

Religiosity and religious communities as a resource for immigrants' integration: the modernity of a classic issue

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the social functions of immigrant religious communities in the process of immigrants' integration in receiving societies. Empirical materials have been drawn from a survey of six immigrant Christian congregations (Catholic and Protestant) in Milan (Northern Italy). The main findings regard the following: the role of religions in the personal consistency of immigrants who have to handle their impact with a new society; the cultural reference to symbols, rituals and devotions of the homeland; the possibility to obtain socially rewarding roles through religious participation; the social support furnished by the 'welfare from below' informally organised in various ways by religious communities; the socializing function of Sunday meetings and other social events; the development of transnational connections with the homeland. I also highlight some possible critical aspects: sectarianism, or simply moral stiffness and cultural opposition to Western societies; low political engagement and concentration on a 'moral citizenship'; difficulties in passing the religious message to the younger generation.

The conclusions discuss three issues: the fact that integration cannot imply full assimilation, and loss of cultural heritage and identity; the development of religious pluralism in Italian society, with conflictual implications at the urban level, especially in the case of Muslim halls of prayer; the possible new role of religions in the public space driven by immigrants' religious activism.

Keywords: immigration; religion; integration; transnationalism ; cultural identity.

This chapter will discuss the role of immigrant religious communities in the process of immigrants' integration in receiving societies, highlighting their main social functions and their possible critical aspects. Empirical evidence will be drawn from a research study on six immigrant Christian congregations (Catholic and Protestant) in Milan (Northern Italy). The conclusions will open a window on a possible new role of religions in contemporary Western societies.

1. From the history of migration to present times, from the USA to Europe: the role of religions

Some years ago, Hagan and Ebaugh (2003) formulated the following observation on Northern American migration studies: despite the diversity and the importance of beliefs and religious practices among immigrants, scholars of immigration and religion have neglected the role of religion and spirituality in international migration processes. Explanations focusing on the economic reasons for migration have left aside the cultural contexts where the migratory choices are taken and pursued.

Among the latter are the spiritual resources that religions provide at the moment of the decision to migrate, and their derived psychological effects on the migrants' resilience to hardships.

Moreover, I would say that, besides spiritual resources, the religious institutions have provided migrants with (i) material resources in the form of assistance and support in coping with the difficulties of the settlement process, and (ii) social resources (acting as catalysts and often as promoters) of relational networks based on a double belonging both confessional and ethnic (Hirschman 2004). Today, the Catholic Church and other religions are actively involved in the protection of irregular immigrants and in campaigns for legalization (Hagan 2008; Itçaina 2006; Ambrosini 2015).

Therefore their role has been important in two respects: the preservation, or rather the rebuilding, of a cultural identity; and inclusion in a new context (Warner and Wittner 1998). Instead of confronting each other, these two aspects have become intertwined: the resources provided by religious belonging have enabled many immigrants to become citizens of the new society where they have chosen to seek a better life.

As Thomas and Znaniecki remarked (1918-20) in their study on Polish immigration during the first years of the last century, churches and organizations with a religious basis (educational, mutualistic, recreational, etc.) formed, for several waves of new immigrants, a sort of compensation chamber which enabled immigrants to adapt to the new life context without the loss of their identity roots and the social networks of their fellow countrypeople. Maybe even more than Thomas and Znaniecki thought, this role proved to be long-lasting and able to pass from one generation to another.

We can grasp the different roles played by religions (and their institutions) in the immigrant integration process by envisaging a dialectical relationship with the political institutions and the attitudes of the receiving societies (Portes and DeWind 2004). First, the religious institutions can help migrants when they prepare for their departure. Then they can give spiritual support so that the migrants can cope with the dangers and hardships of their journey, and they can establish connections with religious hubs in transit and receiving countries (Hagan and Ebaugh 2003).

After the migrants' arrival, the religious institutions can facilitate their settlement: on a cultural level by opposing xenophobic attitudes; on a political level by encouraging policies of inclusion; on a social level by providing services to people in need, in particular the most vulnerable among them.

When the immigrants begin to organize themselves independently, the religious institutions that they promote or manage become the cornerstones of the defense of their cultural heritage, and of the reworking of a significant, consciously accepted identity where imported and modified elements merge with new ones learnt from the receiving societies. Hence, religious institutions support the processes of "selective acculturation" (Portes and Rumbaut 2001) which mediate between original contexts and receiving societies. They also seek to support the family's education and prevent the second generation from entering spirals of social exclusion.

Selective acculturation is closely connected with the establishment of religious institutions which keep the language and the memory of the homeland alive. The functions of cultural identity building, socialization, and mutual assistance are strengthened by the possibility of meeting communities of fellow countrypeople.

In the Northern American case, this happened historically among the Italian migrants also as a reaction against a local ecclesiastical institution dominated by the component of Irish descent: by establishing 'national', more than territorial, parishes, the Catholic Church made it possible to

preserve the mother tongue and national pride: in 1916, almost half of the Northern American Catholics attended churches where the language used in sermons was not English (Vecoli 1969). Against the pressures of the American Church for a forced Americanization, which in fact meant subordination to the Irish religious praxis and ecclesiastic hierarchy (“Catholicism of another race” as an Italian priest said at the time), the Italian missionaries’ pastoral activity sought to achieve integration into the new society without accepting the removal (or even the shame) of their own roots. In that historical experience, tension between Catholic belonging and participation in the local Church was already visible: the immigrants preferred to frequent their own communities led by clergymen from the homeland. In post-war Europe, Catholic immigrants followed the same pattern: if possible, they attended churches on a national basis.

Finally, a dimension of the religious phenomenon underlined especially by Levitt (2003) regards the construction and fueling of transnational ties, which for immigrants are first and foremost connections with their homeland: a fact that puts the issue of religious practices at the centre of the debate on transnationalism. In this regard, the Catholic Church has represented a prototype with its combination of centralization and ramifications into local contexts, with the activity of its missionary congregations, and with the organization of the pastoral of migrants.

Today, these ties spread and intensify in several ways, in different institutions and religious denominations. The foundation of ‘affiliated’ religious centers; participation in transnational religious movements working as ‘membership cards’ to be recognized and welcomed also abroad; visits by spiritual leaders from the homeland, and requests for new ministers to give pastoral assistance to migrants; organization of collections and the sending of aid to the religious communities of origin (what Garbin (2019) has called “spiritual remittances”); pilgrimages to holy places abroad: these are some examples of the transnational ties established by the religions in the migrants’ experience, and by Catholicism for many decades. I shall now analyze how these aspects function in the case of Italy as a receiving country.

2. The research study: Christian immigrant communities in Milan

The study reported in what follows was conducted together with Paola Bonizzoni and Samuele Davide Molli, between May 2016 and 2018, as part of more extensive research on immigrants’ religious pluralism in Italy¹. It analysed six immigrant Churches located in Milan: three of them were Protestant and three Catholic.

The three Protestant Churches (one Baptist and two Pentecostal) were characterized by a marked and prevalent ethno-national connotation; specifically, South Koreans, Latin Americans (mainly Peruvians and Ecuadorians) and Eastern Europeans (mainly Ukrainians) coming from the former Soviet Union. As regards Catholic communities, the first was only attended by immigrants from Salvador, the second by Latin American immigrants of various national origins (especially by Ecuadorians and Peruvians). The third case instead had long been a point of reference for the Milanese

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Filipino community. The cases well represent the pluralisation process that is taking place within the main Christian denominations.

In each context, a series of ethnographic observations were carried out. Furthermore, the ministers of worship, the main referents as well as some believers were interviewed, for a total of 40 semi-structured and recorded interviews, to which should be added several unregistered conversations that occurred during these observations. We collected data on the history of the Churches, the structuring of worship activities and any other parallel activities (both ordinary and extraordinary), and we mapped the internal organization chart (e.g. the responsible of specific activities and functions, the number and the aims of any sub-groups), the possible relationships and collaborations with other institutions and organizations on the territory (both religious and non) (Ambrosini, Bonizzoni and Molli 2021).

We analysed the prevalent socio-demographic profile and number of believers, the main needs and reasons that had induced them to discover, choose and attend the Church. Finally, we carried out repeated conversations with relevant experts from the local Catholic and Protestant denominations. These were very important to contextualise the data collected in a wider framework.

3. Research findings. Explicit and implicit functions of religious participation

A first relevant aspect concerns the establishment of places of worship in the city of Milan. Here we detected marked differences among Christian denominations. Catholic immigrant communities can demand from the local Catholic authorities a place to gather, and they can receive three answers: obtain a church in the city center allocated to them (this is the case of Latin-Americans who attend the church of Santo Stefano); share a church with native churchgoers, organizing their own activities in distinct moments, according to a pattern which can be called ‘church sharing’ (this is the case of Filipino communities); be hosted in a chapel in the city outskirts (this is the case of the Salvadorian community). In all three cases, their spiritual and pastoral needs are addressed by the mainstream religious institutions. In the first two cases, they give new life to spaces of the city center which were almost deserted on Sunday, and to old churches which were closed or underattended. By the way, also Christian Orthodox congregations receive the same hospitality and play a similar urban role.

Protestant immigrants can be hosted by established Protestant communities if they belong to the historical Protestant denominations. This is not the case of new Evangelical congregations, which have to establish their worship places with their own resources. They gather at the beginning at the pastor’s home, and the initial community often consists of the pastor’s family. When the community grows, it has to search for a larger community hall, usually an old storehouse in a popular district of the city. To cope with economic difficulties, they sometimes share the space with another religious congregation. Here these small communities become an element of social dynamism and cultural pluralism in urban peripheries. As a consequence, Christian denominations build a different relation with the urban space.

Gathering places related to religious practice perform a social role in several respects: as a source of support and personal identification (i.e. as places performative of their faith and belonging, as well as a form of continuity with their past life), as a framework for meeting and socializing, especially on special occasions (patriotic festivals and the like), and as places for recognition and public participation.

I will now detail these social roles of religious communities and gathering places.

Firstly, on the personal level, religious attendance is an element of personal consistency for an immigrant. Having left a context which was well known and familiar to her/him, and in which social relations gave guidance for her/his conduct, orienting her/his vision of the world and everyday behaviour, an emigrant is induced to search for new points of reference and reasons for personal stability. Religious identity gives continuity with the past, with familiar tradition and the homeland (Roldán 2019).

The same confusion in face of unknown societies – in some respects incomprehensible and even hostile, more inclined towards individualism and agnosticism – may push immigrants to find in religious identity an element of pride and resistance to rootlessness. This occurs also as a reaction against the many difficulties of social integration in the new society.

The idea of emigration as a theologizing experience remains valid, as Smith (1978) observed many years ago; maybe even more so in the secularized and culturally distant contexts of present-day Western societies. Emigration induces people to ask many questions about themselves, their identity, their place in the world, and the truth of beliefs in which they have been educated. For this reason, not rarely immigrants state that they have become more religious abroad than in their homeland, where religious belonging and related practices were guided by custom and influenced by the surrounding social context (Kurien 2002).

Furthermore, religious attendance can assume another significant meaning for the people involved: it enables many of them to obtain social roles of some importance and visibility in their community, and even leadership positions. Religious attendance can be particularly interesting for such people, because these roles are normally denied to immigrants in the labour market and in their social lives in hosting societies.

Workers who experience subordination during the working week find in the community gathering for worship and related activities a place in which they can express their personalities and receive public recognition: according to the religious tradition, they can become cantors of the choir, teachers of catechism, lectors, mentors of groups, administrators responsible for the collection of donations, the Sunday lunch, or other services. As a Catholic priest put it, “during the weekend, it is as if they are resuscitated”.

This implicit function of religious participation is one of the reasons for the reluctance of immigrants to merge with the religious institutions of the majority, even when they share the same religious belief, as in the case of Catholic immigrants in Italy. Immigrant believers would rather be active members and leaders in their communities than passive and voiceless followers in a wider religious institution. A cultural dimension should be added to the subjective reasons for participation: in religious practice, immigrants recover symbols, rituals, language familiar to them. They recognise in these aspects a meaning which supports their life, often troubled, in the new society. By recalling the past, religious experience supports the present time and fosters hope in the future.

However, religious participation abroad is not simply a mechanical reproduction of religious practices experienced in the homeland. Actually, not only do religious teachings have to confront challenges raised by a new cultural backdrop; also times and places of worship, liturgical rituals, relations between ministers and believers, and the contents of religious discourses are subject in various ways to adaptations to the receiving society and its forms of management of the relationship with the sacred.

For this reason, the form taken by immigrants' religious institutions can diverge, even if not explicitly, from what is observable in their countries of origin. For instance, in immigrant Catholic communities, lay people, and especially women, have more space and responsibilities than they would usually have in their homeland. In Milan, the Salvadorian community was established and is managed by a woman. In Filipino congregations, women perform most leadership roles.

As these examples show, religion is not only a private experience. It also has a communitarian and then social dimension. For immigrants it has greater significance than for common local believers. In many cases, religious communities also have ethnic, national, and linguistic features. For people living abroad alone, the community can become a substitute for their family. For those who have formed or reunited their family in the new society, it is a resource with which to strengthen its cohesion. It is a place in which immigrants can gather with other people whom they recognize as similar to them, sharing a common homeland, a memory, a social experience. They can exchange news (and rumours) about what is happening in the homeland. They can celebrate festivities and anniversaries that are not only religious but also related to the history and culture of their country.

The religious dimension then blends with other elements related to cultural identity, concurring to strengthen the meaning of belonging. The possibility to meet compatriots, to reinforce social bonds based on common origin, to claim and update a cultural identity, is a remarkable incentive to join religious communities. In turn, because communities are often organized on national lines, they do not disdain to exhibit flags and national symbols, or to celebrate civil festivities of the country of origin of the participants.

As in the past, Italian missionaries at the service of Italian emigrants guided them to discover their national identity and to live it with pride, also today religious communities are typical places in which there develops a social life based not only on religious belonging but also on national and linguistic features.

The reinforcement of personal consistency and the claim of a positive cultural identity are often strengthened by religious leaders' teachings, coupled with communitarian social control.

Immigrant religious communities, and especially Evangelical protestant communities, adopt a rigorist moral stance which informs discourses and activities. As Scrinzi (2016) observed when studying Pentecostal Latin-American immigrants, through adopting a rigorous pattern of personal morality, believers construct a line of defence against stereotypes targeting them: the young men as members of street gangs; the adult men as violent, drunk and unfaithful; the women as 'bad mothers'. Men are encouraged to take care of their children, to spend free time with their family, to share domestic tasks with their wives. Women are educated to adopt modest and traditional patterns of womanliness. For young people, rigorist teachings translate into instilling a way of life distant from that of street gangs. For everybody, it becomes a way to distance oneself from the moral decay of Western societies.

Another crucial function of immigrant religious communities derives from the principle of solidarity: the development of forms of mutual aid and support to fellow country-people in difficult circumstances. Despite their economic poverty, immigrant religious communities develop forms of informal welfare to tackle various needs of their members. This activity can be called 'welfare from below' (Molli 2020). Voluntary solidarity in religious congregations of the mainstream society is usually based on asymmetrical social relations: volunteers and donors, belonging mainly to the middle class, help people belonging to lower social strata. In the case of immigrant religious communities, social distance is much smaller, or non-existent: help is given and received according

to a principle of reciprocity, implicitly asserting that in other circumstances the roles could be reversed.

Our research identified basic forms of help, like the distribution of food and drugs, but also support in the search for employment, especially in domestic services. Native employers often contact religious communities to find honest and reliable domestic helpers, and care-workers at the service of their seniors. Another interesting form of support is the organization of informal kindergartens, so that mothers of babies can keep their jobs when they do not find a place for their children in public nursery schools. In this way, they also provide rewards to the unemployed women who take care of these children. Filipino communities are particularly active in this field. They have invented another informal Keynesian policy: they entrust unemployed members with some community services, such as preparing the Sunday lunch, or cleaning the communitarian hall, rewarding them with the money collected at the celebrations. In this way, they avoid the shame of demanding and receiving a handout. This aspect implies two observations. The first concerns the link between religious engagement and volunteering. Also for immigrants, religious preaching, socialization, examples of solidarity given by religious institutions favour a propensity for unselfish service within, but also beyond, community boundaries (Handy and Greenspan, 2009). Second, grouping around places of worship, especially if based on principles of solidarity with and care for neighbours, yields social capital. This social capital, even if it is mainly ‘bonding’, i.e. referred to members of the community, favours the spread of information, support in critical events (e.g. loss of employment), and linkage with other institutions and services.

In our study we also found several examples of transnational connections: collection of money to support fellow country-people in need, social institutions, churches in the homeland, and also in Africa (this is the case of the Korean evangelical church); circulation of messages and sermons by religious leaders, which are also favoured by IT technologies; more traditional pilgrimages to holy places. In transnational social fields, processes of de-territorialization, trans-territorialization, and re-territorialization of popular devotions, symbols, rituals, holy images occur. They are imported and adapted to the new context (Roldán 2019). This is the case, also in Milan, of the cult of the Lord of Miracles, introduced by the Peruvian community.

4. Shadow zones: some problematic aspects

Immigrant religious gatherings also have some shadow zones, or trends which could become problematic in the future. The first and most evident of them is social closure, whose extreme outcome is sectarianism. Every social group developing strong internal cohesion tends to establish clear boundaries between itself and the external environment. Searching for grouping with people who share similar features, immigrants communities tend to separate from other religious communities, along not only linguistic lines, but also ethno-national lines. In Milan, the Salvadorian community is distinct from the bigger Latin-American community. If religious belonging implies strong values and moral inflexibility – in opposition to the dominant corruption perceived all around – a Manichean opposition between a community of pure believers and an external world beset by sin may become a tangible risk.

The second problem regards political participation and forms of citizenship. In other countries some studies have highlighted how several religious communities promote civic engagement and

participation in the public sphere (Levitt 2004), and especially mobilization against unfair immigration policies (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007). By contrast, the communities that we studied appeared rather reluctant to take a political position and to urge believers to actively take part in political life. They appear more similar to the Pentecostal community that Guzman Garcia (2018) analysed in the USA: a community which tries to shape a “spiritual citizenship” by encouraging immigrant members to become “less deportable” through irreprehensible behaviour. At the same time, citizenship is reframed as individual responsibility, economic independence, and “good moral character”. According to Guzman Garcia, religious organizations expect immigrants to match the mainstream conception of ‘deservingness’, as it is defined by a neo-liberal political framework. In this conception, the necessary, even if not sufficient, condition for accessing citizenship (I would add: some form of social recognition) is the demonstration of being irreproachable, responsible and economically self-sufficient.

Immigrant religious communities, in our study, through their moral stiffness, try especially to shape honest and hard-working individuals, and thus more respected and respectable ones. For this reason, they hope to achieve social acceptance and some form of recognition, overcoming stigmatization and exclusion. Their leaders would probably not share the critical conception of “deservingness” that Guzman Garcia has depicted.

Attention should also be paid to acquisition of what Handy and Greenspan (2009) have termed “civic skills”: the ability to organize public events, to conduct meetings, to talk in public. The history of immigration shows that skills developed within religious communities can at some point flow outside them and translate into resources for social and political participation.

The third problem relates to second generations and to the evolution of immigrant religious communities over time. Our study met young people who took part in community life, and families who were happy to share with their children meanings, appointments and social meetings. Parents showed satisfaction in seeing their children protected against the bad influence of hedonistic and secularized Western societies, and also of co-ethnic street gangs.

But our study has analysed this issue from within, studying young people who belong to religious communities. If the analysis takes the general issue of second generations into consideration, the picture becomes more diversified and problematic (Ricucci 2017). For young people born in Italy, or who have arrived in childhood, and have been educated and socialized in Italian schools, who speak Italian fluently, gathering in communities in which people speak the ancestral language, and symbols, rituals and festivities recall a distant family homeland, is not always a comforting experience. Obviously, also Italian fellows often distant from religious practice exert some influence. If emotional attachment to the family and cultural belonging can keep participation alive, one can ask whether these elements will last over time. As found by other studies conducted in countries with a longer history of immigration, immigrants’ religions have to face several challenges: demographic evolution of their population, formation of mixed couples, linguistic shift of new generations towards the local language, entrance of converted people belonging to the majority. Immigrants’ religious communities are usually a resource for the first generation, but it cannot be taken for granted that they will keep this role for the following generations.

5. Conclusions. A new role for religions in multicultural societies

Three main conclusions descend from the above-described study.

The first conclusion regards the diverse paths towards integration in receiving societies. Differently from old assimilation patterns, and from new secularist visions, immigrants' integration does not imply the desertion of cultural traditions and religious belongings. Religious communities can mitigate loneliness and cultural alienation by helping immigrants to establish social bonds, find meanings, and obtain resources which support their daily lives in a new society. They offer rewarding roles to engaged participants, who can acquire compensation for the weak recognition that they receive in the labour market. At the same time, moral stiffness fosters improvement of immigrants' representation by the majority.

The second observation highlights the development of religious pluralism in Italian society. It is no longer possible to conceive Italian society as mono-religious, and to identify 'religion' with the Roman Catholic Church. This cultural change has been mainly produced by immigrants' religious activism. The process is particularly visible in cities, where immigrants' religious communities reshape some districts, giving new inputs to declining neighbourhoods and historic centres. This does not occur without political conflicts and social resistance, especially in the case of Muslim halls of worship. Immigrants' religions find uneven acceptance in Italian cities. Islam is a crucial issue in the clash of civilizations discourse. But also other immigrants' religions are affected.

A third point concerns the return of religions to the public space driven by immigrants' religions and by the need to favour intercultural dialogue and cooperation. Religions, often in cooperation with national and local public institutions, can build common initiatives for peace, human rights, environmental engagement, and the socio-economic development of third countries. The trend towards the privatization and loss of public relevance of religions is challenged. Immigrants can support a new public role of religions in multicultural societies.

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