

Resisting, Reacting and Reinventing: Exploring the Role of Minority Religious Solidarities in Milan and London during the Pandemic

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1. Framing minority religions and their role(s) at the time of the pandemic

When considering the multifaceted relationship between state capacity and the everyday lives of migrant minorities during and after the pandemic, the role of religion is crucial. There are various reasons for studying why and how religion played an important intermediary function during this crisis, but it is also necessary to consider how this function was shaped by factors which preceded the crisis and reflected different nation-state processes (Eade 2011).

Over time and with varying intensity, different political orientations and ideologies have informed the ways in which religion operates in the public sphere (Barbalet, Possamai and Turner 2011), where different government strategies, juridical frameworks, and policies of regulation operate through both cooperation and conflict. The regulation and monitoring of religion by the state is a key feature of European social history but it has been increasingly challenged by the development of new religious solidarities as a result of transnational migration. Whether and how these solidarities can reduce or reinforce trust in and compliance with state institutions has become an important question today, especially if we consider that religions are often a significant factor in the lives of minority migrants. The attempt by states to regulate religious pluralism from above has often been challenged from below by new religious solidarities, which are informed by social and cultural influences bound up with transnational migration.

Human beings often turn to religion when faced with unexpected disasters and tragedies. They seek in religious beliefs and practices answers to insecurities, the alleviation of suffering, resistance to stress and hope for the future (Del Re and Naso 2022). The ‘anchoring role’ played by religion became a prominent feature after the arrival of the covid-19 pandemic (Molteni *et al.* 2021), particularly for many members of the migrant minorities who faced the emergency without being able to draw on the wide range of relational, family, political and economic resources that many native citizens had at their disposal.

As well as providing comfort, which helps to encourage mental and psychological resilience (e.g., Connor 2012), religious solidarities can support migrant minorities through a complex range of cultural, civic and social benefits (Hirschman 2004). These solidarities facilitate the creation of

transnational continuities that link past and present and permit the exchange of meanings with the homeland (Levitt 2007), but they also become a source of practical support by developing safe relational networks, welfare projects, civic partnerships, and aid campaigns (Ambrosini, Bonizzoni and Molli 2021a, b). The polysemous and polyvalent character that faith usually develops when people migrate explains why many migrants put their trust in religious institutions when they settle in another country (Ambrosini, Molli and Naso 2022) and, equally, why it is important to explore their role in filtering and mediating the impact of the pandemic.

The health emergency imposed a series of changes and challenges, especially those involving the response to state interventions, such as lockdown regulations and social distancing (Giordan and Palmisano 2022; Ricucci and Bossi 2022). These had a deep impact on the *modus operandi* of religious institutions and their relationship with the faithful. Moreover, the duties imposed by the emergency guidelines not only involved religious practice but also symbolic issues (Pace 2021), i.e. which types of ‘goods and values’ should be given priority during a crisis. The state asserted its authority by appealing to biomedical and economic arguments (see Colombo 2021) and other perspectives were relegated to second place. The state determined what was ‘central and essential’ for people during an emergency, while concerns about religious freedom were sidelined. This misalignment needs to be carefully considered when analysing the civic involvement of religious actors and their commitment to reinforcing compliance or reducing trust. This is even more crucial in the case of migrant minorities since they often lack institutional recognition as well as suffer discrimination from public authorities.

The problems generated by the pandemic crisis depend on a complex set of transnational, national and local factors, such as the ethno-religious ties associated with particular religious sites, agreements and/or juridical accords with public institutions, the capacity of both religious leaders and lay people to interpret state regulations and health crisis for others, their willingness to promote civic tasks and develop caring networks. Other factors were involved such as the citizenship and juridical status of congregants as well as their gender and socio-economic composition. The intersection of these different factors meant that the unequal impact of the pandemic took various paths (Bonizzoni and Dotsey 2021) shaped by differences in legal position (from long-term permits to the condition of irregularity), job situation, family condition and social capital (Maestriperi 2021; Pastore 2021).

Hence, while restrictive policies imposed by authorities applied to everyone, such as ‘stay at home’, the intersection of macro, meso and micro level factors led to different ways of responding and reacting. This chapter seeks to explore this diversity by concentrating on Latin American Catholics, especially of Peruvian origin, in Milan and Bangladeshi Muslims in London. With regard

to Milan, we will consider the role of three ethnic churches while in London we will focus on those associated with two mosques in particular as well as a local funeral director.

Adopting a local level perspective provides the opportunity to compare how macro-processes have been reinterpreted and readjusted by members of these two minority populations in the context of different territorial opportunities and constraints. We discuss the major issues identified in the course of the research, and themes such as our interlocutors' relationship with their faith at a time of *individual* need and *institutional* constraint, the 'religious welfarism' some of them proposed and the type of 'civic compliance' some also advanced.

2. Surviving the storm: religious communities as pandemic welfare providers in Milan

To cope with the exponential and dramatic increase in needs, strengthening state responsibility has been a key argument for launching of a large package of emergency investments in Italy (Pavolini, Sabatinelli and Vesan 2021) as in other European countries (Ferrera, Miró and Ronchi 2022), such as lockdown benefits or wage subsidies. As often happens in a moment of crisis, the state's responsibility was emphasised and this was quite novel given the last three decades of cuts and privatisations in the area of social policies, as well as populist, anti-state rhetoric in the name of freedom from the burden of money wasted on public services (Jessoula, Natili and Pavolini 2022).

National welfare systems, weakened by years of outsourcing and with weak safety nets, were not sufficiently ready to cover all the socio-economic risks that the pandemic created and/or intensified. However, significant help was provided by civil society organisations (CSOs), which supported state interventions through forms of partnership with local bureaucracies and public offices as well as through autonomous or networking aid initiatives.

The welfare role of religious associations established by migrant minorities has generally been neglected, in both the literature and public debate concerning CSOs (Ambrosini, Bonizzoni and Molli 2021 a,b). Their activism in terms of solidarity has become a pivotal core of their 'pandemic mission' (Molli 2022), especially given the juridical barriers to accessing public welfare where migrants' social rights are often linked to their legal status and job position and given the lower economic incomes migrants often have at their disposal (Molli 2018; ASGI 2022¹). Faced with these obstacles, religious leaders and activists among migrant minorities have developed complementary, alternative and often substitute services at both national and local level.

¹ See also: «When Institutions discriminate: Equality, Social Rights, Immigration». Report of Project L.A.W. – Leverage the Access to Welfare: https://www.asgi.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Report_LAW_EN.pdf.

Our interlocutors provide a vivid insight into these issues. Carmen, a woman who guides a Latin American group belonging to the main Milanese chaplaincy, worked to strengthen internal networks and provide various forms of help during the pandemic crisis:

This is our logic, and in the pandemic period we have tried to do this with chats and online communications, we write to each other and share information through the chats about needs and requirements [...] The question of solidarity was important, we know that many people have lost their jobs, many ... Not only because they are “badanti” or babysitters, but also others have lost their jobs [...] So, I know what it means. We have motivated solidarity groups. Motivating groups is important, even a small gesture [...] During the pandemic we gave a hand to others, we could not go out, and many of us were stuck at home, without assistance and without receiving a hand, many friends died. A woman I know was infected and stuck at home, we have friends around, Peruvians, we asked them ... and we have given them her number and they brought her some food for this lonely woman, first she didn't answer anyone on the phone, she was sick, then we succeeded, and we gave consolation, this is a case ... but I can say many, but many ... the situation got out of hand ...

Carmen operated as point of reference and confidant, since she understood the needs of her religious group and tried to find solutions. The example that Carmen provides in the interview clearly illustrates how ‘pandemic counselling’ played a significant role for those who did not have an extended family. Similarly, Marvin, a Catholic young man from El Salvador, who guides a religious unit linked to the same Milanese Catholic chaplaincy, has organised a series of helps mostly for irregular migrants, and he gives a vivid testimony of their living conditions:

Irregular immigrants are those who suffered the most, not just because of lack of work, also for a significant loss of money, if you are Italian you have priority... but if you're without document what can you do? What can you do? A lot of us were without work, because the majority work as caregivers with elderly people, and some of them died by the way... and so all these caregivers were without a job... and without a permit in the midst of a pandemic... illegal immigrants suffered badly... both economically and psychologically...

Faced with critical situation of the pandemic community activists responded, and the priest of the chaplaincy provides an overview of the assistance being provided and their rationales:

I'd say a lot of internal solidarity, consider that generally migrants are here here with very few extended family relations...some, maybe those who've been here the longest, but not the others, there's people here who needed support when they ended up in quarantine, many of them had no connections, and for others there are small families with no contacts with the outside...there were people who took care of bringing them food and medicines, because nobody else could, it was a kind of spontaneous solidarity, they asked me to come and collect some basic things from the church (it being a centre for collecting goods) and they manage the rounds by themselves where they'd go out and help the families, solidarity was important, at the basis of the help given. They collected boxes of food, they were well organised, I mean they didn't collect random stuff, but collected rationally what people needed. From food to medicines, because they knew the people, or they got the requests through other relations, they got organised to help one another

The immigrant catholic chaplaincies supported people in a ‘spirit of mutualism’ that is grounded in a common identity and horizontal reciprocity. The ties between migrants, forged through religious attendance, created something like an ‘extended family’ that ‘takes care of itself’: what anthropologists also term as a ‘fictive kinship’ (Molli 2020). In this sense, the call to ‘your brother or sister as yourself’ was the ethical compass that motivated their pandemic solidarity.

Despite these efforts, their welfare, however, has not been a panacea. Mutualism has encountered structural/physiological limits. It can provide basic support – so crucial during a moment of profound crisis – but could not cover all the pandemic risks. In this sense, the migrant Catholic chaplaincies worked in two main ways. They either provided the resources that members needed (mutualism) or communicated members’ requests to the local Milanese charities (mediation). The chaplaincies functioned as hubs which filtered problems and acted as an extension of Italian Catholic associations such as Caritas., which could call on greater resources.

In the case of the Evangelical churches, the role of welfare was performed differently. Brenda, a young woman, tells how solidarity has de facto become a mission for the Latin American Pentecostal group to which she belongs:

We called all the members of the church and others contacted us, I can tell you we were contacted by a lot of families... and we gathered funds, and we received funds from a lot of places, many were prepared to donate, and then we filtered through identifying critical cases inside the community.

Consider I have a file of all the contact, since I managed the helps for the brothers and sisters, I’d say at least 70 families from outside asked us for help, I mean 70 besides our church community [...] and we bought groceries.

Her church reinterpreted its role the pandemic ‘calling it’ to take action, both for the members and for other families in need. The Pentecostal community performed the welfare role as a form of «mission in the city», addressing critical cases ‘off the welfare’s radar’:

You have no idea...during the first lockdown there was a family...just to mention one case, they asked us help through Facebook, she said she needed help so we called her up to understand what she needed: and she was crying and said she had nothing to feed her children with that night, an illegal immigrant, unemployed and with small children... it was really hard for her, it was towards the end of the lockdown and the little savings she had were down to nothing and she had nothing left...but people hold on, these are people that can resist, who are incredibly strong...

So, religious congregations represented an ‘alternative welfare hub’ to which some families turned, especially in the case of the most vulnerable members of the migrant population. As Brenda explained during the interview, ‘for these people the church became a central organization during the crisis, the entity which is closest in their lives.’ Even if religious congregations could not provide the panacea

for pandemic needs, their welfare commitment represented a precious support for the migrants' resilience.

3. The role of religious communities as civic intermediators in Milan

The attitudes such as obedience and collaboration or criticism and scepticism in front of state decisions represent another key empirical focus for exploring the role of religious communities/identities during the pandemic crisis.

The restrictions imposed by state authorities raised a controversial normative question about the relationship between the state and religion and the reasons for public health security. This question referred to whether people should obey the 'raison d'État' or assert religious freedom: both options were mutually exclusive during the pandemic. As we now know, the sanitary argument *de facto* prevailed in this normative hierarchy.

More precisely, the right to religious freedom as an absolute right remained but the ways in which it was concretely permitted and exercised were subject to various restrictions. In European countries, this coercion followed, despite some relevant differences in terms of restrictiveness (see Mazurkiewicz 2021), a common trend; there was a complete ban on collective worship during the first wave, which often included the complete closure of religious sites, and then a series of national accords allowing limited gatherings during the second and third wave.

Apart from the reactions by the historic religious denominations, which enjoyed institutional acknowledgement and well-defined channels of dialogue with national and local authorities, the reaction of migrant minorities represents an interesting issue, as they often lacked formal agreements and their settlement was often the target of prejudice and suspicion by many members of the receiving society. Requiring these minorities to comply with the pandemic regulations, which were designed to both keep the 'situation under control' and rely on a civic contribution, was not a matter of course. Moreover, 'loyalty to the state' was also affected by the fact that migrants were generally not the primary target of public welfare interventions. Indeed, at the beginning of the pandemic in Italy, foreigners were often blamed as 'spreaders of the virus' by populist forces.

The data, which we collected in Milan, enables us to explore the processes through which migrants from Peru and other Latin American countries responded to pandemic rules and addressed civic tasks. Although some criticisms emerged (in terms of a latent resistance), we saw evidence of an active commitment as well as a diffused trust - that cannot be taken for granted. In Catholic churches both religious and lay leaders encouraged worshippers to respect the guidelines and also provided specific information concerning members' situation to the authorities.

Our interview with a priest at a church, which had a large Latin American congregation, referred to the complete absence of the state beyond the official declaration of restrictions and described the reaction by members of the congregation:

The state ... the state didn't even see them (the migrants) ... I can say I expected this to happen, nothing new [...] because they are a weak class, what the state was especially unable to see, and this is very serious, was the medical implications for all of those who didn't have an Italian health insurance card (irregular residents), because although it's true that if an immigrant goes to A&E (accident and emergency) he or she has a right to ad hoc assistance (that's to say that even as an illegal resident, the person is entitled to emergency assistance and is identified via the granting of a designated health insurance card/number) but if this isn't made clear people won't know, and this is serious lack of foresight ...

The priest, drawing on his clerical status and taking advantage from the well-established relations with authorities, initiated a series of institutional contacts by filtering the needs and preoccupations he perceived, such as in the specific case of irregular migrants:

I'll also tell you this, they (migrants) expected nothing from the state, they didn't even begin to think of it, and to tell you the truth, neither did I...a part from medicines...I mean when they (the illegal immigrants) started calling me saying they were scared to go out to the pharmacy, and that's when I started worrying, so through institutional and personal contacts I said to the people in the high places (members of the Ministry of Interior) I said, you need to send a strong message to say that...their answer was that this couldn't be done but tell them (the immigrants) that they can rest assured...not to worry...and so I told everyone not to worry...we are in Italy, and anyway how would they manage a deportation when everything was stuck, but you know how it is when you're scared...it difficult to change someone's mind if they're scared

He was conscious that panic and fear inevitably emerge during a liminal period, especially when public institutions do not help migrant minorities and their life-conditions. As he commented during the interview 'communicating calmly to them was difficult. They were scared'. In this sense, the Catholic community compensated for the state's absence and served as a point of reference for diffusing information on how to deal with pandemic restrictions.

The process, however, was not always easy, especially after the first prolonged lockdown. Strong ethnic and social cohesion underpins the establishment of religious congregations abroad but this can make the role of a religious leader difficult. The priest narrates how he also became a sort of policeman confronted with the feelings that developed among worshippers who wanted to freely meet their brothers and sisters:

(me) How do they perceive danger?

(priest) Yes, foolishness and the inability to handle feelings, they think we are...we are cold as worshippers (we don't express as they do religious fervour and a certain kind of participation during Mass), on Sundays a typical scene is when I demand for the safe distancing to be respected, ... I say: 'Don't get too close together' ... and then outside when they are leaving they're all hugging and kissing, And so I say, 'Brothers and sisters, what you

do outside is not my responsibility but don't stand so close together in front of the saints'. But when you speak to Peruvians ... you know what they are like, Samuele ... you've seen them, they all have to pray and they all want to light a candle for El signor del Milagros...and if you tell them anything else someone will think that the parish priest is a man of little faith...who doesn't protect them while they are there praying

Catholic chaplains, therefore, have re-interpreted their role and mandate during the pandemic, alternating between representing migrants' demands to the authorities and keep them in line with state regulations.

Pentecostal activists developed similar practices in terms of civic engagement. As we have seen, their solidarity activism became a mission in Milan, and they also disseminated pandemic news to fellow worshippers:

There was always someone from the church who'd translate the information (guidelines and restrictions) into Spanish, plus we used Whatsapp groups and created posters to go round on the Internet and in chatrooms, everybody was informed and we also managed to reach those who had no social networks available, and we called on them at home to tell them what they should and shouldn't do, we contacted all of them and other people too, we always warned the brothers and sisters of the community, you know...explaining things is not always that easy...think of older people...they ask you 'why can't we go to the market? And it wasn't easy to explain the type of risk they'd be running...

As Brenda – a young lady - explained during the interview, the church started to act in a 'capillary way'. They contacted all the members and translated the regulations, making them easier to understand. Also Rafael, a volunteer leader at another Evangelical church involved in the study, tells how his church performed the same role:

I would say that the state ... how should I put it? - we mainly took it onto ourselves to help each other out. With respect to information, let's say that we shared information via Zoom, especially for permits necessary in order to leave your house, many didn't know how it was done, and so thanks to community ties we shared information, then there was a period when they gave a permit for going to church service (while in the first phase of the pandemic the churches were closed), and then we shared the information about how to get a permit to go to church to pray ... for us it was important, there was a lot of information going around, and through acquaintances we clarified the information, if I had any doubts I would ask an Italian Baptist Church, because they have a lawyer and so we knew how to go about things properly without making mistakes, we asked them how to behave if in doubt.

The attitudes of both Brenda's and Rafael's churches may appear exemplary. These realities performed - probably better than the Catholic communities – a role of «civicness» in relation to the decisions of the public authorities. In this sense, Pentecostals worked for diffusing a sense of «self-discipline and self-control» in front of chaos and anomie, although none of these religious communities are officially recognised by the State and lack of any official recognitions by local institutions. This can also be interpreted as a «strategy», namely a willingness to demonstrate responsibility as well as to

demonstrate that they «deserve» acknowledgement. In this sense, presenting themselves as «allies of the State» can be also conceived as a tool to try to create preconditions for a new recognition.

Communities we studied not only functioned as civic intermediaries but also directly sponsored civic activities. Some worshippers decided to promote forms of support not only for their members but also for the local community where the respective church is located or in neighbourhoods where themselves live, showing a sense of empathy with the Italian society:

[...] Those who are more inside and have been here the longest, with contacts in the territory, some of them did voluntary work, you know...in the various neighbourhoods there was a need to help the elderly, those in quarantine, those who were frightened and refused to go out, they were simple but important forms of help.

As the Catholic priest explains, some decided to volunteer during the pandemic through micro-acts of solidarity that can result valuable if we consider that come from a population not particularly wealthy in socio-economic terms and which, often, is socially stigmatised. Similarly, Brenda explains how her group organised not only for themselves but for the local territory some forms of help:

Some of our group also helped as best they could, they got organized, and if someone from the neighborhood was sick or stuck at home they'd go out and do the shopping for them, there was both effort and predisposition, those who had the opportunity would do what they could in their neighborhood, you know...little things but useful ones: the shopping, visiting older people, asking if anyone needed help...

«Little things but useful» synthesizes this solidarity predisposition, and it was not limited to the case studies considered. Many Catholic chaplaincies in Lombardy and Pentecostal churches have organised collections for Italian charities - such as in the cases of Milano, Como and Bergamo - and of for the respective city hospital, showing «empathy and engagement» for the critical situation.

4. The role of mosques during the pandemic: the case of the Brick Lane Mosque

Mosques also played a crucial role in mediating between the state and migrant minorities in Britain and London, in particular. Despite the many similarities in the way governments in both countries reacted to the pandemic, religious diversity was more formally accepted in the British public arena. The Board of Deputies of British Jews was founded in 1760 to represent Jewish citizens at the national level while the Muslim Council of Britain, founded in 1997, was the 'UK's largest Muslim umbrella organisation with over 500 members including mosques, schools, charitable associations and professional networks' (<https://mcb.org.uk/purpose/>, accessed 4/7/2023). At the local level a wide range of non-Christian religious centres had developed to serve the needs of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, while a number of private educational institutions had also emerged such as madrassahs and Islamic secondary schools.

One of the ten ‘experts’ that we interviewed was an imam at the Brick Lane Mosque. The mosque represented vividly the history of immigration and cultural diversity that characterised this area of London. It was housed within a building which began life as a Christian chapel erected by French Protestant refugees who had settled in the area during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. When Polish and Russian Jews settled here during the late 19th century it served as a synagogue and Talmudic school and after the arrival of Bangladeshi migrants during the 1960s and 1970s it was turned into a mosque.

The interview was undertaken at the mosque by our Research Assistant, Shamea Mia, during December 2021. It was conducted in Bengali and then transcribed by Shamea Mia. By the time of the interview there had been two lockdowns and restrictions on social interaction but as the vaccination programme got underway during the autumn of 2021 the health crisis was starting to weaken. In the interview, therefore, the imam was invited to reflect on what had been happening locally, how the operation of the mosque had been affected and the impact on people’s religious beliefs and practices.

The mosque had conformed with government regulations and closed during the lockdowns. Reflecting on the easing of restrictions after the first lockdown, the imam explained that:

We had to manage people in a way so that they did not mix ...but thanks to the Almighty that we were able to manage it during this time ...We did not maintain a timetable during the pandemic either, so we kept the mosque open for 24 hours.

The imam and others involved in managing the mosque acted as important monitors of what was happening across the neighbourhood by checking on what may have happened to regular worshippers:

When people pray their five daily prayers, we see them five times a day but when we didn’t see people coming to the mosque who came regularly, we wondered what happened to them... this feeling of congregation in prayer is a great benefit for the community... And it was a good way of finding out information, that people will ask about you and this is how we found out about each other ... And, of course, it is the digital age, so people call each other up and tell each other about their problems ... and we also announced that if people are in difficulty, please get in touch with us ... So we tried to the best of our ability

The imam also reflected on how people had reacted to the pandemic in religious terms and the fears it had instilled in them:

As a Muslim community, we believe sometimes the Almighty tests us and we found that people were a bit more fearful now. Of course, we can’t say how long this fear of God will last but some sort of fear has been instilled that perhaps the pandemic has happened because we have sinned and this is the wrath of the Almighty. Or what will happen once we die? And this has had an effect on the community.

Like the purpose-built East London Mosque nearby, the Brick Lane Mosque was very much in the public eye and so the imam and others involved in the management of the building had to be very careful about observing state regulations. Both mosques served as more than just religious centres – as the imam himself noted, ‘the mosque is a communal meeting place as well as a place for worship.’ Other community activists were also well aware of the political effect of mosques not conforming as we have seen in the chapter on Tower Hamlets where the borough councillor, Irfan Iqbal, commented about the danger of not ‘playing the game’ and how the ‘Muslim community’ could be blamed by any large outbreak of the virus.

The impact of the 2020 lockdown on religious life

The March 2020 lockdown had an immediate impact on Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Muslim religious observance and their ritual calendars. In the case of Bangladeshi Muslims in Tower Hamlets the performance of the daily prayers at local mosques was suspended and this largely affected male worshippers since they attended mosques in much larger numbers than women. The caretaker of the Brick Lane Mosque, Asad Chowdhury, was keenly aware of the social function that the mosque served:

When you see people, it gives you a strength to live longer because that means, they can exchange views, how family are doing, sharing opinions etc... but when people are solely alone ... they beg to meet with people ... When people go to a religious place, they feel empowered

He had the difficult task of ensuring that the official regulations were observed. He had the unpopular job of standing at the entrance door, taking people’s temperatures and then stopping anyone with a high temperature attending prayers:

There were a few people who would say: ‘Let me in’ ... but I would show them their temperature and [say]: ‘You’re not allowed in ... If this happened to me, I would also not be allowed in ... Please don’t mind but please contact the doctor, who will be able to help you and it will be good for you’ ... Some people got angry but I smiled and laughed and told them as best as I could ... And there were some people who wouldn’t listen and community members came to help.

Praying in the various mosques that had sprung up in Tower Hamlets was very important for many elderly male residents as Irfan Iqbal explained::

A lot of elderly people I know want to live and remain in Tower Hamlets because they can easily access religious activities ... meaning mosque activities... including my own father ... I lost my father in 2010, but we couldn't convince him to move out of where he was living ... He was living just 100 yards from East London Mosque so you can imagine... There are people of that sort - they can afford and are able but they won't move out of the area because they are so used to and they wanted to be part of that essential [facility] ... To some, they might not regard religious activities as essential but to our elderly generation, they regard religious activities as part of their integral living or essential that they need to access and go to everyday.

The month of fasting during Ramadan and the celebration of Eid ul-Fitr at the end of Ramadan also could not be observed in the usual way. Drawing on his youth work Irfan Iqbal was particularly interested in the impact on young people:

So we went through the sort of whole Ramadan thing ... and people couldn't pray the late night prayers ... That affects [people] a lot of the time as well ... because when you're 15, 16, 17, you go to late night prayers, you do bits of it, then you go out with your friends, late night, come back to the mosque ... And it's part of growing up but you miss all of that.

Eid al-Fitr is celebrated publicly and at home and normally lasts several days:

[It] features two to three days of celebrations that include special morning prayers. People greet each other with "Eid Mubarak," meaning "Blessed Eid" and with formal embraces. Sweet dishes are prepared at home and gifts are given to children and to those in need. In addition, Muslims are encouraged to forgive and seek forgiveness.

<https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/what-is-eid-al-fitr/#:~:text=Eid%20al%2DFitr%20means%20%E2%80%9Cthe,to%20sundown%20for%20a%20month.>

Government restrictions on social interaction, such as the 'rule of six,' that followed the strict lockdown presented the local borough council with a difficult political dilemma as Irfan Iqbal noted:

I think the first time they had sort of prayers outside, people are gathering outside they just wanted to do the Eid prayers... and people were, sort of like, in a sort of gathering and saying, like: 'No [restrictions].' ... I remember I spoke to the Mayor about it ... 'So what can you do about it?' ... He was like, you know: 'What do we do?' [I said]: 'You know, if

people want to pray outside, say, you know, in a car park 50, 100 people get together ... okay, do we go there full force and stop the religious act?'

The Mayor decided that discretion was the better part of valour and chose to turn a blind eye.

5. Mortality during the pandemic - the role of the Brisk Lane Mosque

Asad Chowdury and the imam were intimately involved in maintaining the traditional funeral rituals at the mosque. Asad Chowdhury explained what happened during the worst stage of the pandemic when many people were dying:

There is still a need to look after the building and maintain it, and there are so many dead bodies coming in and people dying... lots of Bangladeshis ... They came and we read the Janazah prayers ... People came and, say, used the toilet or performed ablutions to prepare for the Janazah ... So there was a need for extra people to come and work and I sorted this all out ... There were so many... We had 8, 10, 12 bodies in one go and we had 6 to 8 bodies daily ... People washed the bodies and those who had families, the families came ... those who died from the virus. They were afraid ...and they couldn't see the body

The washing of the bodies was a gendered process:

There was a specific person who came, who is the manager and supervised everyone, so the men washed the men's bodies and the women washed the women's bodies ... After the washing, they'd be put into the morgue and the Janazah would be prayed and there would be a lot of prayers prayed and, lastly, the bodies would be taken to where they would be laid to rest.

The imam also movingly spoke about the impact on families when heads of households and other older residents died suddenly in hospital:

There were instances, as I'm sure you know, where the father passed away very suddenly and the child had never had to experience death in this way or deal with a dead body in this way. It was a first for the family ... In Bangladesh or here in normal times, when someone passes away, everyone comes to the deceased's house and comforts the family but we had a family here where the children did not know what to do because their father was the first to die in this way. He had died in the hospital and they didn't know what to do or where to go ... This is not somebody's daily routine and it was very sudden.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which religion played a crucial intermediary role for minority populations during the global health crisis as well as its socio-economic consequences. We began by focusing on political and juridical factors as these shaped the official recognition of migrants from different religious backgrounds, how migrants operated in the public sphere and how they criticised or made requests to local authorities. Hence, the ways in which religions have incorporated and re-interpreted the onset of the pandemic and the restrictions on social interaction were also influenced by the degree of political and social recognition they had acquired during their settlement in a new country.

We also explored the symbolic dimensions of the emergency guidelines since these guidelines raise an epistemological/ontological question about which types of values should be prioritised during a crisis. As we know, biomedical and economic arguments prevailed and, therefore, one of the major issues raised in this chapter was the conflict between those arguments and the religious principles avowed by these minorities. We then proceeded to explore how the minorities developed a local level perspective towards their concrete experiences at the time of the pandemic. Some of the issues we identified are transversal, while others apply specifically to either Milan or London.

In Milan, ‘religious welfarism’ was a key process, which reflected the crucial social role that Roman Catholic chaplaincies played in the life of Latin American residents beyond such pull factors as culture and language. During the crisis, these chaplaincies relaunched and redesigned their roles in order to support and foster solidarity. Internal networks were rapidly activated through the collection of funds and they have operated as a filter that linked members’ needs to other Catholic charities. For the Pentecostals, welfare provision has instead become a ‘mission’ where providing for the needy represented a key task and a sort of theological call - in terms of an eschatology of the pandemic - for identifying souls in need in Milan. Catholic and Pentecostal churches, therefore, were pivotal - especially during the first lockdown – in addressing the key weaknesses in Italian social and welfare provision. The issue of religious welfarism also appears in the London study and highlights the profound relation between religion and solidarity. In this sense, religious hubs during the pandemic compensated for the state’s limitations at the local level.

Another issue we investigated concerned people’s compliance with restrictions and here there were some differences between the Milan and London. In Milan, the Roman Catholic priest and lay leaders were conscious of the panic that could emerge during a period of great insecurity and sought to encourage calm and foster trust through their role as mediators between the congregants and the authorities. This strategy drew on the good general relationship between the Catholic Church and

public institutions in Italy. However, the work of the ethnic chaplaincies shows that this relationship should not be taken for granted since disorientation and problems were many and various and the process of encouraging compliance was not always direct and easy.

Pentecostal activists operated in a similar way with regard to civic engagement. Because their activities still lack any formal recognition by local state institutions, we interpreted Pentecostal activism as a strategy for demonstrating responsibility, capacity of self-control and, thus, their deservedness for a (possible) future recognition. As a young female leader declared: ‘we want to stay regular even if we are irregular’. However, because some members were ‘illegals’ – they did not have official documents – avoiding any involvement with the state was crucial for them. We cannot generalise from our case study for Pentecostal churches across Italy and elsewhere but it was clear that in Milan at least the pandemic created a choice – stay close to the state or stay with God.

In terms of civic engagement, both Catholic and Pentecostal minorities have promoted forms of volunteering within local neighbourhoods through micro-acts of solidarity. It is important to acknowledge these micro-acts since they came from a population that was hit hard by the pandemic and was often stigmatized as ‘scroungers’ of welfare services in populist rhetoric.

The issue of civic engagement was also a key theme in London. Although official restrictions had a major impact on the social and cultural life of local Bangladeshis, those based at local mosques sought to encourage trust in state pronouncements and regulations. Bangladeshi responses were not uniform, however, and were shaped by the ways in which people balanced the value of their customs/traditions against state restrictions. The pandemic impacted on a core part of their identity and importantly limited the series of practices that give the possibility to collectively express it. As clearly commented by our fieldwork gatekeeper: «when people go to a religious place, they feel empowered». The voices collected showed indeed the problems in trying to find accords able to meet both public and religious needs. The case of funerals can be considered a «climax» for these various civic tensions, as it concerns a key community practice. In this sense, it should be noted that it was not easy for activists and mosques responsible to be with the state and the prayer community. They also felt the risk of losing their credibility and image; in other terms, they de facto experienced the pandemic always «in-between», hovering and by filtering requests «from above and below» continuously.

As for the post-pandemic future, our research raises the question whether state institutions have learned anything from their engagement with those who represented minority religious congregations during the pandemic. Some dialogue did indeed develop at the local level but it now seems that this dialogue has taken the form of ‘failed promises’. Minorities have demonstrated, along with their ability to react, considerable flexibility when confronted with political and social

contingences but it is an open question whether state institutions can show the same flexibility and engage more closely and effectively with minorities.

7. Bibliography

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