2014, 2017).

In the time of great migrations, scholars' perspective has expanded beyond the majority denomination in order to include religious minorities and diasporic groups' experiences. Among the most relevant topics in the field of migrations, one can find the modalities of immigration and the consequences for the person (Ambrosini and Abbatecola 2009; Ambrosini et al. 2018), the detachment from the home country and the re-settlement in the host one (Sayad 2002), or in networks and communities of foreign origin (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993), the administrative and citizenship practices (Ricucci 2018), the remittances and reunifications (Ambrosini 2019a), schooling and employment pathways (Santagati and Colussi 2020), and the impact of racism and xenophobia (Ambrosini 2019b).

In dealing with the link between religion and migration, the scientific community in Italy has first of all been interested in the diffusion of believers on the national territory, the emergence of new confessions, communities and organisations (Ambrosini et al. 2018; Naso and Passarelli 2018; Garelli 2011; Pace 2011; Naso and Salvarani 2009), and their impact on residents, local institutions and national agreements between State and religions. Particular attention has been devoted to date to the Muslim component of the Italian population (Allievi et al. 2017), to integration processes (Regalia et al. 2016; Angelucci et al. 2014), the differences between first and second generations (Macaluso et al. 2021; Marroccoli 2020; Acocella and Pepicelli 2015), the issue of mosques and Islamic associationism (Bossi 2019, 2020; Bombardieri 2011; Allievi 2010), or radicalisation (Crocitti 2020), terrorism and contacts with foreign countries with an Islamic majority.

Although several studies have focused on regional or local cases,<sup>2</sup> little is known about the religious experiences and possible changes in migrants and their children's religiosity. There is a poor knowledge about Muslims' religiosity in Italy and the dynamics of family religious socialisation, while there seems to be a complete lack of studies on religious transmission among believers belonging to other denominations—first and foremost Orthodox Christianity, today among the first confessions in Italy for numerical consistency and territorial diffusion, along with Catholic Christianity and Islam (see below). Concerning diasporic groups, such as the Muslim and Orthodox ones that we are dealing with in this paper, the inter-generational comparison makes it possible to distinguish needs, aspirations, limits and opportunities more clearly, as well as those particular experiences that can dramatically influence human existence, either positively or negatively. From a comparative point of view, we hope that this focus will also contribute to the debate on native families, playing the mirror function proposed by Sayad (2002).

### 3. Methodology

The research project from which our contribution stems from falls within this general framework. The data we are about to discuss come from a wider international study that addresses several issues, aspiring to link the ways in which religious socialisation takes place at a family level and the transformations in religiosity observable on a broader level. Among the fundamental interrogatives driving the overall project objectives<sup>3</sup>, in this article we will focus specifically on the connection between changes in the religious landscape and migratory phenomena, starting from the following questions: (a) within multicultural contexts, especially in countries destination of migratory flows, which are

the crucial factors that influence the process of intergenerational transmission? (b) How does religiosity change—if at all—among those who have experienced migration, and what role does the migratory background play on the religious transmission from the first to the second (or third) generations?

As well as for the wider study, in this paper we make use of a perspective that has been rarely used to date: we place the focus on the dynamics of religious socialisation that occur within families, taking an intergenerational approach that questions the ways in which religiosity is—or is not—transmitted at the household level. Such a standpoint seems particularly useful to untie the entanglement between religious beliefs, the (supposed) decline of religiosity and the transformations that, in this regard, are detected in younger generations. In this sense, so much has been said about the status quo of religiosity at an individual level, and on changes in attitudes and behaviour at a longitudinal level, since little has been studied about the concrete socialisation modes to religion, the passing of the baton from one generation to the next, the factors influencing the adoption of religiously oriented attitudes and behaviours in educational practices, or in the relationships with the inner self as well as in the everyday social interactions.

In this contribution, we will discuss the main results that arise from the qualitative research conducted within the Italian territory through semi-structured and in-depth interviews and focus groups<sup>4</sup>. The interviews are aimed at collecting key informants' point of view, and, when necessary, at investigating specific individual cases. Generally, focus groups are devoted to families and are conducted involving three generations—grandparents, children and grandchildren—belonging to the same household. We investigate the ways in which religious transmission takes place within family and generations, has taken place in the past and is expected to take place in the future—or, conversely, how it may not have taken place or may have faded until it disappears altogether in the intergenerational transition.

In order to increase the scope of the comparison, as well as to look into the effects and transformations connected to migratory phenomena, the overall research interrogates both native families and families of foreign origin. In this contribution, we are going to focus on the latter: we will present the results coming from interviews to key informants and from the focus groups conducted with immigrant, families and individual, of Orthodox and Islamic faith in Italy.<sup>5</sup>

The choice to focus on these specific origins is based on data about migrants' presence and religious pluralism in Italy. According to the last available surveys, more than 8% of the Italian resident population is of foreign origin (IDOS 2021), 22.7% of them are from Romania, 13.1% of them are from Northern Africa (Morocco being the first nationality), and 8.2% of them are from Albania [*ibidem*]. The religious presence follows a similar distribution: Orthodox believers account for around 28% of the entire migrant population, whereas those of the Muslim faith represent more than 33% of the total.<sup>6</sup> Considering this landscape, it is quite clear that Orthodox Christianity and Islam are the most representatives "foreign" religions, hence the decision to focus on these segments.

In this study, in the Italian context, 33 families took part in the focus groups (involving 74 people in total), and of these about a third are of foreign origin; 15 people were interviewed as key informants, with 7 interviewees belonging to immigrant communities.<sup>7</sup> We identified as key informants people that through their work or experience were able to offer an informed point of view on the research general topics. More specifically, people playing important roles in their communities were involved, for example, religious ministers, educators, volunteers in religious organisations or in the broader field of migrant associationism.<sup>8</sup> Because of their experience and knowledge, these people represented a valuable source of information, useful to identify change and persistence at work in the religiosity of migrant groups.

Regarding families, we used a snowball sampling technique, starting from the first contacts received from the key informants and then involving the first households interviewed in order to reach other similar groups. In selecting the research participants, we

privileged two criteria: the length of the residence period in Italy (i.e., being part of the first generations arrived in the territory), and the presence of a second generation within the family, in order to investigate the intergenerational religious transmission.

Within the framework of this contribution, the following paragraphs return to and discuss some of the results through the words of the interviewees, following their narratives to highlight the dimensions recalled in the conversations.

Eventually, the difficulties encountered in conducting the fieldwork, linked to the ongoing pandemic, should be highlighted. The regulations introduced to curb the spreading of the virus made difficult both the recruitment of interviewees and conducting the interviews and focus groups. Therefore, the investigation suffered an obvious slowdown, but even more important were the adjustments made to the way the conversations were—and are—conducted. The social distancing and the movement limitations made it very complicated, as well as risky, to organize interviews and focus groups face to face, leading to consider alternative ways of interactions. As a result, a number of meetings were conducted online, via video calls, and if this partly modified the interplays in question, it nevertheless allowed to advance with the data collection.

#### 4. The Impact of the Environment

As already mentioned, migration represents an experience of rupture with the home country, with the worldviews built up during one's life, and with all those aspects of daily life that are often taken for granted before leaving one's homeland. The social, cultural, religious, economic and political environment to which the person is accustomed undergoes sudden changes, as well as the problems that have to be faced, the networks of relations that can be counted on and the resources available to meet the new challenges. In this context of general disorientation, religion can be a fundamental reference point, both for spiritual comfort and for material assistance.

Especially between the 1970s and the 1990s, first-generation immigrants in Italy found themselves acting in a context of total otherness, facing loneliness, housing, linguistic and economic difficulties, building from the ground peer groups and religious communities capable of bringing the person back to a reassuring domestic dimension (Marroccoli 2020; Bossi 2019; Ambrosini et al. 2018; Sayad 2002). The empirical material collected reveals how religion initially represents a way of reconnecting to the country of origin, in a phase of temporary migration and in view of an imminent return to the homeland. Then, when the months became years, the relationship with the faith guarantees a refuge from distance, nostalgia, feeling of abandonment and the loss of a clear horizon. In the end, when the expectations of returning are no longer credible due to the many links with the host country, for many people religion becomes the connection to stable and lasting relationships that, together with community organisation, ensure crucial resources and services. According to a forty-year-old man of Moroccan origin, who came to Italy in the 1990s following his parents and is today a father himself, at the beginning of his migration journey:

«People are a bit lost and religion becomes a certainty, something to rely on even to replicate life in the country from which they are far away [ . . . ] the risk is to feel lost, far from one's roots, from one's environment. Religion remains a recovery: I have not betrayed everything. I have moved away physically, but I am still there».

As recalled by an interviewee, one of the pioneers of migration who came to study in Turin from Lebanon in 1984 and is now a leading figure in local Islamic associationism, before the development of a concrete network of community welfare (above all through the birth of mosques), Islam guaranteed especially:

« [ . . . ] spiritual support, surely, because at the end of the day we had nothing . . . religion was a way to be together, to have a minimum of leisure, some time to go out, take a walk, and then we didn't know anybody».

At that time, however, the aim was to return, «so religion was a continuation» of the country of origin, as he added, and the USMI itself (Union of Muslim Students in Italy, the first formal group born from Islamic migrations) at the beginning «was not a real association, it was a place to meet together . . . not to preserve our identity», which was not yet in question. Hence, it rather represented a meeting place for university students far from home, eager for meaningful relationships that also allowed them «not to lose their religion, to remain practising». When the awareness that there will be no return flourishes, and even more so when children are born, the relationship with religion might change again: it might be loosened, due to the reduction in free time, the continuing distance from the country of origin and the family/friendship networks, the progressive integration in the host country, the greater well-being and satisfaction achieved.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, it can also become stronger, more mature. To employ the words of a second-generation Muslim, representative of an Islamic association in Turin, who arrived in Italy in the 1990s following his parents:

«Especially in a different, more secularised context, where your own religion is no longer the majority religion, such as Italy, families think more about religious transmission than in the country of origin, where your religion is the religion of the majority [ . . . ] here [in Italy] your religion is not taken for granted: it is thought, reasoned, negotiated. This makes it something to be questioned, to be re-embraced or to be abandoned: without the social pressure one can be free to live outside religion».

Migration can affect a previous religious status quo: from an absent or weak, rather unconscious and conformist relationship with an exogenous faith received as a cultural trait, to a more intimate and conscious endogenous relationship, sought outside family and social pressures. In migration, faith (or its absence) can become an elective trait of the person. The issue of surrounding environment emerges in a particularly clear way for families with a migration background: living in a context where one's religion is not shared by the majority makes the processes of transmission complicated.

«The environment, everything you see around you, it's the whole environment that influences . . . here you have to make an effort to do it [be a believer], at work, for example, praying while doing your job is not as easy as it seems . . . you have to be really . . . you have to really care about it».

told us an imam. An Orthodox parish priest shares the same opinion, pointing out that «in Romania, where there are structures and religion is also taught in schools, more [young people] attend the church». In the diaspora, this has a direct impact on families, which bear a large part of the burden of religious transmission, as the spokesman for an Islamic association puts it:

«the family takes on a central role, because there are no support institutions except [ . . . ] the mosque or what the mosque manages to set up, which is not much. Conversely, in the countries with a Muslim majority there is a whole system, including the school system, the social system, the extended family, the neighbours; there is a whole world around that is responsible, even in a non-conscious way, for this religious transmission».

In an environment where a minority faith is practised, the labels the majority society reserves to outsiders and newcomers are also particularly influential. The reactions they can provoke in the faith journey of young people are another undeniably important issue. All the more so since, while the prejudices towards those who profess to be Muslims are perhaps more evident, foreign communities of Catholic faith can also be subjected to uncomfortable labelling, which can influence the construction of religious belonging, especially among young people (Ricucci 2017).

## 5. The Family Transmission

Focusing on the processes of transmission that take place within the family also makes it possible to investigate the delicate relationship that involves religious transmission to the second generations of foreign origin (Bichi et al. 2018). What emerges from our corpus of interviews is revealing of the crucial role played by the family, and the attention to populations of foreign origin makes it particularly evident. In the Muslim diaspora, as well as in the Orthodox one, in fact, interviewees underline the centrality of parents' attitudes and behaviours and the repercussions on children's relationship with religion (Dollahite et al. 2019; McPhail 2019; Patacchini and Zelou 2016), all the more so in a context that differs from the original one in relation to the majority denomination.

Mindful of the central role played by religion in the context of their first migration, and of the importance of religious structures and organisations in transmitting the home country's culture, language and traditions, parents often feel they have the complex task of mediating between the environment of origin and the destination one. Parents' efforts to transmit religion, culture and traditions to their children do not always bring the expected results. Quite the opposite, it can happen that the excessive prominence of the first generations—especially in family contexts characterised by cold relations and high levels of coercion (Smith 2020)—ends up either alienating the second generation from religion tout court or that of the family, or leading them to adopt rigid, conservative and radical approaches. This is recalled by a father and a prominent person in a religious association, in the first quotation, and by a mother and an intercultural mediator, in the second one, of Moroccan origin and Islamic faith:

«One tries to replicate as much as possible what happened in one's home country knowing that it is ... not achievable, or will never be fully achievable. There is a feeling of weariness. This is felt very much with the children. [...] Some families have also taken more dramatic decisions, to take their children, once they [...] reach the age of five or six, back to the country so they can stay there with their grandparents, or maybe having their mother go with them so they can be educated».

«They decided to take their two children to Morocco to teach them religion<sup>10</sup> [...] when they brought them back, the girl became an atheist and the son became an extremist. This is just one example».

The fact that the experience of migration changes the relationship with religion is now well known; however, which directions it takes for the second generations remains a subject to be explored in depth.<sup>11</sup> For example, the different claims and demands for recognition made by the different generations of foreign origin are now started to be investigated.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the specific mechanisms at work in families with a migration background still need to be thoroughly analysed. In this sense, the empirical data indicate interesting research directions: on the one hand, the impact of the external environment, including the friendship circles in which the secondary socialisation takes place, and, on the other hand, the dynamics around family reunification of children or, as it is increasingly the case, that of the older generations (such as grandparents). As one second-generation Muslim adult, now father of two daughters, recalls:

«An important aspect [...] is the company one is integrated in. Because these important decisions are made in adolescence, that's when you make them more than before. [...] How they live it, what kind of people they hang out with, the paths they choose. Often children follow their friends rather than following their parents' wishes. [...] In families, it is now well established that it is important not only to pass on knowledge to our children, but also to choose friends who can help them along this path. Because ... you can cultivate what you want, [but] then they go out and if they have friends they trust more ... [...] We have cases in which this has proved to be particularly fundamental, and very often the result, the final outcome is the opposite, all the efforts that have been made in

the childhood often vanish into thin air because of the context where a family is placed».

In addition, there are similarities observed between young Italians and their foreign peers that show how the generational factor is in many ways decisive in explaining attitudes and transformations in the relationship with the religious sphere, acquiring a transversal value that extends beyond origins and affiliations.<sup>13</sup>

In those cases, in which parents emigrate first and their children join them afterwards, the difficult reconstruction of family relations also affects the ways in which religious transmission takes place. Adaptation to a new context, a possible reversal of roles between parents and children, the difficulties that may be encountered at school or in building new friendships starting from zero contribute to frame a complex picture in which to situate the generational passage of values and beliefs. If this is true for those who arrive in Italy as adults, the difficulties of relating with the grandparents' generation also seem to concern those who are born in the host country.<sup>14</sup> It appears that the figure and role of grandparents has received poor attention in research on religious transmission between generations: despite being fundamental actors in the primary religious socialisation, they have been to date forgotten in Italy, a country that nonetheless recognises their great demographic, cultural, economic and social importance.

«In Romania there is usually also a word [a saying], “faith is learned from grandparents”, because grandparents have a little bit more time, let's say, a little bit more time to do this thing [transmitting religion]».

affirms a Romanian Orthodox interviewee. Grandparents' role seems fundamental, and their absence even more so. If in some cases children manage to cultivate the relationship by spending holidays with their grandparents in their country of origin, in other cases the detachment and distance is more evident, not only geographically—and we are referring here to cases in which the grandparents join a family that has previously emigrated—but also, and perhaps even more, linguistically. This is underlined by a second-generation Muslim couple, when they describe the difficulty that young people seem to have in relating to their newly arrived grandparents, something that does not seem destined to diminish over time.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore important to focus on this dimension and to understand what kind of effects a weaker relationship with the older generations might have, keeping an eye on the comparison with what happens in Italian families, in order to identify its impact on religious transmission better.

## 6. Need/Well-Being

A further question concerns one of the factors that are often cited<sup>16</sup> as being relevant to the dynamics of belief or non-belief: the dimension of need and the opposite dimension of well-being.<sup>17</sup> Yet, together with age, education and gender, the experience of need—in a material, but also psychological or spiritual sense—appears to be a central element in the search for assistance, comfort, recognition and meaning that characterises contemporary religiosity. Its relevance emerges from the national (Melloni 2014; Cartocci 2011; Garelli 2011) and international literature (Norris and Inglehart 2004), from quantitative and qualitative surveys, and finds confirmation in the interviews we have conducted so far in Italy. Whether they be Muslim or Orthodox, the idea that need and suffering often operate as drivers of greater spirituality, dialogue with God, and relations with religious communities, is quite widespread. As a Romanian Orthodox priest and a Muslim mother of Albanian origin recall, respectively:

«I see a stronger faith here, outside Romania, in the diaspora in general, because they feel the lack of their family, they feel the love for their land, they get closer to the church, that's what I saw . . . Of course, there are families that not even in Romania had a communion with the church, but there are also families that discovered God here, with the things that happened, like a funeral, an accident at work, on the road, or they discovered a cancer . . . ».



«In 1991 the regime fell, I was a child, in 1993 I lost my father and the need to believe, the need to lean on a creed or something [pushed her to embrace religion] . . . Then I started going to the mosque, I went every time there were mini-courses, like catechism is done here [in Italy], the same thing was done in the mosque. In the meantime, at home, they were not religious, even if they were Muslim in name, they did not practice Islam. [ . . . ] Then the thing was strange, you had to explain religion to your parents, they were Muslims but they didn't know it. For fifty years there was a regimen that forbade everything.

[Did coming to Italy strengthen your faith?]

Yes, from many points of view it made me grow as a person, with a specific temper. Because you are alone, far from your family, you have to find the strength. It is not like being at home. And the same goes for Islam, because you are no longer where you hear the call to the daily prayer, you have to watch the time on your phone for it. You are no longer where there is a time for fasting, I remember that I used to take food from the university canteen and eat it on the bus when I came back. These things seem insignificant but they make you stronger, whatever you do you do it because you believe, not because someone forces you to do it».

Death, illness,<sup>18</sup> the failure of a migration project, the loss of a job or a house, the difficult relationship between parents and children—from the most basic daily routine to the different ways of interpreting and practising the balance between tradition and integration, from the onset of addiction or deviance to the experience of prison, etc.—can bring individuals and families closer to religion, its ministers and its structures. It is no coincidence that among the activities of imams, parish priests and volunteers, family mediation is one of the most requested and practised services, and spiritual assistance in hospitals and prisons is a fundamental commitment too. In those contexts of spiritual and material deprivation are found some of the people that are in need of comfort the most, and those who, after suffering, are more likely to show above-average attachment. To put it in the words of an Orthodox priest: «of the people we have met there [in hospital], we would say that 50 percent have returned to church» and today they constitute an important share of the most enthusiast believers, being among the most frequent visitors of the places of worship and gathering.

Conversely, the dimension of well-being, fulfilment, inner or outer peacefulness usually drive people away from attending places of worship, from prayer, from devotion, and from the forms of sociability and solidarity guaranteed (and required) by religious communities. To quote a representative of an Islamic association:

«I'll tell you something odd, Islam says that God loves the rich practitioner more than the poor patient, because the poor man has no distractions, he practices because he has nothing else to do, instead the rich man has more to do and if he follows the teachings he's a good person, because he's in the condition not to do it and instead he does it, while the poor man is more in the condition of being a practitioner than not . . . when one starts to feel good it's very easy to go away».

Whether or not the experience of necessity leads more easily to the transcendent and the fulfilment of worldly aspirations leads to the immanent is something yet to be verified, as well as the hypothesis that, in societies with greater economic development, secularised agencies offering solidarity and the fulfilment of needs and aspirations are more widespread and attractive than their religious counterparts. This is certainly true in the diaspora, where the experience of migration can either reawaken faith and practice, strengthening transmission to the next generation, or weaken them as a consequence of religious structures' lesser pervasiveness:

in a context of origin, one thinks less about religious transmission than one does in the diaspora, where one's religion is not the majority's one and it does not permeate social life in general . . . here, however, we are alone.

## 7. Conclusions

Since its beginnings, sociology has proved to be deeply interested in the future of religion in modern societies. The increasingly widespread and pervasive worldliness of every aspect of society has appeared as the key to a progressive abandonment of religion, as if religion were now incompatible with the lifestyles and worldviews that have emerged to date. In spite of a number of pioneering works, which have paved the way for a theoretical debate in our country, the Italian scientific community has for a long time lagged behind in terms of empirical research on the subject. This gap was firstly bridged by employing surveys and interviews, then by setting aside a mono-confessional approach to religion and by subsequently opening to religious diversity, as the historical minorities were joined by new religious communities of foreign origin. Today, their role in the Italian panorama is increasingly taken into account by scholars and pundits, both for the impact they had—and still have—and for the consequences they could have for the future of religiosity and secularisation in Italy.

With this paper, we tried to return some results and considerations deriving from ongoing research on intergenerational religious transmission in Italy, with a particular emphasis on families of foreign origin. The focus on the processes of transmission that take place within the family allowed us to consider those cultural, psychological, relational and social aspects that occur in this process. By adopting an interreligious and multigenerational perspective that considers the point of view of both families and individuals, we enriched the study of religious transmission with some new elements. Alongside the focus on the institutional level of formal relations between the state and religions, the relevance of analysis on lived religion at the micro level of the daily experience of believers and their families is confirmed.

However, in carefully looking for the central factor that, more than others, explains the success or failure of religious transmission, we risk forgetting that this phenomenon has the temporal and spatial characteristics of a process rather than an event. The processes of secularization and religious transmission are not unambiguous and definitive; transmission takes place progressively, through phases of rise and fall and through experiences that strengthen or weaken religiosity. In this sense, it does not necessarily follow precise patterns that can be reproduced under different conditions. Furthermore, we are addressing a process that takes place within a dense network of exchanges and influences, in a constant interweaving between the inner world, the family context, the circle of friends and the social and historical context.

Whereas the importance of the environment, in a broad sense, might require a greater attention to diachronic and multidimensional analysis, a further stimulus comes from the study of families of foreign origin.

Analysing the migrant households' situation can lead us to describe better the fundamental role played by families in the religious upbringing of young people, especially during childhood, when the child's primary socialisation takes place mostly at home. Moreover, several external actors stand alongside the parental couple, participating in the family effort: we are referring here in particular to religious institutions and religious leaders, social and solidarity networks, and religious or ethnic communities themselves are some of the most important allies of families, not only in migration. Their presence on the ground constitutes a fundamental social capital for parents, especially when family solidarity networks are lacking—a condition that can be undeniably better outlined by focusing on migrants.

Furthermore, among this wide range of actors surrounding the couple, the role played by grandparents stands out. Their role has a great influence on family trajectories: their distance or absence often weakens the transmission to younger generations. Having said that, their closeness is no guarantee of success: the relationship between grandchildren and grandparents should be established as a meaningful one, based on affection and example. Cold and stony relationships do not always repay the efforts, as the case of the mobility between the host and the home country of some young Italian Moroccans illustrated.

On the other hand, in the context of meaningful relationships, friendship circles often intervene in adolescence: secondary socialisation plays an equally important role, sometimes confirming the family educational imprinting, sometimes leading the young person towards the search for autonomy or even to the abandonment of the parents' religiosity. This tendency is common to both natives and foreigners, suggesting the importance of considering also the plain and simple generational aspects and of looking at the family and its members as a unit in constant relation with the external environment and the stimuli, experiences, and values that derive from it.

From a migrant's perspective, migration represents a substantial change in the whole individual's existence. It can lead to an immediate worsening of economic and health conditions, to repeated shocks, to the loss of family ties and meaningful relationships, and to the disorientation caused by the sudden change in cultural and linguistic, economic and political, religious and value-based conditions of the living environment. Any improvement in the conditions of the migrant usually concerns the medium–long term. Before this happens, it is necessary to find a welcome, assistance, inclusion: a job, a house, orientation points, solidarity and comfort. As emerges from the literature and from the empirical research we conducted in the framework of previous studies, migrants often rely on religious organisations, both to find material resources and to receive spiritual assistance. The dimension of need brings religion closer in all respects: people seek answers to pressing meaningful questions and to the growing need for material help. While the pressing experience of need may stimulate the emergence or strengthening of religiosity, in other ways it may contribute to weakening it; and the attainment of a certain degree of well-being may later lead to a withdrawal from practice and faith, as well as from the community environment, in favour of worldly activities and elective gatherings.

Migration can be analysed in itself, with a diachronic analysis between the moment of need and the subsequent period of well-being, to evaluate the impact of these variables on religiosity. A migrant's condition can also be compared to that of the native: either the local who had to face lesser shocks, or the needful who had to migrate within the country in search of work, in all cases the objective is to assess the impact of the state of need and crisis on the level of religiosity.

In this framework, the dichotomous pair coherence/incoherence seems to play a non-secondary role. Literature and empirical material suggest that religious change is often related to variations in other spheres of the person or family's life. In the context of biographical trajectories, religious change is often associated with ruptures in the everyday status quo: critical episodes, bereavements, periods of particular difficulty, strong disappointments or satisfactions derived from meaningful people—notably parents, but also other relatives, friends, or religious leaders. Similar experiences can occur in the presence of alterations in the subjective perception of reality, but also when the external world itself changes: between generations, through historical changes in habits, values and worldviews, or within the same generation, as in the case of migration.

In all these situations, there is a rupture in the internal–external coherence that seems to impact the spiritual dimension of the person and his relationship with religion. Its influence can be either positive, contributing to the consolidation or reawakening of religiosity, or negative, playing a part in weakening religiosity, in the abandonment of religion tout court or, more rarely, in the conversion to other religions or in the adoption of a pluralistic approach in the path towards spiritual autonomy. These considerations arise from the collected empirical material and can be observed even more clearly in the migrants' experience. It seems to us that these aspects are worthy of further investigation.

The focus on families of foreign origin allowed us to deepen our understanding of the migrant's condition and the peculiar experiences it entails, highlighting initial similarities and differences between natives and migrants that provide new perspectives for more analysis in the next step of our research project. We hope that the attention paid to personal and family biographies, and to the socialisation that takes place in the transition from one generation to the next will provide new insights and will lead to the emergence of new

categories and dimensions, contributing as far as possible to the efforts in improving the scientific debate.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For further details on this, please see the Methodology section.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, [Cipriani \(1992\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> Such as: (i) How do, or do not, the processes of transmission of religious beliefs and practices, worldviews and systems of values take place within families and, consequently, in the intergenerational passage? (ii) What are the main elements that help to explain the outcomes of these processes? (iii) How does religiosity change throughout the intergenerational transmission?

<sup>4</sup> The wider research is carried out in five countries (i.e., Canada, Finland, Germany, Italy and Hungary), thus employing a comparative approach, utilising qualitative (semi-structured and in-depth interviews, as well as focus groups) and quantitative techniques (survey). The main research is still ongoing: once the explorative stages in each country were completed, we started the interviews and focus groups with Catholic, Muslim and Orthodox families (see above); on the other hand, the survey was administered to a statistically significant sample of the resident population in Italy as well as in the other partner countries.

<sup>5</sup> All the audio recordings were manually transcribed and then encoded and analysed by using a software (Maxqda). The first code created ex ante was updated afterwards following the findings emerging from the analysis of empirical material, as well as the continued confrontation with the other research teams and with the international literature.

<sup>6</sup> Those are estimations coming from [IDOS \(2021\)](#) and [Caritas-Migrantes \(2021\)](#) reports.

<sup>7</sup> We would like to thank Loris Botto, a junior researcher at the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society at the University of Turin, who participated to this study, helping collecting the empirical data, conducting the interviewees and analysing them. Part of the results here presented stem from the collective discussion with our colleague.

<sup>8</sup> Therefore, involved in various projects, such as for instance educational activities aimed at young people, organisation and management of prayer and aggregation spaces, active cooperation in the city's interreligious policies, advocacy actions.

<sup>9</sup> See also the last paragraph of this contribution.

<sup>10</sup> She is referring to a family they are acquainted with.

<sup>11</sup> There is some research that has begun to question the issue and, among these, to date, more attention has been paid to the experience of Muslims; see for example [Frisina \(2007, 2010\)](#), [Acocella and Pepicelli \(2015, 2018\)](#). In [Ricucci \(2017\)](#), instead, one finds a broader overview that adds the investigation of the cases of young Catholics of Filipino and Latin American origin, and of Romanian Orthodox.

<sup>12</sup> In this respect, reference is again made to the work cited in the previous footnote.

<sup>13</sup> This consideration derives both from the comparison with the focus groups conducted in the course of the research with Italian families, not the subject of this contribution, and from the literature on the subject: see, for example, the studies cited in footnote 11.

<sup>14</sup> The reference is to the classic distinction between the so-called "1.5" generation that arrived in Italy before the age of majority (and that can be further subdivided into "1.25" and "1.75" according to the specific age range in which the transfer takes place), and second generations in the proper sense, born in the parents' host country.

<sup>15</sup> This problem does not appear to be confined to the experience of populations of foreign origin: it is enough to think about what happened between the 1950s and 1970s in Italy with the internal migratory waves, when the daily use of regional dialects and a poor knowledge of standard Italian represented a linguistic barrier.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noticed that the sociological and political literature does not deal much with this issue, while the psychological literature offers a more interesting range of studies and proposals. As the research progresses, this material is being the subject of a more precise and in-depth analysis, also from a comparative perspective.

<sup>17</sup> This is a complex and delicate categorical pair, which, on the one hand, cannot explain alone a highly multidimensional phenomenon, such as the one we are dealing with here, and that, on the other hand, risks offending the sensibilities of believers and non-believers alike. Yet, aware of the difficulties inherent in making use of it, and of the limits of its application—even from a

merely methodological point of view—we see this dimension as heuristically relevant, so much so as to include it among the analytical categories of our investigation.

- 18 The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences of the undertaken measures on people’s daily lives also had an immediate impact on the relationship with religion, prayer and the need for material and spiritual assistance. In such context, the times, modes and intensity of religiously oriented activities changed with different consequences, involving both the individual, the family and the associative dimension. The impact of loneliness, fear, suffering, the sudden visibility and widespread presence of death in every sphere of life may have produced changes in the relationship with faith. Although there is no opportunity here to go into detail on the subject, it is the topic of specific questions addressed to key informants and families, right from the preliminary stage of the research.

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