

# Between research and revival. Emerging trends among highly religious young Catholics in Italy

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## Abstract

Research shows that Italians' religiosity is in constant decline. Religious literacy, individual and collective practice, participation in rituals, faith's transmission and symbols' sharing seem to be following a slow but inexorable downward trend. Catholic communities are being depopulated and churches are emptying out. These phenomena, already emerging in those generations born during the economic boom, seem to have a greater impact on younger generations: the decline of Catholicism as a socio-cultural phenomenon is characterising our era. Despite those general trends, young generations are not merely abandoning their faith. Even if faith has lost its social function, young Catholics in Italy often cultivate it on an individual level, between the autonomous search for their own spiritual path and the reproduction of forms of high religiosity derived from the family. In some cases, the younger generations show a renewed religiosity, stronger and more secure than that of their parents, which may sometimes involve them in a path of Catholicism's rediscovery. The article presents and discusses results on highly religious young Catholics deriving from empirical research on intergenerational religious transmission in Italian families, which has been conducted through focus groups and in-depth interviews between 2020 and 2022.

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## KEYWORDS

family, highly religious young Catholics, Intergenerational religious transmission, Italy, religious identity, secularisation

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

For a long time—and at least until the 1970s (Stark, Finke, 2000)—the international scientific debate deemed secularisation an indisputable process (among Christians in Europe), taking people's departure from belief for granted. Italians, as other Europeans, seem to be distancing from Catholicism both in practice, with the decreasing of attendance rate of churches and communities (Cartocci, 2011; Marzano, 2012), and in being involved in religious education, which entails an increasing of religious illiteracy (Melloni, 2014). Church trust rate is falling too, with a diffused disaffection with ecclesiastical authority. On the other hand, migration waves in Italy have progressively widened the range of religious options to which believers can turn, leading to the birth of other organised religious groups that are today an integral part of the Italian religious picture.

During the decades, authors proposed that, 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, the religion seems to have returned to play a relevant role in 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 from Berger's (1967) and Wilson's (1977, 1966) 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 (Cipriani, 1989; Davie, 1994; Heelas, Woodhead, 2005; Hervieu-Léger, 1999). Theories on de-secularisation (Berger, 1999), post-secularisation (Habermas, 2008; Rosati, 2015; Taylor, 2007) or multiple secularities (Beckford, 2012; Burchardt et al., 2015; Stepan, 2011; Stoltz, 2016) have followed one another, wondering whether those processes will eventually lead to the revenge of God (Kepel, 1991), or to a re-emergence of the public relevance of religion (Casanova, 1994), maybe only in the sphere of scientific debate (Pollack, 2006), in a time still characterised by an undeniable ongoing process of secularisation (Köhrsen, 2012; Marzano, 2012).

In more recent years, scholars seem to have started focusing on lived religion—overtaking the limits of State-Church studies—looking at the empirically observable dynamics of the pragmatic experience of individuals, families, groups and communities. In Italy, alongside the broader surveys on values (Garelli et al., 2003; Sciolla, 2005), the most recent research has been oriented towards the detection of some indicators of religiosity, understood as individual religiously oriented attitudes or behaviours.

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 (Schwadel, 2013; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2015), the dynamics through 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 international literature deems patterns, 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 (Dollahite et al., 2019; Kim-Spoon et al., 2012; McPhail, 2019; Patacchini, Zelou, 2016; Smith, 2020) and from grandparents to grandchildren (Bengtson et al., 2009; Voas, Storm, 2012), not so much attention has been paid to date in Italy to intergenerational family dynamics.

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). In more recent times, some authors have started to focus more on family socialisation and the impact of the environment and friendship circles, as well as individual perception and agency (Klingenberg, Sjö, 2019; Petts, Desmond, 2016),<sup>1</sup> with a special consideration for the migration's dimension and the subject of second generations (Bichi et al., 2018; Ricucci, 2014, 2017).

The national panorama is thus becoming increasingly articulated from the point of view of the relationship with the sacred. Immigration has certainly contributed to placing the issue of religious pluralism at the centre of the debate; an element that, it is worth emphasising, pre-existed the flows that since the 1980s have made Italy a multi-cultural country: some Italians defined themselves as Waldensian, Protestant, Jewish, Jehovah's Witness, Buddhist, Orthodox and Muslim well before the arrival of the immigrants. However, the dimension of migratory flows has turned this aspect, which until the 1990s was only dealt with in ministerial documents or in those concerning the inter-religious dialogue of the Catholic Church, into a central issue for the life of Italian cities (Crespi, Ricucci, 2021).

Major European trends in religiosity are thus registered in Italy too, so that the country seems to be losing that trait of "peculiar case" as it has long been described (Davie, Leutstean, 2021). Synthetically, recalling Garelli (2020), the overall picture regarding religions in Italy is changing due to the growth of atheism and agnosticism among young people, the increase of other faiths, and the recurring demand for new or alternative forms of spirituality (Ammerman, 2013; Dillon, Wink, 2007; Hayward et al., 2012; Silverstein, 2022). However, these elements do not mark a profound transformation yet: identification with Catholicism is still high (over 70%) and the religious socialisation of younger generations is fairly widespread, at least if we consider the environments frequented up to adolescence. The practice shows a declining tendency and nones are mushrooming (Garelli, 2016a); the number of believers remains high, even if belief is no longer "blind" but rather underpinned by doubts and a widening relationship with a "do-it-yourself" version of the sacred, increasingly distant from the Church, both its teachings and its environments (Costa, Morsello, 2020).

These traits are to be read through generational lens: elderly people are more likely to be still devoted to a traditional religiosity, with its pivot in the parish, whereas adults, increasingly called "cultural Catholics"<sup>2</sup> (Garelli, 2020), appear to be closer to the position of the nones. From one generation to the next, religious socialisation has faded, though remaining still in the air (Cipriani et al., 2020).

Fostering the generation lens, our research included several dimensions of socialisation that aim to contribute to a non-deterministic approach to religious transmission. Of course, we could not help considering the role of the family: being the first place of socialisation, it provides children with an imprinting that will influence these latter for the whole life, sometimes even shaping the way their religion will be bestowed on their offspring. Yet, family is not and cannot be regarded as a single, well-defined unity separated from the surrounding environment. The personal set of significative relationships and experiences gained outside the family, together with historical and diachronic changes, do influence the way our interviewees, once autonomous from their family, develop their own religiosity.

In our analysis, we also focused on peer groups as a second intervening factor after the family. Since peer pressure regarding religious beliefs is as strong as in any other field, our older respondents highlight the need for their children to stay in an "healthy" environment such as the parish or scout groups. Community life is usually linked to religious practice. In this regard we noticed important differences from grandparents, parents and children: back in grandparents' days, an active community life was a chance of receiving news and a good way to spend one's free time. Women could escape the family by attending the Church, finding "an expedient" to go out by themselves.

Today, the likelihood of living within a community with a marked religious identity is low. Family influence continues to play an important role in religious transmission, but the influence of peer groups and the social environment, which in the past helped to strengthen the religiousness of young people in the transition to adulthood, is disappearing. As several interviewees noted, meaningful life experiences take place in secular contexts, in which religion finds no room for expression and is often seen as an obstacle. Young people's careers are increasingly built on knowledge and skills that do not include a religious worldview. Their relational networks change over time, distancing them from the religious groups in which they grew up and from the friendships they developed in childhood and adolescence.

The youth-parish centres and churches-related environments (e.g., youth groups, sports- and leisure-activities developed in collaboration between lay-and religious organisations) continue to be points of reference for the families, but mostly for their educational-formative and recreational side than for reasons linked to a strong belief and a demand for religious socialisation outside the family, and keep being important welfare providers, as in other European countries (Zrinščak, 2014). The theme of the sacred and the relationship with it is not a subject of discussion: there

is a deafening silence in families on the issue, which is broken—occasionally and not for everyone—by grandparents, who remain the bastions of interest in the (Catholic) religious education of grandchildren and granddaughters.

In addition to this set of dimensions, we placed the role of the individual actor—understood as an active subject in the socialisation process—at the centre of our cognitive framework. Even among the most religious active young people, the reasons for participating in religious groups are often varied and transcend the boundaries of religiosity itself (Genova, 2022). Nonetheless, many of them are interested in cultivating a spiritual dimension, but their reference is no longer the priests, or the parish or scout groups they attended when they were children or adolescents. Increasingly, religion is involving inner research: based on the tools received in the course of family socialisation, but moving along a personal path of discovery that draws from different sources, stimuli and experiences, with a pluralist approach that marks a strong difference with past generations.

Our findings support these premises: young Catholics might commence three different paths once they are socialised to Catholicism, paths that they use to better define their relationship with the sacred and with what have been taught to them. In this paper we tried to assess the way young Catholics in Italy express and think about their religious identity by analysing interviews conducted from 2020 to 2022. The data we are going to discuss come from a wider international study<sup>3</sup> addressing several questions, intended to link the ways in which religious socialisation takes place at the family level and the transformations in the religiosity observable on a broader level. The study focuses on the dynamics of religious socialisation that occur within families, taking an intergenerational approach that interrogates the ways in which religiosity is transmitted—or not—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.

Among the fundamental questions driving the project objectives: (i) How do the processes of transmission of religious beliefs and practices, worldviews and systems of values take place, or do not, within families and, consequently, in the intergenerational passage? (ii) Which are the main elements that help explain the outcomes of these processes? (iii) How does religiosity change throughout the intergenerational transmission?

The contribution is structured as follow: the methodological section assesses what and how data have been gathered and analysed; the subsequent section will be focussed on the three identified types of religious personal research: indeed, we are presenting the ways in which—from our data—individuals can develop a peculiar faith path. Finally, we discuss some key transversal issues and suggest further research paths to be develop.

## 2 | DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The wider research from which we derive the data presented here has been carried out in five countries<sup>4</sup> and thus it utilises a comparative approach, employing qualitative techniques (semi-structured and in-depth interviews, as well as focus groups) and quantitative ones (survey). As for the qualitative analysis, interviews are aimed at collecting key informants' point of view, and, when necessary, at the investigation of specific individual cases. On the other hand, 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, on the contrary, how it may not have taken place or, again, may have faded until it disappears altogether in the generational transition. Based on a semi-structured outline, open to respondents' stimuli, the focus groups and individual interviews have focused on religious transmission in the family and the primary religious socialisation in order to contextualise each cohort and to better understand the secondary socialisation. We then transcribed the recordings and elaborated data through a qualitative analysis software (Maxqda). The interviews, conducted between 2020 and 2022, have been conducted both online and onsite, depending on the pandemic and the measures the Italian government undertook to curb its spreading.

The difficulties encountered in conducting the fieldwork, linked to the ongoing health emergency, should be highlighted. The regulations introduced to contain the pandemic have made both the recruitment of research

participants and to conduct the interviews and focus groups complex. 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 organise interviews and focus groups in presence, leading to consider alternative ways of interactions. As a result, several meetings were conducted online, via video calls, and if this partly modified the interplays in question, it nevertheless allowed progress with the data collection.

To date, we have collected 31 in-depth, semi-structured interviews that involved 58 people in total. The interviews are divided in collective and single interviews. We gathered 16 families from North, Centre and South Italy and 16 single interviews with people from mostly North Italy, either involved in religious education, or part of families in which just one member was willing to participate in our research (Table 1). We have identified as key informants those who through their work or experience were able to offer an informed point of view on the research general topics. More specifically, we have involved people playing important roles in their communities, for example, religious ministers, educators, volunteers in religious organisations or in the broader field of migrant associationism; thus, because of their experience and knowledge, they have represented a precious source of information, useful to identify change and persistence at work.

Focus groups and interviews have been structured on three macro-dimensions of religious transmission: the role of the family, the societal impact, and the individual experiences. In this paper, we focus on the individual dimension: we are going to discuss three different kinds of inner research, presenting the ways in which—from our data—individuals can develop a peculiar faith path. Thus, we intend to draw an ideal path able to connect the familial dimension and the education received as child, with the impact of the various societal environments in which one grew up, ending with the analyses of the individual dimensions and the different ways by which one can approach, or move away from, a faith journey.

### 3 | RELIGION AS A PERSONAL WORK-IN-PROGRESS: MAIN TRENDS AMONG YOUNG CATHOLIC GENERATIONS

Even though religion originates within the family, it is subsequently shaped by the continuous relationship with the various external environments of daily interactions (eg. schools, job settings, religious communities, associations, peer-groups), and it is subject to the impact played by specific life events. Furthermore, religion is to be analysed by linking it to the inner relationship with faith. That is why we identified three ways in which Catholic identity can develop and change: the intra, inter, and extra-confessional research. Before presenting them, it may be useful to briefly mention some common aspects occurring in young believers' accounts.

Among the first elements to emerge, especially with regards to the third generation of young believers, is widespread the idea that religion is a deeply personal issue: aware of being the depositary of an effort that influences their view of the world, as they grow old and reach maturity and independence, they start an autonomous path linked to the experience gained outside the family environment. In their secondary socialisation, they do not limit themselves to mechanically reproducing family religiosity. For them, religious choices are a private issue, closely related to individual biographical careers and, therefore, all possibilities are admissible. Whether it is a question of renewing family religious patterns, adapting, or abandoning them in favour of other religious options or non-belief, few of them feel able to judge the experiences of others, as a practising Catholic living in Turin observes:

I have had friends who believed and then have lost the faith, that is, who have had a certain education but then do not believe anymore, and others who have remained religious. We have always experienced it as a personal matter (I#5, third generation, female).<sup>5</sup>

TABLE 1 Interviewees' characteristics.

Interview	Generation <sup>a</sup>	Gender	Religion	Region
KI#1	G2	M	Catholic	Piedmont
KI#2	G1	M	Muslim	Piedmont
KI#3	G2	M	Romanian orthodox	Piedmont
KI#4	G1	M	Muslim	Piedmont
F#1	G1; G2; G3	M; F; F	Catholic	Piedmont
F#2	G1; G2; G3	F; F; F	Catholic	Sardinia
F#3	G1; G2; G3	F; F; F	Catholic	Sardinia
F#4	G1; G2; G3	F; F; F	Catholic	Piedmont
F#5	G1; G2; G3	F; F; F	Catholic	Piedmont
F#6	G2; G3	F; F	Romanian orthodox	Piedmont
F#7	G2; G3	F; M	Romanian orthodox	Piedmont
F#8	G1 (x2); G2 (x2); G3	M; F; M; F; F	Catholic	Veneto
F#9	G2 (x2)	M; F	Muslim	Piedmont
F#10	G2; G3 (x3)	F; F; M; F	Catholic; Jehovah's witnesses; maronite	Piedmont
F#11	G2 (x2); G3 (x3)	F; M; M; M; F	Catholic	Piedmont
F#12	G1; G2 (x2); G3 (x2)	M; M; F; M; F	Catholic	Piedmont
F#13	G2 (x2)	M; F	Catholic	Tuscany
F#14	G2 (x2)	M; F	Catholic	Veneto
F#15	G2 (x2); G3 (x2)	M; F; M; F	Catholic	Piedmont
I#1	G2	F	Muslim	Marches
I#2	G3	F	Muslim	Piedmont
I#3	G2	F	Muslim	Emilia romagna
I#4	G3	F	Catholic	Piedmont
I#5	G2	F	Catholic	Piedmont
I#6	G3	F	Catholic	Piedmont
I#7	G3	F	Catholic	Piedmont
I#8	G3	F	Catholic	Piedmont
I#9	G3	F	Muslim	Piedmont
I#10	G2	F	Christian	Piedmont
I#11	G2	F	Christian	Piedmont
I#12	G2	M	Christian	Friuli-venezia giulia

<sup>a</sup>We refer both to familiar and sociological generation. In Table 1, we labelled the first generation as G1, the second as G2, and the third as G3. In sociological terms, G1 is baby boomer generation, G2 is generation X, and G3 is millennial or generation Y.

For these young believers, the generation gap is quite central:

In my family, my grandparents and great-grandparents, they were all of the same faith, no one embraced another. It could only happen to what I call my generation. I have a very large family, several uncles and cousins, everyone went their own way. Some kept the religion imposed on them as children and others abandoned it for personal reasons, but this only happened in our generation, because my parents' generation was already more constrained (I#5, third generation, female).

The idea of religion as a free individual choice emerges above all in contrast to a mono-confessional, dogmatic and formalist conception experienced at a young age, observed in the daily practices of previous generations, or recounted by them. As a young primary school teacher with a Catholic upbringing, nowadays devoted to a personal spirituality, said, the religion transmitted in the family takes root in each cohort with progressive generational adaptations, that constitutes in the younger generation a mere reference from which to move in search of a more personal religiosity.

My grandparents were there once, and with them also these Catholic beliefs. I say old because they are traditional, closed. But my parents were more open, and I was more open. It's as if the culture my grandparents left me helped me to enter a bigger world, whereas for my grandparents it was just that. But also, the openness towards other religions, today Italy has many more religions than in my grandparents' time (I#4, third generation, female).

In this context, the religious literacy received in the family—often oriented towards the transmission of values and built on example—offers the fundamental tools for a sort of bricolage that does not necessarily lead to interconfessional paths. Concerning those who describe their religiosity as inner research in progress, rather than an acquired and monolithic condition, three tendencies emerge: the intra-, inter-, and extra-confessional research. The first takes place within the framework of the religion transmitted in the family; the second draws on more than one religious tradition, taking confessions as valid options from which to draw; the third transcends the confessional boundaries, completely renouncing dogmatic forms typical of traditional institutions and taking in stimuli from various environments, including philosophical traditions or scientific knowledge.

### 3.1 | Intra-confessional research

The increased religious plurality of our times can offer a wider range of options, without excluding that personal research can also take place within the family's confession. If, as in the opinion of most of our interviewees, strict mono-confessionalism is an old-fashioned concept, this also means shelving visions of a religion that is mechanically transmitted by external socialisation agencies, such as the family, the school, and the parish. From this point of view, the individual, feeling that he has freed himself from the social and institutional pressures that, in the past, imposed a normative vision of faith, is free to interpret the religious messages personally, building a grammar suited to his own spiritual needs. This position is shared by many young interviewees, but also by their parents who lived through the Second Vatican Council and 1968, or who were born during the '60s economic boom. Within this conception, the mass in Church "as it used to be" is experienced as one of the most coercive elements and, at the same time, as a great waste of time, to which a more intimate and authentic, active, and transcendent individual prayer is preferred.

I pray more attentively at home. In church, especially when there is mass, my mind wanders a bit from the words and the sermon. Prayer as I understand it is done more at home because I am more concentrated (I#5, third generation, female).

Besides normative elements of social pressure, and doubts about the usefulness of the collective mass, it seems that the social reason for the place of worship has also disappeared, that "experience of novelty" which, according to an educator of one of the most important Catholic parishes in Turin, was once a sufficient reason for attending Church:

The experience of novelty: going to the parish, seeing different people, getting to know them, was something different. You became passionate and accepted all the steps just to be part of it. Was there Thursday prayer? We went, because there were so many people, and I knew people. You had to go

and play football but there was mass before the game? Cool, so I see other people (KI#1, second generation, male).

The opportunity to meet other people, to broaden one's relationships, to make experiences outside the family, and to be in society has acquired, today, a more organic and elective character. All these aspects (social coercion, superficiality and boredom, the discovery of new relational circles and spaces of freedom from the family, and the parish as the centre of social life) are well represented in the story of a Catholic from Veneto, married and father of a daughter:

When I was a child, I didn't want to go to mass because I wanted to sleep, or there was that show, football, that interested me and they only did it on Sunday mornings, there was no excuse, and you went anyway. It's clear that afterwards it becomes a habit. So, Sunday without Mass didn't even seem like Sunday to me anymore. The transition from habit to what it is today means that I'm happy, but it wasn't automatic. You have to think about it a bit and have opportunities. But, well, the obligation is an obligation for everyone, there was nothing to do, it was something... almost a stress. Afterwards, however, I would say that... there was also a reason for it, in the sense that I found my friends there, whereas today the meeting points are no longer the same. There was also something nice because I went alone, I could walk, I could go to the church, I could find my friends, etc. I left annoyed but, as you can see, I didn't like it. I left annoyed but, as I said, I came back happy, it's true (F#8, second generation, male).

As a second-generation Catholic, mother of a thirty-year-old agnostic Catholic, remembers, especially in small provincial communities, the parish was once—and in those suburban areas it still is in part today—one of the few, when not the only, opportunity to offer children activities, leisure, and social experiences:

In my opinion, the whole thing has to be seen in a town of five thousand souls, where there were and are two opportunities and possibilities to do things: either you go and do sports activities, or you go and do parish activities. My daughter did both, at that time it seemed to me a place where she could learn to live among others (F#5, second generation, female).

I think that for my grandparents it was very much cultural: oratory, church, parish were a help, places of aggregation, culture. When these things were lacking, the needs I mean, my grandparents were able to broaden their vision. (I#4, third generation, female).

Even for those who have grown up with a Catholic upbringing, the more traditional forms of religious practice may prove insufficient to respond to a “desire to live the faith more” (F#11, second generation, male) that often arises with adolescence, in the secondary religious (and non-religious) socialisation phase, when the person begins to experience a wider range of relationships in environments outside the family nucleus, as a second-generation Catholic, married and father of two children, recalls:

Sunday mass was the only thing you did as a child, but you only did it with your mother. Later, when you grew up, you could go with your friends or your neighbour because it had become a tradition to go to Mass with your neighbours on Sundays, but it was all limited to Sundays. The most important choice of faith I made was when I started going to the parish, when there was a Salesian who looked after the kids and started talking to you, discussing things. And that's when the search for a deeper faith came up, and then the youth movements themselves led me to attend groups outside the parish, where there were retreats. There arose a desire to live the faith more [...] You are no longer a receiver but a seeker of something more (F#11, second generation, male).

If parish groups represent for several interviewees an alternative place of socialisation to the family, in which they can build new and gratifying relationships and, at the same time, a workshop where to search for a more personal



and active faith, often their attendance is interrupted with age, when they discover themselves too adult to continue interacting in adolescent environments, and too young to join older groups. "When we got too old and had to get out of these groups, we were missing something, we went searching", the Catholic father quoted above tells of himself and his wife (F#11, second generation, male). This is a crucial biographical moment, which for many results in the abandonment of the practice and the turning away from religion. In order not to lose contact with their own spiritual life and to continue the religious research undertaken at the time of secondary socialisation, young adults and most practising adults build autonomous paths of deepening, studying, and confrontation. Thus, the formulation of a personal religious perspective continues outside the churches, but always within the framework of the Catholicism inherited first of all from the family and then developed in the parish. In these passages there is often a progressive abandonment of the minister of religion as the mediator of religious instances between the person and his God, in preference to study or personal introspection and, sometimes, peer education.

Catholicism as a personal quest, between introspection, individual study and peer-education is well represented by the experience of an interviewee, a practising Catholic aged thirty-five, living in Turin. In the framework of a religion transmitted in the family mainly through values and example—"it was a more straightforward thing, if you like"—with adulthood she felt like she needed to:

Read and understand, even when the Church says certain things, understanding where certain concepts come from: it was more of a necessity of mine [...] for a year now I have been part of this group and I like it: you start with a theme and then you discover something more about yourself, others, and God. [...] We met at work and realised we all had the same need: to spend an hour talking about these issues (I#5, third generation, female).

Among the external environments that can influence the personal elaboration of an inner religious dimension, autonomous and independent from the family or institutional confession, the Italian scouting of Catholic matrix plays a leading role, since adolescence. Participation in scout groups is the shared feature of many biographies of young Catholics who say they are on a quest: the possibility of living spaces of freedom from parental control, of sharing cognitive horizons and significant experiences, of looking out onto new visions of the world stimulates the person who, although in a religious context, finds himself – often for the first time – confronted with meanings of Catholicism different from those received in the family and parish context. As a third-generation Catholic girl, interviewed with her paternal grandmother, parents and brother, all Catholics, recalls:

When I was eight years old, I joined the scouts, who take you into a context of religiosity and faith that is different from the parish, much more...dedicated to age groups. Then maybe everything changed today, but that taught me to personally analyse certain aspects, especially when, growing up in the scouts, you have to transmit values. So, faith has turned into a – at least for me – not an unconditional trust. I have worked it out, certainly what has been passed on to me are a series of values that can be traced back to Catholicism, but which are not exclusive. The key values of religiosity I have experienced differently (F#11, third generation, female).

The idea that faith is not based on the suppression of doubt but, on the contrary, on its daily practice, and that this is the path to follow in the search for greater religious awareness, beyond mere formal belonging, is quite widespread in the families that have been interviewed. Sometimes it is present in some first generations, who are critical towards the institutional Catholic Church and the coercive and punitive approach that has marked it for most of their lives. More often it emerges in the second generations, starting at least with those who, although Catholic, over the years have had to deal with the antagonistic positions of the institutional Church on divorce, abortion, sexuality, procreation and the end of life, and who have moved away from it in search of a Catholicism with a human face and in step with the times—that is, more in tune with changes in contemporary lifestyles, needs and morals. This is

undoubtedly a feature common to the narratives of many third generations, perhaps the most representative in this sense, probably because they are the depositaries of a family religious education that is progressively more critical and detached. Beyond the image and role of the institutional Church or its ministers, it is the dogma of infallibility itself that is rejected, as illustrated by the Catholic school teacher mentioned above:

Questioning what is said by religious authority was taught to me by my parents: we are all men, mistakes happen, and no one is a saint because there are saints, but we are not all saints [...] When the pope, for example, or the Church produces documents, which I read, I do not necessarily have to agree. Agreeing does not mean being faithful [...] you don't necessarily have to trust blindly. The path is personal, and I believe that the greatest teaching of Christianity is the freedom to think in a certain way (I#5, third generation, female).

### 3.2 | Inter-confessional research

Between those who seek their own personal approach to the family religion, and those who abandon it completely in favour of profoundly different stimuli, there is a median condition that, although not very represented by our sample, deserves a brief discussion. This is the experience of those who, having grown up with the family religion, explore the path proposed by other confessional options to deepen their relationship with the transcendent. The inter-confessional search can lead to the abandonment of the religion of origin, as it is replaced by another, or no other, in favour of atheistic or spiritual positions. However, abandonment is not the foregone destiny of all biographies of this kind: one can also witness the weakening of the family faith, in favour of a holistic vision that sees the different religious manifestations as the fruit of human expression, historically and culturally given, of the same need for transcendence, in the recognition of the same higher entities called, over time, in different ways. In this sense, each denomination represents a way of knowing the transcendent: everything can contribute to the formation of the person, and some may prevail because they are more functional, suitable, pleasant or inspiring, including the religious denomination from which they originate, in a confirmation that is based on research and comparison.

This position is shared by several young people (i.e., third generations), especially when they talk about the religious education they intend to give to their future children. On one side, second generations are characterised by a greater desire to transmit the faith received from parents, perhaps leaving their children free to explore and possibly embrace other religions once they have reached a certain degree of personal and religious maturity. On the other side, third generations seem more inclined to transmit values such as curiosity, doubt, reflection, introspection, study, and the free search for meaning. There are various possibilities in this regard: there are those who think of giving a basic religious orientation, stimulating curiosity about religion (ie. Catholic) in general, and its manifestations; there are those who imagine opting for an all-round education on the various religious denominations; and there are those who would simply prefer not to directly condition their children's spiritual growth and their religious formation. Education in values, of course, is the common denominator: all the generations interviewed always agreed that these are the fundamental basis for the education of a person who, first and foremost, must learn to do right, as a precondition to being religious.

Among these different experiences and projections, the peculiar example of a second-generation mother stands out: talking about her helps us to make the complete transition from intra-to inter-confessional research, leading finally to extra-confessional research and bricolage. Her story is particularly interesting as it encapsulates in a single biography all three types of research, and several recurring elements of young believers' accounts. First of all, she experienced the primary socialisation to the family denomination, and the development of a religiosity even stronger than that of the parents ("I even entertained the idea of becoming a nun"). Then family conflict, with the development of greater autonomy in adolescence and the search between different expressions of Christianity, resulting in conversion to Jehovah's Witnesses. Finally, the intolerance for institutional religion, the abandoning of organised forms of

Christianity and the choice of an independent spiritual path, through the bricolage of new stimuli and the persistence of elements of Christianity, reworked in a personal way ("I have an image of the Virgin Mary [...] I like the idea that there is a feminine energy that governs the house").

In her case, elements from the Catholicism of her family upbringing, from the Jehovah's Witnesses to whom she converted for a long time, and from the spirituality that now characterises her path coexist. Raised as a Catholic in a not very tolerant although not practising family, she abandoned Catholicism and began studying with Jehovah's Witnesses at the age of fifteen; she then joined them at eighteen and kept her faith for about twenty years, together with her ex-husband, who had left her after their separation. Her son and daughter, who are now twenty-eight and twenty-five years old, received religious training and joined the Witnesses, leaving shortly after the mother's departure. Today the family is made up of the mother, the two children and the son's fiancée, who is of Lebanese origin and Maronite tradition, but of agnostic orientation. In her own words, her childhood and adolescence were marked by a strong relationship with Catholicism:

I was very Catholic, contrary to my parents I was very, very Catholic: I practised, I attended church. At a certain point in my life, I even entertained the idea of becoming a nun. The approach to Jehovah's Witnesses was more of an intellectual one: I was curious, then my father came out against this religion, and this immediately sparked my interest (F#10, second generation, female).

The need to explore a new Christian confession, looking for a personal way elsewhere, stemmed from two main elements: a strong religiosity—or, as she says, the "need to have a very big, strong, watchful God watching over" and her father's reaction:

My father tried to kill me for religion because he could not accept this family dishonour. I was the only one in a huge Sicilian family who had deviated so blatantly from the straight and narrow. My father told me it would be better if I became a prostitute. He disowned me and beat me many times. We were on a collision course for many years (F#10, second generation, female).

After having freed herself from the family yoke and then, later on, from the community of Jehovah's Witnesses, the interviewee turned her search towards flexible and non-coercive expressions, within which she could freely cultivate her own inner dimension: "For me the division between spiritual and religious is strong, religion is tied to the rules" (F#10, second generation, female). The transition from institutionalised Christian confessions to free personal research has been anything but simple:

For me it was a mess. A mess. It took me a long time to move from God to universal energies. And still today I miss that God so much. I'd like to pray and say 'now I'm talking to someone who knows, who can, who does' but I know that whatever I say is picked up by some wandering energy that doesn't interact with the human being. [...] I still pray. I pray to the energies of nature: the earth, the sun... I like rituals, candles, incense very much. I invent them, I mix everything. [...] I have an image of the Virgin Mary. A small image that my son's ex-girlfriend gave me, and I like to keep it, I've kept it. I like the idea that there is a feminine energy that governs the house, I like it. It's the image of that energy. Then I became involved in shamanism [...] Every now and then I go into a church to breathe in the mystical air, incense, candles... they're evocative. I could be a very good nun: waking up at four in the morning, repeating mantras by heart. I like mantras, I think they calm the mind. It is something ancestral beyond reason (F#10, second generation, female).

The complex experience of this mother describes a path common to several people: family upbringing, curiosity and intellectual interest, internal and external pressures, critical moments, different interpretations of the role and

relevance of religion, rejection of mono-confessionalism first and then of institutionalised religion, have accompanied a path of research that has finally landed in the domain of spirituality and neo-shamanism. The elements of previous experiences coexist with current references: the Virgin Mary, now a symbol of feminine energy, coexists with the lack of a “strong God” like that of Jehovah's Witnesses, between personal rituals and mystical aspirations.

### 3.3 | Extra-confessional research

The third type of inner search includes the experiences of those who, having grown up with a Catholic or non-Catholic upbringing, do not feel represented or are unable to express themselves within the framework of an institutionalised confession and choose a different religious path. These are above all the younger generations who are looking outside the denominational context for new stimuli and keys to interpreting the world, in order to build a relationship that is as authentic and aware as possible with immanent reality—often identified with the natural environment—and transcendent reality—forces and energies, but also science and culture. Shared feature of the various biographies collected in this context is a kind of agnosticism: the perception of human limitation and insufficiency in the face of the unknowable leads to the abandonment of rigid and deterministic readings; the unknowingness of the transcendent seems to orientate towards paths that emphasise questions rather than answers, and that transmits peace and acceptance, at the same time feeding curiosity and reflexivity. Often biographical trajectories are formed on the background of a liberal and non-formal education, in a combination of secular and religious values, sensitivity to civil rights, the habit of introspection and recourse to a wider range of sources—sacred texts and profane narrative, philosophical doctrines, physical, psychological, astronomical, or astrological disciplines, direct observation, introspection and meditation, etc.

For some, the educational model has been so informal that it has been described as spiritual rather than religious, referring to the lack of connection with doctrine, rituals, liturgical obligations, beliefs, and the social role of faith. For others, disappointing or painful experiences within the confessional framework are the reason for a clear rejection of the doctrine and those who represent it. In the framework of extra-denominational research, the various religious expressions are seen as historically given cultural phenomena, the result of the search for meaning by individuals equally concerned with understanding reality and its latent meanings. In the impossibility of conceiving one religion as “true”, or “truer” than others, each confession can serve as a stimulus to explore unexplored areas of knowledge. As the young teacher, who has a Catholic background and spiritual orientation, tells us, this path of research can originate from a liberal upbringing and a marked curiosity, without there being a clear break with the family confession:

I am spiritual, I believe there are great energies to which we are somehow subjected. The why and the how is not given to us to know. I think religions are interpretations of that and that's it, nothing more. I'm curious, that's how I grew up, I've never had preconceptions: no church, no church. Everything is possible. I never heard any negative comments from my parents about other beliefs. The fact that I was so free to look around gave me the opportunity to be open to everything. There was a time when I was a young girl that I went to church, why I don't know. As a child I went to the nuns' kindergarten and I remember that period very, very clearly (I#4, third generation, female).

In other cases, the distinction between religious phenomena and spirituality is more pronounced, as in the words of the teacher just mentioned, intent on imagining the education she will impart to a future child; and, later, in the testimony of a young third generation of Lebanese origin, educated in the Maronite Church and now engaged to a former Jehovah's Witness, mentioned in the previous paragraph:

I think I would aim to make him love nature: make him stand barefoot, make himself hurt with the earth. Have contact with the natural things of life. It seems to me that religion is... that they detach

a lot from the body, in my opinion instead it's something to recover [...] Religion in my opinion has created an imbalance with the most natural part of life. Even with sex. So, I would try to push it more towards an acceptance of natural things (I#4, third generation, female).

My ways of being spiritual are different from the classical religious ways. Going to some peaceful places, maybe in nature, any places that are calm helps me find... I am still working on this, but mainly going to a calm place, meditating, generally this helps me to calm down when I am really stressed out. It can help me. I search for a connection with nature. Also, yoga, I do meditate, yoga... (F#10, third generation, female).

Finally, when painful events arise from religious experience, the dogmatic and institutionalised confession becomes an obstacle to happiness: the break becomes clear and the rejection more radical, but without affecting the interest in the texts, as testified by a 30-year-old, third generation, agnostic with a Catholic background:

[Has the role of religion changed during your journey?]

Yes, because my role in humanity has changed, in the sense that I have grown up, I have had experiences, and then you know how certain things go. Gradually religion has been more of a hindrance than a companion, but a hindrance in my public life. I am homosexual, so for me religion has been an obstacle in my community life from the beginning as soon as I became aware of a part of myself. However, I grew up with the Gospel for various reasons and so you know things, bits, and pieces of the Bible... I, for example, am very interested in the Scriptures, I like them a lot, but I realise that this is more in the domain of my intellectual curiosity than religion (F#5, third generation, female).

Among the greatest difficulties of an extra-confessional research trajectory, free of coercion and formal dogmas, the absence of ritual formulas and standardised liturgical models is the other side of spiritual autonomy. In embarking on this path, several people feel the need to equip themselves with some form of ritual: among these is the widespread use of objects—candles, incenses, stones and other natural elements, images—that transform the liturgical space, giving it a cosy, intimate and separate atmosphere, conducive to introspective thought and contemplation. If anyone converts domestic spaces into places of meditation, almost all non-confessional researchers refer to natural environments where one can have metaphysical experiences, walking, remaining silent, observing:

No, I have no rituals. I wash myself, that's my ritual. It is spiritual because I wash away thoughts. I walk, that's it. I walk a lot, for me the most difficult thing would be not to be in nature. I find something very spiritual in putting my hands in the earth and doing things in nature (I#4, third generation, female).

I really like walking in nature, I really like wild places, and I've always recognised a strong divine imprint in it, if you like. But it's a very abstract thing, for me it's a very sensitive thing in those moments, but completely abstract [...] a very metaphysical thing (F#5, third generation, female).

Between the invention of ritual formulas that draw on the mystical traditions widespread in many religions, to the experience of the natural world through observation, meditation or study, even scientific study, it could be said that non-confessional research is aimed at mending the rift between reason, religion and nature, drawing without prejudice on any source of human thought that is able to contribute to a better understanding of oneself and one's role in the universe. Thus, even in moments of greatest difficulty—such as critical events that intervene in individual biographies, radically changing beliefs and perceptions—the spiritual seeker tries to put together the inexplicable with the rationalizable, resorting to magical, religious, and scientific thought to attribute meaning to existence.

[Your parents passed away recently, when you went through that difficult time did you turn to faith?]

No, to astrology [...] trying to understand in a more or less rational way why things happened to me, why at this moment. Probably rationalising. It seems to me that with religion there is no rationality, there is a lot of faith, I don't believe in astrology, but it seems to me a fact and it gives me security. What I read and the connections I make seem logical to me and there is daily feedback [...] I don't know, I think I faced the period of my parents' illness with reason. The opposite of religion. [...] I explored a lot, and, in a way, I put into practice my parents' teaching: to explore, to be curious. When tragedies happen in life [...] this research helped me to strengthen this belief of mine, although I don't like to call it a belief, it's a way of thinking. (I#4, third generation, female).

## 4 | CONCLUSIONS

In this contribution, we aimed to present the data we gathered thus far on the ways in which young Italian Catholics can build up their own religiosity, developing a peculiar faith path. In doing so, we tried to return the relevance of a wide set of intervening dimensions: the familial influence and the education received as child, with the impact of generation gaps and the environment in which one grew up, as well as the individual dimensions linked to personal biographies and the different ways by which one can approach, consolidate, change, or move away from, its own faith journey.

Recalling Garelli (2020), Italian religious landscape is changing following the growth of atheism and agnosticism among young people, the increase of other faiths, and the recurring demand for new or alternative forms of spirituality (Ammerman, 2013; Dillon, Wink, 2007; Hayward et al., 2012; Silverstein, 2022). However, identification with Catholicism is still high and the religious socialisation of younger generations is fairly widespread. While from these points of view it is still difficult to state that a true transformation of religiosity has taken place in Italy, something has certainly changed in the nature of belief. Our data confirm a widespread trend in Italy, emerging and consolidating especially among the younger generations. Belief is no longer "blind" but rather underpinned by doubts, in a complex relationship between subjectivity, life experiences and a composite web of stimuli and religious references. The Church and traditional religious transmission agencies – first and foremost the family – still play a role in the early socialisation phase, but they are increasingly distant (Costa, Morsello, 2020) from the religious experience of adolescents and young adults, among whom an autonomous and pluralist approach to the sacred is more widespread.

Religion is not disappearing, but the location of religion (Knott, 2005) has changed. The youth-parish centres and churches-related environments are still points of reference for families, but mostly for their educational and recreational side and as fundamental welfare providers, as in other European countries (Zrinščak, 2014). The likelihood of living within a community with a marked religious identity is low. Faith is not at the centre of the family, nor of peer groups or society, but is increasingly cultivated inwardly through individual paths of personal search. The collective, intrinsically social dimension of religion endures, and is even rediscovered or strengthened, only in rare cases of high religiosity. As several interviewees noted, meaningful life experiences take place in secular contexts, in which religion finds no room for expression and is often seen as an obstacle. Young people's careers are increasingly built on knowledge and skills that do not include a religious worldview. Their relational networks change over time, distancing them from the religious groups in which they grew up and from the friendships they developed in childhood and adolescence (Genova, 2022).

Nonetheless, as our results show, many young Italians are interested in cultivating a spiritual dimension. Increasingly, religion is involving inner research: based on the tools received in the course of family socialisation, but moving along a personal path of discovery that draws from different sources, stimuli and experiences, highly religious young Italians might commence three different paths once they are socialised to Catholicism, paths that they use to better define their relationship with the sacred and the values to which they have been socialised, with a pluralist approach that marks a strong difference with past generations.

Klingenberg and Sjö (2019, 171) argued that religious socialisation should be “studied as a process occurring simultaneously in several different settings, thereby acknowledging the many different ways in which young people encounter religion”. In their view, research should consider changes in affiliations and non-religiosity, and the role of individual agency; religious socialisation should no longer be understood as a linear path, but rather as a social process open to different entanglements, depending on specific cultural contexts.

Our findings support the understanding of religious socialisation as a non-linear, non-binary and non-deterministic, but rather multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and multi-directional lifelong process, which develops and transforms in the interaction between social, family, relational and individual factors, at the intersection of exogenous influences, biographical changes and inner processing. The subject of socialisation—with its own perceptions, understandings, set of values and meanings, and peculiar biographical careers—plays a central role. The individual agency of believers (and non-believers) should be seriously taken into account at all stages of research, while designing cognitive premises and empirical instruments, interacting with participants and analysing materials.

Along with first socialisation in the family and second socialisation in peer and/or parish groups and networks, life crucial events play a significant role in making question, refuse, or strengthen their faith. Turning points happen and do matter, and for individuals who are subjected to continuous external pressure, religion can be the centre of inner research. Intra-, inter-, and extra-confessional research are three main paths we explored in our analysis, three different ways of dealing with watershed events that either modify or confirm one's religiosity. In this article we mainly explored and endeavoured to generalise the data we gathered, trying to think about how factors at a micro- and meso-level act with regards to socialisation. Data are overall highly encouraging to further analysis and research.

The Italian context is furthermore enriched with historical and cultural elements that are clearly playing a role in the religious transmission and that should pave the path for future analysis and research. One of them is the growing religious plurality and relatively recent presence of numerous Muslim and Romanian Orthodox migrants, both the first and the second, sometimes even the third, generations. Some authors clearly suggested that the focus should be moved from native and institutionalised native religiosity alone, comparing processes of religious transmission between various religious traditions: “the study of religion would certainly benefit if research into processes of the intergenerational transmission of faith is not limited to Christian families” (Vermeer, 2014, p. 408).

Following the more recent migration waves, scholars' perspective has expanded beyond the majority religion in order to include religious minorities and diasporic groups' experiences. In dealing with the link between religion and migration, the scientific community in Italy has been interested in the diffusion of believers on the national territory, the emergence of new confessions, communities, and organisations (Ambrosini et al., 2018; Garelli, 2016b; Naso, Passarelli, 2018; Pace, 2011), and their impact on residents, local institutions and national agreements between State and religions. Although several studies have focused on regional or local cases, little is still 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.

Concerning diasporic groups, such as Muslims and Orthodox Christians, the inter-generational comparison makes it possible to distinguish needs, aspirations, limits, and opportunities more clearly, as well as those experiences that can dramatically influence human existence, either positively or negatively. And, above all, to understand whether or not the trends we underlined in this paper are shared by young people of other faiths—if they have to be understood as a characteristic of contemporary Italian Catholicism alone, or a common trait of the young Italian generations of our time, regardless of their religion of reference.

Broadening research including religious traditions other than the institutionalised one, could strengthen the empirical results on religious transmission and religiosity *tout court*. Besides, the transformations of which the populations with foreign origins are protagonists play a leading role in influencing 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 life, migration can also 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 contemporary societies' pivotal issues.

In a previous article (Bossi, Marroccoli, 2022), we presented the first results about migrant religiosity and the link between the family religious transmission they carry on in the host country and their being alone in a different national and cultural context. In continuing the project, we intend to further this topic, linking it with the data and analysis we already gathered and conducted on Catholics to understand if, *mutatis mutandis*, they are bearing their generational cross too. Hopefully, the comparison will help us better define the trends highlighted among young Catholics too.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funder 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.

## INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In their contribution, the authors offer a critical overview of prevailing positions on socialisation and its role in explaining religious transmission, to which we refer for further discussion.
- <sup>2</sup> Namely those who have been raised in Italy and have no particular religious afflatus. Eventually, young people (18–34 years old).
- <sup>3</sup> The research is still ongoing. See: <https://www.templeton.org/grant/the-transmission-of-religion-across-generations-a-comparative-international-study-of-continuities-and-discontinuities-in-family-socialization>.
- <sup>4</sup> Namely Canada, Finland, Germany, Italy and Hungary.
- <sup>5</sup> Each quotation mentions the way information have been collected (by individual interview or focus group); the generation to which the interviewee belongs considering the family generations (G1 = grandparents; G2 = parents; G3 = children) and interviewee's sex. All the interviewed children were over 18 years old.

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