Faith, identity and practices

The current refugee crisis and its challenges to religious diversity in Southern Europe

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Introduction

There is no doubt that the subject of migration is one of the most important and most controversial aspects of European political debate in the 2010s. Indeed, a lot has happened in just a few years. A severe financial crisis influenced a reduction in public resources and increased unemployment while ISIS appeared on the international scene and the Islamic State claimed responsibility for attacks against symbolic places of the Old Continent (from Paris to Nice, Brussels, Berlin and Barcelona). This perception of immigration is also certainly motivated by the significant arrivals of asylum seekers (and refugees) who have challenged the EU’s internal cohesion. The upsurge occurred in the first six months of 2015, when Greece overtook Italy in the number of arrivals during the summer, which is ideally considered the starting point of what has been rapidly named the ‘refugee crisis.’ Consequently, the nexus between these episodes and immigration has been improperly established and exploited throughout the years, particularly by populist, anti-immigrant forces.

With the growing number of refugees and asylum seekers, the effort undertaken by some countries and the resistance of others to their reception, as well as the increase in deaths at sea, have been a real test for inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations throughout Europe especially in the countries bordering the Mediterranean. Among these countries, Italy is the context in which the issue has been most relevant. The political repercussions have not taken long to be noticed. The latest elections have revealed the growing clout of right-wing and populist parties, perceived by many as a reaction of the population to the growing arrivals and to the fear of their different religions, particularly Islam and its more radical forms. In the public discourse, all new arrivals belong to Islam and the fear of being under an Islamic invasion re-emerges.

Media commentators and politicians in Europe, particularly in Italy, sometimes stress the risk of Islamization and Islamic terrorism. This became more acute after the proclamation of the so-called Islamic State in 2014 and the attacks carried out by ISIS supporters in Europe.
Yet it is incorrect to speak of an ‘Islamic invasion.’ According to a survey at the end of 2017 from the Pew Research Center (2017), there were about 25.7 million Muslims registered in Europe—4.9% of a population of over 740 million people, with the highest percentage in France (5.7 million, 8.8% of the population) and Germany (about 4.9 million, 5.5% of residents). Given this data, however, the perception is totally different, as demonstrated by an Ipsos Mori survey (2016) that measured the gap between public perception and the reality in 40 countries in 2016. The findings stated that the actual Muslim population in Italy was 3.7% while the perception was 20%. However, this was not only the case for Italy. The average French person estimates that 31% of the population was Muslim, almost one in three residents, while the true figure was 7.5%. In addition, German and Belgian respondents all believed that more than a fifth of the resident population was Muslim, while the figure ranges from 5% in Germany to 7% in Belgium.

But religion is not only important as part of the identity of migrants and refugees or a political argument in the debate. Religious associations and immigrant faith-based organizations play a key role in terms of advocacy, concrete projects and strategies in the area of reception and integration activities.

Despite there being a rich body of literature on migrations in these times, studies investigating religion within immigrant communities, including its role and impact on asylum seekers and refugees, have been less extensive. However, evidence from some contemporary ethnic groups suggests that ethnic religion may play a strong role in the lives of those who fit into the heterogeneous group of migrants. The chapter summarizes the main religious issues that are currently guiding the debate in Europe dealing with faith and immigrants. Specific focus will be devoted to the role played by ethnic-religious associations, immigrant religious associations and faith-based networks in the host societies in the relationship between religion and settlement paths of refugees and asylum seekers. In the above-mentioned framework, Italy has become an interesting case study for a significant number of policies, initiatives and projects, which started there and later on were adopted elsewhere in Europe.

The chapter tries to outline the above-mentioned issues in the following three sections by using an interdisciplinary methodology.

**Immigrants and religion: believers and religious symbols under the ethnic umbrella**

For some time now, the relation between immigration and religion has been central to the interest in migration studies. In the US literature, Herberg’s (1955) assimilation model of Protestants, Catholics and Jews (triple melting pot) inspired many studies (Heft 2006; Koenig 2008). According to this model, the support of integration provided by religion (and religious institutions) favours the persistence of a strong religious identity at the expense of an ethnic other. In fact, since then numerous studies have demonstrated how ethnic congregations favour, through their activities, the persistence or the strengthening of a marked ethnic identity for the first generation and, in many instances, the second (Hirschman 2004; Massey and Higgins 2011; Connor 2012, 2014).

Over time, the increase of migrations from non-European countries has further enriched the US debate, drawing attention to religious instances outside the Judeo-Christian tradition. The increase in the number of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in the United States has directed scholarly attention to the question of whether strong religious traditions (leading to active believers) favour a better process of integration of immigrants and, above all, of their children in the host society, as evidenced in research on young Asians who profess
themselves Catholics (Wuthnow 2005; Eck 2007). The US debate on ‘immigration and religion’ has since moved to Europe (Foner and Alba 2008; Kivisto 2014), where attention was given initially to the Muslim presence (Continental Europe) and the Sikh presence in the UK (Singh 2012) and, in more recent times, to Orthodox, Catholic and other Christian groups among the migrant diaspora (Vertovec and Wassendorf 2005; Voas and Fleischmann 2012; Hausner and Garnett 2015).

Yet, despite the affirmation of increasing religious pluralism within the population, research in Europe has concentrated on the growing Muslim presence (Hunter 2002; Cesari 2013), with observations on and studies considering different viewpoints (Emerson 2009; Bowe 2010; Meer et al. 2012; Van De Pol and Van Tubergen 2014). Furthermore, the perspectives of refugees and asylum seekers, and their religious points of view, are also underrepresented in studies in Europe (Crane 2003; Gallo 2014). According to existing literature on this specific topic, the processes of social integration, as well as the definition of cultural and religious identity, in many instances, are filtered through relations with religious institutions and integration institutions. They are represented mainly by associations and organizations belonging to religious congregations (Foner and Alba 2008).

In the current debate regarding this matter, how faith and religious belonging intertwine with societal insertion and then integration is understudied. Indeed, discussing relations among faith, identity and practices in the migratory framework means considering the role of places of ethnic worship and whether religious identity changes along the development of the integration paths.

These arenas do not play a merely religious role. They are pre-eminent players too in offering welcoming and welfare services. On the one hand, immigrants feel at home in places of worship, where they find religious leaders who speak their native language, share the same ethnic background and cultural traditions, and understand the difficulties emerging from mixing their old way of life and the requests of the new society (Cesari and McLoughlin 2005; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). Ethnic worship centres are also considered in the debate among experts as a stage in a process of assimilation and from the point of view of the role and objectives of religious organizations. With respect to behaviour, values, traditions in the transition from the first to other generations, there is a progressive abandonment of the need for ethnic religious institutions in favour of religious organizations already present in the host society. In this sense, organizations should assume intercultural aspects and transform themselves into intercultural religious organizations. On the other hand, the recent, continuous arrivals bring out spiritual needs that can best be satisfied when the migrants can find a comprehensible and familiar linguistic and cultural scenario. This means that it is better not to dismantle churches, mosques and ethnically affiliated organizations because they can be spaces in which various aspects of assistance are offered, from spiritual to material. They can be spaces where they can express their own values—religious and cultural—without being judged, discriminated against or stigmatized.

Often, asylum seekers and refugees (as ‘first generations’), being in a new reality without familiar linguistic-cultural references, favour seeking refuge in religious groups that offer recognition and reinforcement of identity. This is mainly because attendance at churches, mosques and other places of worship allows meeting others from the same country with whom they share experiences and needs (Chivallon 2001; Carol et al. 2015). Moreover, centres of worship (churches, mosques, prayer halls) can be a reference point for them to carry out functions typical of religious organizations in emigration. They also foster social bonds (McKay 1982; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Portes and Hao 2002; Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Gilbert et al. 2012).
Faith-based organizations: leading players in the management of social and religious cohesion

During the 2010s, changes brought about by globalization, immigrant settlements and increased ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity in Southern European countries (e.g. Greece, Spain and Italy) have reinforced the need for policies capable of promoting social inclusion and preventing conflict. On the one hand, mainly due to migration, we are witnessing an increase in the presence of heterogeneous cultural groups as part of the socio-economic fabric of cities. On the other, there is an exploration of how interculturalism can help foster social inclusion. In recent years, more links have been forged between interculturalism and social inclusion, a development that has sometimes given rise to effective inclusion initiatives. But sometimes they remain on a superficial level. This is the case, for example, with intercultural festivals. These events are devoted to raise awareness of the cultural traditions present in a city without necessarily pursuing a greater social inclusion of these groups or fostering closer relationships and intercultural dynamics between natives and migrants.

The results have been precarious balances, greatly alleviated by voluntary organizations, between sectoral and administrative bodies interested in promoting intercultural dialogue and/or conflict mediation (Caponio and Ricucci 2015). The Mediterranean crisis fermented by the Arab Spring and consolidated by the Syrian exodus has called into question the integration processes underway in many European cities and countries. The main reasons have been identified as the growing numbers and biographical characteristics of the players (often poorly educated, dark-skinned and Muslim), and the increased reception costs. The tragedies of Lampedusa, Ceuta and Lesbos have attracted public attention to the subject—attention that has also made clear the crucial role played by religious associations and charitable organizations.

This has resulted in the following: a) public appeals for welcoming refugees and asylum seekers by the most important religious leaders like Pope Francis on a global level with effects at the local level, b) crisis management actions of the various Christian and Muslim religious organizations (humanitarian corridors, first aid assistance and first reception), and c) events and initiatives especially at the local level to promote the meeting of refugees and asylum seekers and the host community.

Considering the first aspect, in September 2017, Pope Francis launched the Caritas International global ‘Share the Journey’ campaign to create opportunities for encounters between migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, and local communities around the world. The aim was to change the debate about migration and successfully break down fear and racism. The campaign promoted a global effort among Caritas organizations in creating increased places and opportunities for communities to find out more about migrants and refugees and to join in shared experiences and initiatives. The campaign was prompted by Pope Francis’s repeated calls to promote the culture of encounter, which emphasized the importance of building stronger relationships within communities and to face the increasing challenges in the world with united, rather than individualistic, efforts. Moreover, Pope Francis outlined a shared responsibility to welcome, protect, promote and integrate asylum seekers and refugees at all stages of the journey through the Twenty Action Points for the Global Compacts. He called for every parish in Europe to welcome one family. Many religious (Catholic) organizations like Caritas and Comunità di Sant’Egidio supported the idea.

For the transit and destination of asylum seekers and refugees, church partners in different countries also provide critical information, translation and language services, as well as legal resources. This is to let refugees’ and asylum seekers’ families know their rights and what
options are available in order to make informed decisions. Caritas is well known internationally for providing vital food, living items and dignified shelter so that the families of refugees and asylum seekers—especially women, children and the elderly—can have their basic needs met. Moreover, Caritas, together with other organizations, has been active in promoting legal pathways for asylum seekers and refugees, including resettlement, humanitarian corridors, labour mobility and family reunification to ensure that they can move with safety and dignity. Such organizations make sure that the families do not fall prey to smugglers and traffickers. In Poland, for example, with the consent of Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz, a group of Catholic and secular NGOs launched a campaign entitled ‘Communities of Shelter.’ This campaign aimed at supporting local communities and representatives of the Catholic Church who wanted to prepare for admitting refugees. The initiative was a response to the call from the Polish Episcopate to create so-called humanitarian corridors to Polish parishes for particularly vulnerable refugees. The initiative was to complement Caritas’s ‘Family-for-Family’ programme whose aim was to financially support families in the Middle East. The Community of Sant’Egidio is the other international Catholic organization actively involved in facing the refugee crisis since the beginning. With such projects as ‘Together with the New Europeans: From Emergency to Reception and Integration,’ what they carry out is designed above all to provide initial reception services. These include healthcare and legal assistance, clothing distribution, baby items, school kits, emergency health kits, mobile phone minutes and public transport tickets.

In Italian cities during the refugee crisis, the influx of asylum seekers and refugees from countries with Muslim majorities has offered opportunities for shared activities between Muslim and Christian Catholic organizations strengthening both the Muslim and the European/Italian identity of both Muslim refugees and Muslim refugee workers (Khallouck 2018). In fact, Islamic associations in Southern Europe also run programmes for refugees at various levels covering all areas of refugee relief such as first aid, beds, food, and guidance and support activities. ‘Emergenza Siria’ (asylum seekers mainly from Syria aiming to go to Germany but stuck at the Central Station in Milan) is a good example which shows close coordination with other national, local and religious (mainly Christian Catholic) associations. These contexts, in which some of the workers were refugees themselves, help refugees to overcome difficulties through proactive participation in public and political life, following the role model of those who ‘made it.’ The shared history of fleeing creates trust between the refugee workers and the refugees who are considered equals.

Often, for the refugees and asylum seekers, being in a new reality without familiar linguistic-cultural references, can push them to seek refuge in religion. This is mainly because attendance at churches, mosques and places of worship allows meeting other migrants from the same country with whom to share experiences and needs (Bastenier and Dassetto 1993).

The worship centres during the so-called refugee crisis were confirmed to be a point of reference (McKay 1982; Portes and Hao 2002):

I feel well when I am in church. I think of my mother at home and get a little homesick. She and I often went to church together. Here I can come with my sister only sometimes because she often has to work on Sundays too. But when we come, we meet a lot of people we know and chat with them until it closes. It’s like being in Ukraine and it does us good, especially when outside, round and about, we hear Italians complaining about foreigners, therefore about us.

(F, Ukrainian, 53-year-old)
Again, at the local level, during Ramadan, the organization of *iftars* (fast-breaking) or feasts open to the public become opportunities that bring together Muslims and non-Muslims (Premazzi 2017; Khallouck 2018). They allow the refugees and asylum seekers to feel welcomed and concretely experience a sense of community in their new host society. In these shared practices, they encounter a nuanced experience of Italy that, on the one hand, prevents naivety, and, on the other, anxiety, with reference to society. As Rohe (2016) argues, religion is not decelerating but accelerating the process and the progress of integration when it helps refugees to make social and economic needs meet in a way that allows them to experience linguistic, cultural and religious familiarity in the new country:

> We have never worked with so many associations as we do now. What happened has also had a positive aspect in that it drove us to meet, to talk, to understand one another. Its weight is most certainly felt in the media, for example a lot of nonsense is said on talk shows, creating this climate where people come up to you and ask: ‘And what do you think about ISIS? And what do you think about terrorists coming from Libya? And what do you think about refugees,’ yes, that happens, but on the personal level we have not observed any substantial change of attitude. Rather there has been even more coordination with the security forces. Perhaps the only positive thing all this has given us is the fact that it has driven us to converse, to collaborate and to get to know one another better. There has never been such collaboration and dialogue among different religious organizations and people before. There is also talk about a conference of religions here in Turin, different projects which are being worked out.

*(Islamic representative, Turin)*

### The religious experience: risks and opportunities

Current migratory waves are rapidly modifying the physical features of neighbourhoods, the school population and the structure of small businesses. Compared with their situation twenty years ago, immigrants have introduced many profound changes or transformations that one would need a global vision to understand (Hanley et al. 2008). As Ammermann (2007, p. 234) reminds us, ‘in order to understand religion one needs to pay attention both to the micro world of daily exchanges and the macro world where the broadest social structures act.’

What is happening today is nothing new with respect to the migratory landscape. Even in the early 19th century, the experience of Polish immigration into the United States, as described by the sociologists Thomas and Zaniecki, offered insights that still matter today: what is happening in their new daily life; what happened in their countries of origin (i.e. how religious socialization developed); and what transnational relations with religious organizations are—to what extent countries of origin intervene in managing religious issues (Vasquez and Knott 2014).

Some of our members come from Ghana, from Senegal. Obviously, they pray in a different way, and sometimes the ‘habitual’ churchgoers resent their spirituality through gestures, songs and movements with which they are not familiar. This situation has given rise to a great debate. Should we organize worship only for them? But some say this would be like putting them in a ghetto; others say that—although we belong to the same Church and, being in Italy, should adapt—we are too different.

*(Methodist Church representative)*
Religion is a marker. It doesn’t matter if you are Muslim or Catholic. You are what your country of origin says you are. This is our life as immigrants: we cannot choose what we want to do, who we want to believe in... I’m Filipina and when teachers at school speak about me, they immediately class me as a village woman, with a mother involved in domestic services, with a high level of religiousness and strong moral values. It is the same for my Egyptian friends. They are treated as dangerous, or as at risk, because they are supposed to belong to Islam, and everyone in Europe fears Muslims. What a mistake! They don’t attend a mosque or any community events anymore. If you grow up in a migrant family, their cultural and religious traits will be yours. You don’t have any chance to express yourself or to be considered as a person with his/her own identity.

(Filipino, 19-year-old)

The label of foreigner often places subjects in a dimension without space or time, causing them to be considered as people with no history or values (or with too much history and incompatible values, as in the case of Muslims) and immune to transformations. All migrants, as well as citizens, asylum seekers and refugees, are fully involved in these transformations:

For us from Nigeria, Mass is an important occasion for meeting the community. It is much more than prayer; it is gathering as a family, feeling at home. We feel as though we were back in Lagos. We feel safe, here we can be ourselves and there is a Nigerian priest who has been in Italy for years. I would like to pray more, even where I live, in a welcoming centre. We don’t all have the same religion. We have been told that it is better to pray alone; religion can cause problems because we are Catholics, Muslims, Animists too, and the others I do not know. There is no place to pray, anybody who wants can go outside. But it is a small town and there is no mosque, for example. Even the Catholic Church is not always open, and I am afraid to go alone when there isn’t a Mass for Nigerians. You know how they look at you—that is not the right place for you even though we are all believers.

(Nigerian, 26, asylum seeker)

On the contrary, as stated above, religion for refugees and asylum seekers can play an important role in promoting their identity and sense of belonging and, even more, can also help asylum seekers deal with the frustration of waiting for their status to be defined and give them a break by supporting them to find a sense of moral certainty and their place in the world (Roy 2002, 2007):

One prays always. One prays when one is setting out, when one is about to set out, when one is at sea. You pray when you arrive, to express thanks. For some people praying is not thinking. When you have nothing left, all you can do is pray. Some really believe. Muslims, Christians, invoking the spirits: altogether while we are waiting for them to get us moving. In the waiting, the silence, languages and prayers get mixed up. The same happens at sea. As long as you have strength and are breathing, then silence. Those who have a crucifix hold it tightly; some verses of the Koran [are heard]. Then those who survive continue to pray in the reception centres, in silence.

(Malian woman, 24)

In fact, in the process of the application procedure, asylum seekers may intensify their religious affiliation or even convert to another religion. Religion, when practised together
with their co-religionists, can offer them stability and a framework in which to live as believers in European society. For asylum seekers, the discrimination suffered or the curiosity and attention to their countries of origin and to their religion (especially for Muslims due to terrorist attacks in Europe) are factors that can stimulate new reflections about their personal identity and personal and collective religious affiliation. This can produce a process of review and reinvention of religious practices in view of progressively detaching them from their ‘ethnic’ religion. This can also encourage religious individualization and possibly, also, radicalization:

In the centre where I used to work, many asylum seekers asked for an imam who then became their point of reference. There were also ‘inter-religious’ houses (centres) that worked very well and others where intransigent attitudes, one against the other occurred. For them, religion remains a strong identity point and waiting for a resident permit can cause frustration and risks of radicalization.

(Social worker, asylum seekers centre)

The ways in which immigrants’ cultural identities change over time and under the influence of society at large, as well as the relationship between immigrants and society, are generally crucial issues in the study of the integration process. For asylum seekers and refugees, this process is more complex because it overlaps with identity formation. Such formation began in their home countries and then continues in the receiving society after experiencing dramatic events, personal loss, exploitation and traumatic events (e.g. periods in Libyan jails, time spent in passeurs’ hands, and so on).

Conclusion

The role of associations in the inclusion of immigrants has been examined and found to have many positive aspects. Specifically, the four main functions outlined by other scholars are also confirmed by our analysis: overcoming isolation, providing material help to community members, defending the interests of the community, and promoting the community’s culture. In addition, associations can play an important role in helping community members to enter the host society through networking and information sharing.

Feeling part of a community helps to discover what Sayad (2004) has called ‘new roles against the stigma.’ In other words, when there is an effort to enhance and empower migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, they can challenge the stigma around them. Through religious organizations, asylum seekers and refugees become involved and can have an active role in the community. The association and its role in society can also help to overcome differences and include everyone, regardless of one’s ethnic origin and nationality. It can help in fostering friendships, relationships and networks. While praying together, people may feel closer to one another rather than feeling divided because of their differences of age, social class or culture. Asylum seekers and refugees, through religious associations and centres, can find their ‘place in the world,’ even if only for a few hours, even if far away from home; the community offers an identity, a role, a sense of belonging and important relationships, helping and accompanying them in different ways. Thus, with the help of the most important religious leaders, religious organizations can act as accelerators of integration, mutual knowledge and cross-community networking. Taking care of others, especially those in need in the community, also teaches them not only to be entitled to rights but also duties and responsibility towards others and the community as a whole. The community thus
becomes a space where they can practise social skills and assert their rights and perform duties. In such community, they can overcome the crystallized, simplified and dangerous figure of a believer (radical Muslim in most cases) painted by the media.

Notes
1 For a literature review, see Gungwu 2018.
2 Qualitative interviews were carried out within the project ‘Continuity and Change in Migrants’ Religiousness in Southern Europe.’ Specifically, in this chapter, the reader will find quotations from interviews with key informants, religious leaders, administrators and immigrants collected in Italy. For more information, see Ricucci 2018.
3 Islamic Relief has put forward a three-point Agenda for Action to tackle the crisis, including a Europe-wide humanitarian response as refugees travel across the continent, greater commitment to resettling refugees in European and other countries, and a fresh diplomatic effort to end the conflict in Syria, providing food packs to refugees, as well as small cash grants to the most vulnerable, and translation and support services to help people get the assistance they need.
4 We can recall the role of Catholic chaplaincies set up by European religious orders in Australia and in the United States during the last century to support Catholic immigrants, with priests speaking European languages or dialects; and more recently the role played by Muslim countries in funding the building of mosques and sending imams.

References


