

Young immigrants and religion in Italy. New identities, old stereotypes, an educational challenge

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Abstract

Migration and multiculturalism are key factors of social change in Italy. The increased number of adolescents and young people belonging to the second generation of immigrants is one of the most important issues. In the context of a globalised, complex and fluid society, the presence of second generation migrants, most of whom were born in Italy, has accelerated the crisis in the concept of Italian identity – understood to be traditionally formed from the unity of religion, language, race and territorial belonging. Religion is part of young immigrants' cultures, values and ways of life. Generally more secularized than their parents, sometimes attracted to extremisms, boys and girls have to negotiate their different religious attitudes in the private and social contexts. At the same time, and particularly for Muslims, they have to face the effects of stereotypes, prejudices and discriminations. Given this scenario, educational agencies are called to play a leading role to disseminate knowledge on the many religions, to deconstruct prejudices and to promote dialogue and inter-religious activism.

Keywords: second generation immigrants, Italy, religious pluralism, inter-religious dialogue

Religious pluralism in Italy

According to Caritas Migrantes (2012), 5.011.000 foreign citizens are living regularly in Italy¹, with impact on the resident population equal to 8.2%². Nowadays Italy is a country consisting of people of 195 different nationalities coexisting

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and speaking a multitude of languages and dialects. Similarly, the increasing globalisation of migration flows has brought a significant number of Muslims, Evangelicals, Orthodox, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, and adherents of traditional religions (animism, etc.), further subdivided into multiple communities and denominations.

In an interconnected world, where population mobility is intense and the communication systems are incredibly fast, religions are being brought together by the movements of people. Moving in the world, religions change, and some of them – once considered distant – are living together in the same society, with a proximity probably unexpected and unimaginable until a few decades ago. Within the last twenty years, Italy's social and religious map has gradually changed and Italian society is becoming increasingly multi-religious (Pace, 2011). Religions are now “one internal to another” (Colzani, 2010), subjected to the processes of hybridization, contamination, *métissage*.

According to Caritas-Migrantes (2012), the majority (53,9%) of the five million (plus) migrants in Italy are: Christians (29,6% Eastern Orthodox³; 19,2% Catholics⁴; 4,4% Protestants⁵; 0,7% Other Christians); Muslims⁶ (32,9%); Eastern religious traditions (2,6% Hindus; 1,9% Buddhists; 1,4% other Eastern religions); “Traditional” religions (1,0%) and, finally, Jewish (0,1%). Atheists and agnostics account for 4,3%.

The level of religiosity of ethnic minorities is particularly high: nearly 73% of immigrants profess to be religious, compared to 50% of Italians (Garelli, 2011).

In Italy as in other countries of Western Europe, migration and globalization have resulted in the return of the sacred dimension. The 1960s and 1970s are behind, decades in which John Lennon dreamed and sang of a world with no religions, while the most credited sociological theories foregrounded secularization as the most likely destiny of Western society (Acquaviva, 1961), based on the lower incidence of Christianity on society, on politics and on everyday life, and on the lack of knowledge about the other religions. The theory of secularization incorporated at least three different dimensions: the decline of religion *tout court*, the increasingly sharp distinction between the sphere of the sacred and the sphere of the profane, and the privatization of the relationship with God (Salvarani, 2012).

The current “revenge of God” (Kepel, 1991), characterized by a growing religious pluralism, is due to the overturning of European Christianity's hegemony. In Italy and in Europe the highest religious institutions are more vulnerable, while the absoluteness of the Christian message is questioned by the plurality of possible choices that Italians and other Europeans face (Schillebeeckx, 1989). God is not dead, but has reappeared, conjugated in the plural, in the mosaic of faiths that day after day is becoming increasingly complex (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2009), to

help humankind to deal with the confusion and loneliness of modern life (Bauman, 2000).

The plurality of religions offered by the nowadays liquid (Bauman 2000, 1998) and post-secular society makes the religious choice less binding than before: just as work, family, love, home, even religious membership no longer appear stable, but fluctuating, changeable, open, personalized, and individualized (Jenkins, 2007, 2006).

The number of people engaged in “believing without belonging” (Davie, 1994), away from institutions and traditional religious groups, not present in places of worship during the rites, but often part of small groups and communities based on social, cultural and spiritual affinity, is growing. In global religions, in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, new models are adding to the model of the practicing believer: the model of the converted, who discovers, recognizes or changes the religious affiliation, and the Pilgrim, whose religious practice is no longer mandatory, or regulated by the institution, communitarian, fixed, territorialised and repeated, but is instead voluntary, autonomous, adaptable, individual, mobile, and exceptional (Hervieu-Léger, 1999).

More than forty years ago, René Girard (1972) exhorted us to consider the sacred dimension within a cosmopolitan constellation. Now that the sacred has become a plural and individual experience, it leads us to the development of at least three positions: fundamentalism, postmodern religiosity, and cosmopolitan religiosity. While fundamentalism claims to be the one true religious narrative, the postmodern religions prefer to abandon the role of an unconditioned truth’s mouthpiece and recognize the position of the other different faiths.

The cosmopolitan religiosity wants to promote the hybrid character of the sacred and the ability to see the world from the point of view of the other, without denying the personal spiritual membership (Audinet, 1999). It is a new approach that is highly pertinent to the main protagonists of the present and future changes: the boys and the girls of the so-called “second generation” of immigrants.

The “second generation” immigrants

Up to what length is a skirt permitted? Below the knee? And a little above? Can the vinegar be used to flavor foods? Cakes and snacks with a low percentage of alcohol? Can I eat them? And what about lard in certain types of bread? Does it send you straight to hell? To list only some of the more mundane dilemmas. And is it credible that all these problems are raised by a little “Milanese” girl? Is she a true Muslim? Who can decide it? Is there a license, a certificate? If yes, let me

know. It continues to rain outside, and the chaos does not seem to stop inside me. (Ghazy, 2007)⁷

Jasmine is the alter ego of the writer Randa Ghazy. She was born and has grown up in Milan with her Egyptian parents. Now she is twenty-one years old and attends university. She wears the veil and her identity is stressed by the fight between (at least) two cultures, two lifestyles, two worlds. Every day she has to match the expectations of parents and of friends and has to face the prejudices of strangers. Every small gesture – wearing a skirt, eating a snack, talking with a young man – causes inner dilemma and flows into the great chaos of her heart.

The number of foreign minors living in Italy has increased from 284.224 in January 2002 to 993.238 in January 2011. 755.939 students with non-Italian citizenship had been enrolled in the Italian school system in 2011/12, equal to 9% of the total of the students. Almost half of them (44%) are born in Italy. In the school year 1996/97, they did not exceed 59.389 (0,7%) (Ministry of Education, University and Research, Statistical Service, 2012).

The definition “second generation immigrants”, used by the scientific community, is open to critique and to inflated or narrow interpretations (Filippini, Genovese, & Zannoni, 2010). We adopt the definition proposed by Maurizio Ambrosini (2005): in the Italian context, all children of at least one immigrant parent, born in Italy or abroad, belong to the “second generation immigrants”, and therefore consist of:

- Children born in Italy from foreign parents;
- Minors arrived after birth for family reunification;
- Minors arrived alone;
- Refugee children;
- Children arrived for adoption;
- Children born in Italy from an Italian parent and a foreigner.

Although they have different origins, cultures, personal histories, migration experiences, and places of birth, these boys and girls have life styles, behavioral patterns, expectations and aspirations similar to those of their indigenous peers. Unlike their parents, they imagine and plan their future in Italy. They do not dream of a return to the country of origin, they do not accept a subordinate integration (Ambrosini, 2005), they perceive themselves not only as workers, but also as citizens, and demand equal rights. They strive to secure more prestigious and lucrative occupations than those of their parents, and they put a lot of effort into studying, not always attaining satisfactory results⁸ (Queirolo Palmas, 2006).

They build friendships and love affairs with Italian or foreign peers, while their relations with relatives and friends who have remained in the countries of origin

are often reduced to virtual contact. Poised between two cultures that are often dissonant, they have to face small and large conflicts and misunderstandings, outside and inside their houses each day. They experience and process personal forms of mixed memberships to find answers in their search for identity. Once they have reached the right age, they (increasingly) marry Italian people and in some cases, a few years later, they divorce.⁹

Sociological literature positions the religious attitude of young second generation immigrants between the opposite poles of assimilation and the radicalisation of religious identity. According to the thesis of religious assimilation (Tribalat, 1995; Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001), there is a decline in religious practice from the first to the second generation of immigrants, corresponding with progressive socio-economic integration in society. Generally the process is not absolute and total, but the detachment is accompanied by a form of emotional identification with the religion (Hargreaves, 1995). Despite the abandonment of religious practices, such as prayer and attendance at rituals, some religious/cultural practices, such as Ramadan for Muslims, continue to be celebrated as markers of some attachment to roots and to the parents.

By contrast, according to the thesis of the radicalisation of religious identity (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), discrimination, socio-economic marginalization and hostility may lead to radical religious choices that become defensive tools and help to strengthen the internal cohesion of minority groups. The rise of radical Islam in Europe, especially after the recent incidences of international terrorism, confirms the presence of a minority that follows this model of reactive religiosity, alongside the majority who tend move towards religious assimilation.

The different approaches to the sacred

The embraced faith, the socio-cultural context, the family background, the gender, the education level, the social and parental networks, the friendships, and the age of arrival in Italy are all important elements that influence religious attitudes. The levels of religiosity in the countries of origin vary in the frequency and intensity of religious practices, just as they will vary from country to country, and from region to region.

Through the narratives of some boys and girls belonging to the second generation and attending upper secondary schools in the cities of Reggio Emilia and Ferrara, it is possible to contextualize the theoretical framework just presented in the concrete reality of the current North-Central Italy and enrich the analysis with new nuances and new elements. In the following paragraphs we present some findings

from a qualitative research project that engaged in in-depth interviews with 13 boys and 18 girls aged between 14 and 22 years old.¹⁰ They were born in Italy or they arrived at a later stage.¹¹ They came from different cultural backgrounds and ethnic origins.¹² Each interview, lasting between twenty and thirty minutes, was carried out at the school buildings, in a small room that contained the interviewer and the interviewee, and was developed following an outline of semi-structured questions that included the following issues: the personal religious habits and the level of importance assigned to the faith; the religiosity of the parents; the opinions about how their religion is considered in Italy; the opinions on religious conflicts in everyday life and on a large scale; the opinions on the religiosity of the Italians.

All the respondents claim to have reflected on the role that their religious affiliation has had in the integration process. Christians, especially the Catholics, consider it a positive thing; it helped them. They believe, however, that Muslims have had to face more difficulties and problems.

“Being Catholic has helped me a lot.” (C., Filipino parents)¹³

Many boys and girls consider it regrettable the way in which their Italian peers live their religion: in their opinion, their Italian peers do not go to Mass and blaspheme, wear inappropriate clothes in holy places and do not really care about religion.

“I think it is a fake religiousness. In times when it is not needed everybody is Catholic, but when really there is the need to be religious, to defend the own religion, nobody is. It’s a bit nonsensical, religion comes out only when there is a personal interest, not for faith.” (C., Moldovan parents)

The second generation boys and girls come from different countries and grow up in families with a specific religious heritage, but social pressures (such as the peers’ attitudes and behaviours, the messages and the values shared by the mass media, the globalised way of living, the specificity of the different contexts, etc.) prompt them to progressively question and change their beliefs, strengthening them or weakening them, even to the point of denial. In this way we recognize:

- the boys and the girls devoted to their own belief, members of religious groups and publicly recognised associations, which are open to dialogue;
- the minorities that radicalize their religious belonging, to react to failures and to express discontent;

- the boys and the girls that embrace a religion in a bland – rather nominal than actual – way, focusing more on the cultural aspects and on the identification, rather than on the daily or weekly devotional practice;
- the proponents of a personal approach to the sacred, which can transcend the single religions or which can combine them in new ways;
- the uninterested and the agnostics;
- the atheists, those who knowingly deny any religious membership, sometimes heavily disapproving of the existence and the function of the religions in the world.

The observants

The non-profit association for the promotion of youth, *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia*¹⁴ (GMI) was founded in September 2001 by a group of young Muslims. Autonomous and independent, it is composed of a General Assembly, an Executive Board and local sections spread throughout Italy. The Association is open to all young Muslims aged between 14 and 30 years old, united by faith and by the feelings of pride in being Italian citizens.¹⁵ Its objectives are the diffusion of the Islamic culture, to be a point of encounter and of life, to promote responsible citizenship, to support young people in education and to get them to act positively in the Association, in the community and in society.

The members of the GMI interviewed for this research wanted to emphasize the freedom with which they have chosen to be Muslims and the importance of their peer movement which, even in religious behavior, differentiates them from their parents. S. is one of them:

“I am a Muslim because I am convinced of being Muslim, not because my parents are Muslims and I have grown up together with Muslims. I am proud to be Muslim. Religion is a door that allows you to know the others, it is very important. The Qur’an is the guide of every Muslim. In the Qur’an you can find everything, even the slightest thing of life: how you have to dress, how you have to behave with the others, how to be faithful.” (S., Moroccan parents)

In our multicultural cities, youth associations, churches, mosques, temples and synagogues are entities which, through the religious dimension, encourage community aggregation, catalyze the solidarity networks, offer help and support, maintain ties with the communities in the countries of the origins, build relationship

with associative and institutional realities, and accompany people in the difficult path of integration.

“Religion is very important. I’m very Catholic, very practicing. I am also a member of the choir of my parish, San Lorenzo, where there are Catholic immigrants, mostly Ghanaians, with whom I usually have a wonderful time.” (A., Ghanaian parents)

When based on solid foundations, religious identity safeguards important linguistic and cultural elements of the parents’ heritage, strengthening community cohesion and openness to dialogue. To suggest a historical parallel, in the United States by the early 20th century religious identification offered internal cohesion and social status to the groups of Catholic immigrants grappling with the difficulties in adapting to the new living environment. The Church was the first line of defense behind which these immigrants could organize themselves and preserve their group identity (Warner & Srole, 1945).

The radicals

None of the boys and girls admitted to religiously radical behaviour. Many recognize that Muslim people may be more predisposed to this form of behaviour, but only a Moroccan boy, N., confessed his radical views that have not yet translated into concrete actions. His beliefs are the consequence of a difficult integration and of some episodes of racism:

“You don’t understand us, in Morocco we understand each other better. In Morocco we do the same things as here, but more freely. Italy is a racist country, some people chase us to tell us “shitty nigger!”. If I am a nigger, I accept it, I like to be a nigger.”

It is an easy move from racism to the contrast between the Western world and the Arab world, especially when it is characterized by the dramatic events that characterize our time:

“People are dying in Palestine, there are children who have no parents, who die on the street, in the Middle East the Palestinian blood flows like rivers. America gives arms to Israel to kill Palestinian children. The Taliban are our army, they defend us. The Italians are deployed in the American side. Come to my house and on

Al Jazeera I'll show you what is happening. Italian people don't give a damn about what is happening, they think just for themselves.”

N. has firmly decided to align himself with the world of his roots, rejecting the world which dismisses him and discriminates against him:

“I feel Arab. I want to become Arab, because Arab is a pure and warm-blooded race. I mean that we are warriors. Real men are Arabs, real men are Palestinians, Palestinians and the Taliban, that bring the bombs and explode dragging behind the enemy, because they want a better future for our children, they don't want our children to be ruled by a single country. Which is this country? The United States! I imagine an entirely free future, I want that we respect each other, because now we're like dogs, we are stepped on, we are shot. The Taliban are the real men: God bless and welcome in his Paradise who has knocked down the Twin Towers! The real Arab must have a palm of beard and his wife must be covered. The real Arab, when he is attacked, he takes a rifle and fights. I'm becoming Arab. I burst with rage for what is happening in the Middle East, my blood burns with anger.”

For those who feel lonely, lost, misunderstood and mistreated, the religious belonging – often intertwined with ethnic-cultural belonging – can become an illusory environment that ensures protection and unity, to erect a kind of “barrier around the many bloody souls” (Djouder, 2006). In some situations, the display of a religious belonging and the isolation in a self-identity dimension represents a way to react to the humiliation suffered by the parents. Deprived of strong father figures, the boys and the girls seek self-confidence, created in religious radicalization, that is a form of paternal replacement, a simplified, idealized and reassuring antecedent (Moro, 2002): religious membership no longer represents a starting point to promote dialogue, but becomes the numbing result of a failed integration.

The secularised

A. was born and has been brought up in Italy by Moroccan parents. He was circumcised, but he doesn't approve of this practice, nor does he approve of women who wear the veil. He doesn't pray:

“It is too hard for me. Muslims must pray five or six times a day, I have never prayed in my life.”

Despite his ideas, he doesn't drink alcohol and doesn't eat pork, he doesn't blaspheme and observes Ramadan. He considers religion to be important, firstly as a sign of closeness and respect for his parents, with whom he has a very good relationship.

K. arrived from Morocco when he was a baby. He defines himself a Muslim "believer" because he observes the familial and cultural traditions of his country of birth, but not "practicing" in the sense of the devotion and the accuracy that is required by Islam:

"Religion is very important, but I am not very practitioner. I never pray, but I believe in religion, since I was born I have been believing. I don't pray because I should pray five or six times a day, I'm not the most appropriate person and I think it's not correct if I start and then I stop. Religion has to be lived seriously, it is better not to play with religion."

The Moroccan parents of M. are very devoted to Islam; they have already made the pilgrimage to Mecca and for a long time, when M. and her sisters were younger, they attempted to involve them in the religious dimension, but in the end they gave up. M. doesn't pray, doesn't wear the headscarf, but observes Ramadan:

"I observe Ramadan because I really like it, I like to see the family gathered together to eat after the fasting, it's nice, I like it."

Once again, in parallel to the rejection of the devotional practice, the participation in rituals and customs, stripped of their sacred meaning, assumes importance in terms of cultural identification and family affection; observing Ramadan despite not being practicing Muslims becomes a way to recognize the role and the responsibility of the parental culture, to not deny the roots but to promise faithfulness to them, perpetuating at the same time the process of integration and the search for socio-cultural references in the Italian reality.

In the three cases above, the particular way of living the religion is defined as a kind of mediating attitude, to balance the demands of family roots and the outside world, of new lifestyles, and of personal beliefs. Such dynamics seem to be more marked in Muslim families, but in a similar – sometimes more subtle – manner, they occur also in families devoted to other religions.

Devoted to a personal God

“I’m Muslim, but I wear the Christian cross, because I like the Christian cross. I always kiss the cross when I pray, even if I am Muslim. I recite the Christian prayers because I think that Christians and Muslims don’t have different Gods. God is one, therefore I believe only in God. I believe in God, for me it doesn’t matter what I am and what the others are, for me it is important that I believe only in God. God is one for all, therefore I believe in God.” (G., Albanian parents)

When she used to live in Albania, G. used to go to the mosque with her parents and relatives, but since she moved to Italy she has stopped, preferring to develop the relationship with God within the walls of her bedroom. The Christian-Orthodox C., since her arrival in Italy, has also stopped attending places of worship:

“In Moldova, in my country, I used to go to church with my grandparents. Here I don’t go anymore. In Moldova I used to go to church to stay with others, I never was alone. Instead here I should go to church alone, so I am not interested.”

C. arrived in Italy with a mother who does not consider the religious sphere very important, so she has moved away from public forms of devotion, considering them devoid of meaning when they are not shared with family members and with friends, and so she has opted for a private approach:

“I don’t believe in collective religions. My religion is a personal religion: I believe in God, in my personal God. In my opinion, religion is a personal matter, I pray on my own, I talk to Him without any intermediary. I live the religion in this way. I think that religion is manifested in the way people behave: if you have healthy principles, if you have values, you manifest them in everyday life, in your behaviors. The matter is not if you practice or if you don’t practice, but if you have or if you don’t have religion inside you.”

B. has been in Italy since she was three years old. She is the daughter of nonobservant Muslims and has grown up experiencing contact with Islam and Christianity, attending the Catholic parish of her neighborhood in Ferrara and spending a lot of time with her Muslim grandfather during the summer holidays in Albania. In difficult moments, she has prayed:

“I used to pray to God in Italian, in my bedroom, because I have learned the prayers here in Italy. I have never asked myself this question: Allah or God? I used to listen people speaking about two different religions and Gods, but for me there was only one God, that was my personal and unique God.”

The parental freedom to adhere or not to adhere to one of the great monotheistic faiths has pushed B. to choose a personal God. She talks directly with her God, avoiding the public ceremonies, going beyond the limits imposed by the institutional membership. However, living in a world where religious conflicts are intensifying, B. appears pessimistic:

“My grandfather often speaks to me about religion and I think that there is no religion that teaches evil. I think the best religion is the meeting of all religions, because every religion has its value, which never is negative. Religions never teach you to kill, to steal, to beat up. However, because of all the bad things that we hear about religion, lately I have cooled down a lot, I sometimes think that there is no God.”

Atheists, agnostics and indifferent

The denial of the existence of God is a motivating force and firm conviction for some boys and for some girls. Sometimes it is also a kind of “strategy” to align themselves with the behaviors and the transgressions of the peers.

“Religion in my life has little or no importance. I’m not Muslim. I drink, I eat pork, I don’t observe Ramadan. Everybody drinks: why can’t I? Among my Moroccan friends nobody is practicing, none of them. In Italy all the Moroccans drink, eat pork, don’t observe Ramadan, and all the girls are whores.” (S., Moroccan parents)

S. blames the hypocrisy and the inconsistency of those who define themselves as “religious” but don’t behave as such. He disapproves of the public manifestation of religious sentiments, coming close to the positions of those who are devoted to a personal God:

“Religion is in your heart. You don’t have to show that you are religious. The long beards and the veils are not useful. If somebody prays, if he has something

between him and his God, has it in the heart, does not have to pull it out, to show it. I sometimes pray before sleeping.”

The Moroccan father of M. is an observant Muslim and a beer drinker. His Italian wife is a non-believer, but each year she observes Ramadan. M. is 15 years old: she observes Ramadan, she doesn't eat pork and doesn't drink alcohol out of respect for the will of her father, but she is increasingly adopting the position of a convinced atheism. Islam and Catholicism have coexisted during her childhood:

“When I was a child I used to go to church with my grandmother. My dad has always let me go, I have always had the freedom to choose, so I used to go to Church as a child and now I'm trying to learn more about Islam.”

M. has tried to read the Qur'an, but she has not finished all the pages. She attended religion classes during Primary school and she has shared her mother's interest in the other faiths of the world, so that she seems to have very clear ideas now:

“I don't believe in God. Religions are full of contradictions. I don't think that God exists because, if He would really exist, this world would probably be a bit better. A big contradiction lies in the fact that God is merciful, God is great: I don't like this thing. If He is the best, who are we, in comparison to Him? I don't like this idea, which exists in all the three monotheistic religions. Muslims and Christians for me are all hypocrites, when I see them on Sunday going to church or when I see them going to the mosque every day; for me it is something inconceivable, though I respect them in their faith.”

Conclusions

The increasing presence of young second-generation immigrants in Italian society has imposed pluralism and change as new realities, and created new frontiers for coexistence and for cultural, economic and social development. Nowadays pluralism is the perimeter of our democracy, but it is also a threshold, a huge goal that is not fully realized yet; it is not harmonious and balanced in its many components.

New ethnic, linguistic and generational memberships coexist with old stereotypes and prejudices that would like to conceal the constructive and revolutionary potential of the changes that are taking place. Until recently, the majority of Italians lived in socially and spatially restricted religious groups, with a rather strong

awareness –substantially undisturbed – of their identity and of the distance which separated them from the members of other religious traditions. With the arrival of the first immigrants, new religions were introduced and developed in a traditional Catholic country such as Italy, sometimes fueling conflict.

Growing up in close contact with their peers in an increasingly globalised society, according to our research, the children of first generation immigrants manifest a generational break that involves even the religious dimension. Unlike their parents, they don't consider themselves temporary guests/workers in a foreign country who seek comfort and safety in religious and cultural expressions of the country from which they come. Without denying their origins, they consider themselves (or wish to be) Italian citizens in all respects. They rehash the elements of the culture and of the religion of origin in new forms, influencing and mixing them with the values and the behaviors that they absorb from the context in which they live. The panorama of the religious attitudes is amplified: alongside the traditional practicing believers, for whom religion plays a central role in socialization processes and in the construction of their worldview, there are those who live the religious dimension in a more bland way, binding it to family membership and to a kind of respect for the manifestations of the culture of origin rather than to a true spiritual engagement.

Other boys and other girls in our sample choose a personalized approach to the sacred: they reject the institutional and collective practices and seek their God without intermediaries. Conversely, there are those who radicalize their religious affiliation, in reaction to the difficulties of the integration process. Finally, it is not possible to forget those who declare themselves agnostics and those who reject God, considering religions in a negative way.

The plurality of religions and of the approaches to the sacred poses the challenge of how to live with all these diversities and how to let them become occasions of mutual enrichment. So far, the present pluralism has not been accompanied by proper reflection, on the contrary it has been perceived in a negative way, like a wedge suddenly embedded in the quiet *status quo* scenario (Salvarani, 2012).

The educational agencies (school, after-school services, but also religious associations and parishes) are invited to play a leading role, acting on multiple levels. The first level is that of the knowledge of the different religions and of the different ways of being (or not being) believers. The awareness of the many expressions of the religious dimension is the first step towards the removal of barriers, the acceptance of religious diversity and the deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices. The moments of knowledge, acceptance and deconstruction of prejudices are important in order to prepare the background on which to promote moments of meeting which must be as far as possible free from conditioning and animated by

the curiosity to embrace the others in their entirety, without manipulation, conversion or humiliation. The meeting ought to lead to dialogue, understood as empathic interaction, exchange of views, opening, recognition and valorization of the other.

A constructive dialogue involves interlocutors aware of their own religious identity who are able to critically express their own point of view and to listen to others. It also implies the development of a positive attitude towards other religions. Education and training for inter-faith dialogue must promote an attitude that underlines what is positive, good and beautiful in other religions rather than focus on the negative, and the emphasis must be put on what unites and fosters collaboration and friendship, rather than on what divides (Sottocornola, 2002). The dialogue may eventually result in concrete projects of cooperation that involve religious groups, youth associations, schools, cultural and social institutions, in order to promote a culture of understanding and respect for those who believe and for those who disbelieve. An awareness is now established: as stated by Raimon Panikkar (2001), there is no alternative: either religions open up to each other, or they degenerate.

Notes

¹ Continents of origin: Europe 50,8%, Africa 22,1%, Asia 18,8%, America 8,3%, Oceania 0,0%. Main countries of origin: Romania (997.000), Morocco (506.309), Albania (491.495), China (277.570), Ukraine (223.782).

² Across the European Union, the incidence of foreign residents on the population is equal to 6,6%.

³ Main countries of origin: Romania, Ukraine, Moldova, Macedonia, Albania.

⁴ Main countries of origin: Philippines, Poland, Ecuador, Peru, Albania, Romania, Macedonia, Brazil, France, Dominican Republic, Croatia, Colombia.

⁵ Main countries of origin: Romania, Germany, United Kingdom, Ghana, Nigeria, Peru, the Philippines, Brazil.

⁶ The Italian immigration is characterized by the prevalence of flows from North Africa and from Eastern Europe. The Muslim presence is not attributable to a single ethnic group, but it is rather heterogeneous: Africans (54,5%, mostly from North Africa: 44%) and Europeans (31,7%) are predominant. Asian Muslims are only 13,7%. The main countries of origin: Morocco, Albania, Tunisia, Senegal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Kosovo, Macedonia.

⁷ Translation by Federico Zannoni. Original edition: “Fino a che lunghezza è lecita una gonna? Sotto il ginocchio? E poco sopra? L’aceto di vino si può usare per condire i cibi? Le tortine e le merendine con una bassa percentuale di alcool? Neanche quelle si possono mangiare? E vogliamo parlare dello strutto in certi tipi di pane? Quello ti manda dritto all’inferno? Per elencare solo alcuni tra i dilemmi più banali. Ed è credibile che a sollevare tutti questi problemi sia una ragazzetta “milanese” qualsiasi? O lei non è una vera musulmana? Ma in fondo chi lo decide? Esiste un patentino, un certificato? Se sì avvisatemi, perdio, ci tengo davvero. Continua a piovere, e il caos dentro di me non accenna a smettere”.

⁸ At the end of the first year of upper secondary school the 12,2% of the pupils with foreign citizenship is not admitted to the next class (among the Italian mates: 8,6%). 71,4% of high school students born in Italy from foreign parents attends technical or vocational schools; the percentage rises to 78,4% if we consider those who are born abroad (Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca, Servizio Statistico, 2012).

⁹ In 2012 the intermarriages between Italians and foreigners were 20.764, equal to 10% of the total number of marriages celebrated in Italy (Istat, 2013). In 2011, the separations were 7.144, equal to 8% of all separations (Istat, 2012).

¹⁰ With the exceptions of a worker boy and of a girl that were still in junior high school, all respondents attended high schools: those enrolled in professional institutes were the majority (24), followed by those enrolled in technical institutes (5); only one girl attended lyceum.

¹¹ 2 of the interviewed people were born in Italy, 3 arrived in Italy when they were 0-6 years old, 11 when they were 7-12 years old, 15 when they were 13-17 years old.

¹² Albania (9), Morocco (9), Ghana (4), Burkina Faso (2), Senegal (1), Ivory Coast (1), India (1), Philippines (1), China (1), Brazil (1), Moldavia (1). The different origins of the interviewed people reflect the great heterogeneity that characterizes the multicultural society in Italy. We also chose to interview a large number of boys and girls of Albanian and Moroccan origins since their communities are particularly numerous in Reggio Emilia and Ferrara.

¹³ All the interviewed persons have answered in Italian language. Federico Zannoni has translated all the reported answers.

¹⁴ Young Muslims in Italy.

¹⁵ The members have several origins: Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, Sudan), Middle East (Syria, Palestine, Jordan, United Arab Emirates), Asia (Turkey, Mongolia, Pakistan, Philippines) America (USA, Peru, Brazil),

Europe (Italy, France, England), Oceania (Indonesia). The association accepts all the Islamic denominations. For further details, see the website <http://www.giovanimusulmani.it>.

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