

The Value of Religion in the Family and the Maternal Role. Educational Resources in the Process of Integration

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Abstract. Immigration separates families and interrupts geographical continuity, friendships and processes of solidarity and mutual trust. Religious experience, on the other hand, can strengthen the sense of personal identity to make these processes even more effective. It is therefore important to explore the role of religious affiliations in the family integration process. This is what the study presented here attempts to do, followed by a specific and in-depth exploration of the maternal role aimed at maintaining the religious dimension as part of migration processes, educational practices, and the process of mediation with host country traditions.

Keywords. religiosity, integration, maternal role, education, identity

1. Introduction

The recognition of freedom of speech, conscience and religion is among the principles upheld by some of the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, as well as of National Constitutions.

In addition, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), attributing a pivotal role to diversity as a necessary and ally element for democracy, states that «Respect for the diversity of cultures, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation, in a climate of mutual trust and understanding are among the best guarantees of international peace and security» [1]. And by culture we mean «The set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and it encompasses, in addition to arts and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs» [2].

Critical issues, determined by an ineffective political management of diversity, increase and become more urgent when there are at stake not only the organizational dimensions of coexistence, but also each person's most intimate and profound aspects, connected to morality and conscience [3].

“Migration as a total social fact” [4] is an expression already used two decades ago by the Algerian sociologist and philosopher A. Sayad to underscore the complexity of

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the migration experience affecting all the dimensions of human life (economic, political, cultural, relational, emotional, cognitive, religious, etc.); dimensions that are interconnected by constant references and entanglements, hard to be separated. Sayad also points out how human migrations have a way to reveal contradictions, paradoxes, difficulties and resources of societies involved in the process and in the relations between locals and foreigners.

Dealing with a dimension like religion in a complex human phenomenon is a delicate and risky arbitrary operation, and yet essential to further research, in-depth studies and raise awareness, needed to better assess the situation that has lately taken on a greater importance.

2. Religion, migration, education: joints and perspectives

Historically, the encounter between different religious expressions has always existed; however, places of contact and conflict have increased because of migration and globalization. Therefore, faced with historical and contingent situations that are irreversible, we are constantly invited to critically read these data and to accompany in these contexts the growth and dialogue of *people* who have the urgent need to search for an existential meaning and build a convivial community. In addition to an analytical commitment to understanding, then, it is necessary to provide guidance and support to new generations and their challenges, which is a specific pedagogical task [5].

In the personal life of an individual, migration represents a crucial passage where paradigms, representations, perspectives, and religious experience are under scrutiny, which may or may not be accompanied by well-defined practices and choices and be part of a broader search for spirituality and meaning, or may change significantly in the movement from one context to another and in the experience of the journey itself.

Hence, during the migrants' journeys sometimes there are no concrete, material elements sanctioning an important alteration of their religious perspective, and there are changes and inner transformations that are difficult to grasp. "Migration is usually a response to changes in one's life (such as marriage, divorce, and parenthood), or a desire to improve one's standard of living (such as moving to a better neighborhood or a bigger house). It is generally assumed that migration is less responsive to variables like religion, that is, to variables that are more about ideology and less about material standard of living" [6].

Indeed, religion is a relevant factor influencing the migration process and integration. Even Myer argues that:

Religion can influence socio-economic and other integration outcomes through (1) its role as a marker of identity, (2) individual characteristics attributed to religious affiliation, (3) resources acquired through religious participation, (4) signals brought about by religious affiliation, and finally (5) overt discrimination of majorities against certain religious minorities [7].

It is not always easy to understand, for example, how religious affiliation can be associated with better results – such as, an easier access to a job opportunity, or receiving financial support from religious organizations, etc... as is the case of Christian immigrants, while affiliation with non-Western religions often represents an obstacle [8], becoming the target of prejudices and stereotypes, and therefore of

discrimination. Religion can hinder or promote migrants' integration, but it is not clear and probably not easy to describe which experiences really bring it about. Migration experiences question and challenge the relationship with one's religion "of origin" and affects intra and interpersonal dynamics that frequently foster contradictions and internal conflicts.

In addition, the lived religion of migrants is shaped not only by their life before and after migration but also by the contexts in which they settle and the translocal social networks in which they participate. (...) But adapting to new circumstances after migration can also give rise to tensions and divisions within previously solidary religious collectivities. This means that the balance between continuity and change in migrants' engagement with religion is dynamic [9].

Because of the ethnocentric perspective which the individual spontaneously embraces, religion has been often considered the cause for a lack of integration, or tensions and detachments from the host society.

Controversies are especially intense around claims that the practice of some forms of religion can be detrimental to the status of women, incompatible with western ideas of citizenship, resistant to the ideals of universal education, and so on. Indeed, some migrants distance themselves from their religious backgrounds for these reasons, although relatively little research has been conducted on these contentious issues [9].

Migrants often struggle to be fully committed to their religion in the host society, where public events are reserved to the "official" or predominant religion. Religious freedom, in order to fully benefit from, entails many mediations, the assumption of private rather than public places, and revising orientations and directions received in the primary educational processes. This difficult compromise becomes apparent, even in the eyes of local people, only in "emerging" events or situations such as the celebration of religious feasts, ritual moments of prayer, or matters related to food and nutrition, etc. Even some issues concerning children's education according to religious choices might be controversial and depend on how parents rethink and live out their own religious belief and practice.

More often, children and teenagers come up with progressive visions of synthesis, where the conflictual cultural elements are contaminated in various ways, up to the point of creating a real personal vision of the world, generally endowed with sufficient internal coherence to support the development of their own identity" [10]. And that is why many foreign parents are open to question, revise and negotiate their traditional religious identity, by engaging more with the new reality in which they live.

Religion, as a body of beliefs, feelings, rites binding an individual or a group to what is considered sacred, as a social and symbolic context contributes to shaping and fulfilling a spiritual tension, a search for meaning [11]. It helps migrants find their own balance, but also to stay connected with their past and create new ways of community membership in the present. If then religious pluralism, like cultural pluralism, are considered vital conditions for a society that wants to be truly defined as democratic, the identification of areas to explore the relationship between migrants' own culture, religion of origin, and the one they come in contact within destination countries represents a key factor to assess the health condition of a democratic structure.

The research presented in the next pages stems out from these convictions and premises, by providing an opportunity to some special people –parents and in particular mothers, who combine their educational and care role with cultural transmission as well– to talk about the value of religion as a driving force for social cohesion, a source of individual and collective recognition, a factor of loyalty to the culture of origin and at the same time of openness –and this not without tensions and ambiguities– to the one experienced in the host country.

3. Maternal role in religious transmission

Before mentioning merits and achievements of this study, it is necessary to explain the intimate connection between the maternal role and the transmission of religious values belonging to the culture of origin, a connection that sheds light on the reasons why the survey practically focused on female parenting by involving in the research only foreign mothers.

A subtle wisdom marks the work of education and care; in fact, “knowing how to stay close at the beginning” is a typically maternal trait. It is mothers who first get lost in the wonder of their own generative endeavour and foster that attitude in the child, whose eyes wide open to the world make wonder the first way of learning. In fact, knowledge comes from amazement, and it is amazement that enhances a unique look on the world.

In that openness to life, a covenant of trust is perpetuated between generations, and in the future, when a child’s birth provides the opportunity to experience an on-going awakening also to those who are around. The beginning of this primary relationship means for the child to be an open question, an individual totally absorbed in the search of definition of one’s very self.

An *initial* educational practice (which gives them the opportunity to be close to children who *begin* to talk, walk, play together, reason, hypothesize, think, leave their marks in the first doodles, problematize, ask questions, even the existential ones that are often difficult to address, the day after the onset of abstract thought: “where do we come from?”, “what is death?”, “who is God?”) has always marked the educational care that mothers dispense to their children together with the gift of language, nourishment and care for the body, the conquest of independence.

The maternal role is, therefore, carried out by accompanying children to get to know reality, including those spaces of ineffable mystery, of sacredness that involves the world and life’s situations: mothers “begin”, open to the quest for meaning with their own presence, and create connections, links, between the “here” and the “elsewhere”.

The maternal “sensitivity” records the jolts, the transformations of the child and is always there to provide references, insights to understand the days unfolding. It even involves the religious sphere; in fact, the female religious sensitivity is more pronounced and active than the male one, aiming to grasp the variety of links present in the different levels of life and nourishing openness towards the transcendent.

In cultures, religious *socialization* has always been of a *maternal* nature, attesting to a greater female participation in religious rites and practices, greater support to rules within a religious context and, therefore, in general, a greater devotion and care for reflection and attention to their own interiority [12]. However, lately, even women are failing to achieve this goal, for they too are experiencing the transformations of

secularization, of changes linked to gender roles and functions, of places suitable for their participation in the life of religious communities [13].

The religious transmission coming about through a woman has an *intimacy* feature, meaning a direct, implicit, essential passage, which is often not explained, but breathed in. Pope Francis in a recent address to catechists, also including parents and grandparents, recalls that:

The faith must be transmitted in dialect, in the dialect of intimacy, of that language, that is, that comes from the heart, that is inherent, that is precisely the most familiar, the closest to everyone. If there is no dialect, the faith is not passed on fully and well [14].

The intimate dimension of the maternal “tale” has a deep interreligious root, that is, transversal to several religious expressions.

The coming of a child changes a mother’s perspective on the world to a very different extent than it does for a father. It commits to an irrefutable pact aimed at the search and verification of persistent, long-lasting meanings: not only for herself or for the time limited to the present or the immediate future. It is not just a matter of disclosing the reasons directing her actions and underlying her choices, so that they can be viewed as a starting point for life for the unfolding of the child’s existence, but more radically to bear witness –even in uncertainty (and perhaps precisely by virtue of that), in moments of bewilderment, such as migration– to the essential trust in the possibility that existence has great motivations, as the mothers interviewed stated, to the point of touching what Frankl defines as the “unconditional meaning” or “superior meaning”, [15] which surpasses the human ability to grasp an all-encompassing sense and yet confers on the latter dignity and legitimacy.

Here it is based the ontological primacy of openness to unconditional search as an educational tool to strengthen parental responsibility, in the challenge and in the task of sparking in the child the desire to find meaning in every existential situation and the confidence of being able to transform what is happening into an opportunity for specific human growth. This is an attitude of deep spiritual value –to which religion gives forms in its first domestic expressions– opening to the encounter with the other in interpersonal relationships, as with the Other in his highest and most mysterious expression, that is God.

4. Research. Methodical notes according to the phenomenological approach

As a reference methodology, the qualitative research that was carried out used the phenomenological-eidetic approach, borrowed from Husserl’s phenomenology [16, 17] and applied in a pedagogical perspective [18, 19, 20].

By considering phenomenology as an eidetic science, Husserl aims to explain the essences of what happens and is lived by the subjects, essences that are to be understood as constant and general structures of experience. Thus, as Gallagher and Zahavi suggest, phenomenology “does not have as its purpose the description of experience in an idiosyncratic sense, of the here and now that each one inevitably experiences, but rather tries to capture the stable structures of experience” [21]. Structures that identify at the same time what is essential of an experience and the

sources of meaning, as they are seen in what appears by applying the phenomenological reduction.

Essences do not exist independently from the world and the subject that captures them, since awareness and the world are linked in a structural unity. Therefore, looking for the essence means above all to immerse oneself into experience, to welcome its peculiarities and uniqueness, but also to discern its fundamental and invariable constitution, which for Husserl represents the ontological foundation of the empirical sciences. As L. Mortari explains, «Looking for the essence means going beyond the contingent, the unique and singular quality of a phenomenon, to identify the essential predicates» [22].

4.1. The subjects of the research

Foreign families are a very interesting social topic as a paradigm of the systemic nature of migratory paths, where common dimensions and peculiar aspects, individual and collective biographies, come together within a circle of references, stimuli, and conditionings.

The research, with a specific explanatory goal in mind, examined the personal religious experience of some foreign mothers, the representations connected to it, the elements of continuity and problematic issues with tradition, the opinion regarding interreligious dialogue and other matters concerning the religious education of their children.

The study was carried out with the support of “Mondo Aperto” (Open World), a cultural association of social promotion, located in Piacenza, a city in northern Italy with a university campus, and operating on behalf of immigrant families to protect their rights and make them aware of the opportunities for “integration” available in the city. Mothers coming from different religious denominations and with children of significant age differences replied to the “Open World” invitation.

A focus group was set up online, while the more detailed interviews, with the same grids of semi-structured questions, were done in presence encouraging thus an ever-deeper communication.

The focus group included 9 mothers, coming from Tunisia, Iran, Senegal, China, Ecuador, Morocco, and belonging to different religious groups (Catholic Christian, Evangelical Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist). They were between 25 and 52 years old, living in Italy since many years (on an average, over 15 years), with a good understanding of the local language and culture; and they shared their experience spanning over a rather long period of time.

The presence of linguistic-cultural mediators was crucial for a mutual understanding and deconstruction of concepts that, although commonly used, had instead very different viewpoints and interpretations.

4.2. Knowledge-building devices: focus groups and narrative pedagogy

Getting to know the experience of reality from the actual subjects who lived it gives the opportunity to understand situations from within, aiming at setting up a knowledge for educational practice that is constantly referring to the horizons of meaning of the subjects involved in the educational processes. This knowledge comes directly from those people who share the stories of their own experiences of the world.

The researcher's task is to give voice to those experiences by faithfully collecting them, refraining from using personal convictions, assumptions, and predefined interpretations in order to understand them. And this is possible by applying research tools that open a way of access to the lived experience. In this case, the focus group and the collection of short narratives were set up by providing a grid of questions first sent online to each person and then reviewed during an actual meeting (when more detailed interviews took place in person).

The narrative practice touches on a "suggestive" register by which intuitions and deep meanings are not communicated directly but are found just after listening to the story: "to evoke", "to suggest", leading the thought to grasp what "is underneath", as the etymology *suggèrere* indicates, soliciting latent understandings. R. Atkinson writes in this regard, "Narration makes the implicit explicit, sheds light on what is hidden, gives shape to what has no form, and brings clarity where there was confusion" [22].

In this way, experience is configured as a "manifest reality" which is counterbalanced by an "invisible reality" consisting in the dynamics of relationship and influence, concerns and defences, aspirations, ambivalences, and contradictions, and above all by that driving force of educational practices, that is intentionality.

4.3. The results of the research

At the end of the research, which means after collecting all testimonies, reorganizing all the material put together step by step, and especially after the analysis of what emerged from interviewing the mothers, it was possible to frame an overall picture of the whole process. This reconstruction gave the opportunity to identify recurrent and transversal factors based on the "significant units", aimed at assessing the material coming from focus groups and interviews.

Using the methodology of phenomenological analysis [24], in this phase of the research solicitations provided by the investigation and intuitions of meaning stemming from it were summed up, in order to provide a general overview of the relation between religion and immigrant families.

In fact, once it is done the work of data collection, the formulation of the theoretical foundations establishing its premises, the critical reflection on what emerged from the field survey, the researcher's job is not finished yet. The work done so far finds its fulfilment and real motivation precisely in this last step, by addressing the initial question (*How do mothers live and hand down their religious outlook to their children in an intercultural context?*), outlining a critical and organic theory able to overcome the fragmentary nature of investigation and the partiality of reflections.

5. Images and representations of the religious dimension

Images and representations of one's own religious experience define clear and specific points of reference supporting a process of interiorization and personal elaboration needed to doing things and living that dimension. Also, they make an intimate relationship –that with religion– communicable, even though it is by its nature dynamic, fluid, full of experiences that are ambivalent and sometimes conflictual. These very representations, moreover, put together general social and cultural aspects with personal meanings, that is, they mix transversal, common elements with unique traits. They do change over time, and some images do settle during childhood and

accompany the subject for a long time, prompting for deconstructions and revisions in relation to dissonances, contradictions, tensions that increase while experiencing situations or changes in life (such as migration). The importance of representations connected to religious experience, Pinelli writes:

is attested by the fact that, every time one says or thinks “God” (it does not matter whether to affirm or deny his existence), one is still representing an image of God himself through channels that are not always available (or at least not totally) to the immediate rational understanding of the subject [25].

This means that the representational and metaphorical dimension signifies a substratum common to all subjects and cultures, though different in its forms and variations. In this regard, the focus-groups and interviews showed how religious experience can take on an “all-encompassing” value: “*Religion represents everything in my life; without religion I feel lost*” (F.), or is perceived as an extended and enveloping dimension, inseparable from the culture that provides identity and recognition to the subjects: “*Religion becomes a part of culture*” (M.). Along with these viewpoints, there is also the opinion of those who minimize its impact on their life, considering it

only a tool to express and live my spirituality which is much more important than religion. I do not like religious people very much; I find practicing believers more authentic because they are committed to their creed which does not mean to follow and perform only rites and precepts learned and internalized. [C.]

These words stress the importance of living religion as a space to express one’s own search for meaning, by making a clear distinction between the external ritual aspects and the inner sphere. Consequently, there is a difference between religiosity and spirituality, being the latter dimension connected to the choice of faith. Therefore, a potential interreligious factor is introduced, that is, the possibility of understanding religion as one of the pathways available to experience the dimension of transcendence, the search for God, and one’s ethical placement in the world. This can nurture a fertile ground to promote respect, mutual interest, and acceptance of different religious expressions. It is like believing that beyond the paths we take, we all share a single quest.

In line with this way of thinking, there is R.’s reflection,

Religion was created by men. For me it is a pursuit of God in life. I began to look for him in difficult times, in my weakness. There I found strength. God’s power is made perfect in our weakness, in the difficult moments that we have in life. It is in difficult moments that you entrust yourself to him, and he gives you that inexplicable boost. [R.]

In addition to seeing religion as a support for a personal search, we can find in R.’s words the representation of the encounter between the weakness of human beings and the power of God, which describes the role of help and support offered by religion to many, either on an emotional level or as meanings and perspectives provided while experiencing pain, toil and daily commitment. Religion is a support, but also a stimulus to transcendence, that is, to be “more”, to be better, as a Chinese, who arrived in Italy 8 years ago without any specific religion, says:

Religion is something useful to make us understand how we can be better people. Buddhism for me is not a religion, but an education. For example, when I have doubts about life choices on what I can / should do right, religion shows me what the best way is. We are all living beings, and my life is the same as the other human beings'. Buddhism has opened up a new world for me and I am very happy. [J.]

The religious dimension is described here in its “educational” role, which means bringing out the best in people, leading them to fulfil their life while remaining humble (“*We are all living beings, and my life is the same as the other human beings*”), directing them by providing them with instruments of discernment, comparison, and sharing a common existential fabric. The “regulatory” function attributed to religion is also subtly disclosed, “*Religion offers guidance and control*” (M.), “*It is a law that protects those who believe, but also those who do not believe*” (J.).

Let us think of a class of students, we need rules to learn, to keep order in class, to obey; religion is like a teacher telling you what to do or don't. It controls. It does not have to be too strong, too strict, otherwise it will hurt a person that no longer wants to cultivate it. [F.]

Religion is, therefore, a crossroads of different instances: it offers rules for behaviour, indicating prohibitions and authorizations, it plays a role of control and guidance: not quite maternal – the words of F. do not leave any room for tenderness– but still masterful (“it is like a teacher”).

6. Different angles: changes in visions, experiences, and meanings in practices

Migrants experience a special condition in the destination country, that is finding out how others perceive and interpret their own culture. It is subject to other people's scrutiny that, because of perceptions, emotions - mostly worries and fears -, usually scarce knowledge, attributes meanings and judgments to aspects of life that are complicated, historically, and culturally situated, which instead require exploring in depth traditions and representations that are totally different from their own. This is the area where misunderstandings and conflicts can lurk, since lack of understanding exposes you to the risk of discomfort, confusion, disorientation, disappointment, and frustration. F. stresses this aspect very clearly,

I do not like how our religion is described in history books, which should be without prejudices. That must change. Islam is like all the other religions. For example, the phrase ‘Allah Akbar’ is misrepresented, in fact for us it means ‘God is great’. It is something that we feel in our heart, for good and bad things as well, because you recognize that there is a Creator who has destined great things for us, which means knowing how to accept our destiny; but also, to entrust ourselves, to know that Allah does not abandon us. And saying it is something that helps. I am sorry that this expression has taken on such a violent meaning. It is scary. It creates terror. [F.]

Nurturing interest in other religious expressions and promoting the discovery of the meanings underlying in practices and words are then an essential role of education, as M. suggests:

I like to question myself about other religions, I ask about Italian religious festivals and practices. My son is a Muslim, but I chose for him to attend religion class. I would like him to learn some things about religion. [M.]

Here it clearly surfaces the attitude to search, stay open, and the attempt to understand others, but also the desire to have a better knowledge of it, so that even reading or direct experience can promote opinions that are less stereotyped and more in line with an articulated and complex vision.

That very mother acknowledges that there are some moments when prejudice and the perception of something different cannot be easily restrained, but they just come in and immediately influence your perception, “*For example, once there were two people in love kissing, and my son did not want to look at them, because for us expressing feelings like that is way out-of-line.*” The issue of prejudicial attitudes and representations can be effectively limited by getting to know better the meanings and motivations linked to that reality, finding out its basic principles, which means applying to it a broader spectrum of meaning and then choose how to enrich this interpretation with other elements, by weaving together what is known and what is new.

Some of the scenes from the movie “*Almanya. My family goes to Germany*” (directed by Y. Samdareli, Germany, 2011) depict in an ironic but profound way the opinion that the Turkish protagonists who immigrated to Germany have regarding the Catholic Christian religion, interpreting, for example, as “cannibalism” the sacrament of Communion (“they eat the body of a man hung on the cross”). The ability to change ideas on one’s own reality and be willing to accept the interpretation given by others, by welcoming some of their details and reviewing others together, means being able *to decentralize* one’s own perspective by welcoming others’, a precious skill needed by educators as well as students [26].

This skill signifies the ability to read oneself in a “plurivocal” way, listening to different voices and acknowledging the different aspects of one’s identity, especially when someone experiences an important change, like migrating, or other significant transformations in person.

All the mothers interviewed shared that migration has not brought so much disruption to their religious practice, but more to its meanings and to the context where it is practiced.

My religious practice has not changed: I always do Ramadan as I did in Morocco. I dress as always, I wear the veil, I do the prayer five times a day, and if I am at work, I do it when I get home. [K.]

Ramadan creates a different atmosphere, that does not mean just not eating, or drinking etc., but it creates a special atmosphere in relationships and in life. However, even if you do Ramadan here, this experience cannot be replicated, it does not feel the same way. [M.]

This dimension of “untranslatability” of the religious experience is quite unique, as it finds its real meaning only in the original environment. It is possible to build a bridge between cultures, to be a synthesis between different ways of interpreting the relationship with the transcendent, but there is always an irreducible and untranslatable base representing the original point of reference to which one remains faithful, a distinctive trait that marks an element of (self-)recognition and identity.

Here in Italy, I have adopted other holidays, but only superficially, without believing in them, and yet I cannot fully celebrate mine, because I do not have the right, for example, to take time off from work on the feast of Ramadan. [F.]

Therefore, taking on a practice does not necessarily mean fully sharing its meaning, and at the same time disconnecting practice from a context, experience from its meaning, can make the experience lose its depth.

By coming in contact with local traditions and customs, people can also undergo an expansion of their religious experience, bringing them to “essentialize” their religious practice. A Burundian, Catholic Christian, mother of 2 boys, says:

I adapted to the local customs. Even though I belong to the Roman Catholic Church itself, this religion has cultural and historical influences of the place and of the ancient beliefs that are non-existent in Africa, because there Christianity and Catholicism are relatively young. For example, the patronal feasts, the celebrations of the Virgin Mary according to representations worshipped in a place or for a grace received in a place, even the tombs of Holy Thursday ... do not exist in my country. There are other celebrations here that over time I have accepted and now are part of my life. Then there are the lapidary masses that do not nourish me, do not really move me, and do not satisfy me because here people go to Mass with the stopwatch in their hand, as if it were one of the daily appointments marked on their agenda. This is not the traditional African Sunday, that is a Sunday from the moment you wake up in the morning, and therefore you know that “there is no time limit”, and Mass lasts how long the priest and the choir director decided that day. Mass is the only commitment of the day. The way it is done here is a bit frustrating for me. Thanks to my migration experience, I have given more time to Christian spirituality, to the study of the Bible without locking myself up into a specific enclosure. I also practice Evangelical worship, and I study the Word with a friend who is a Jehovah’s witness. I removed the superfluous structures, and I keep my eyes on Jesus who walked in the streets proclaiming the Gospel to everyone, Jesus who admonished the Pharisees, who was non-conformist and was going against the tide, who went to eat at Zacchaeus’, let himself be washed by the prostitute, asked for water to drink from the Samaritan woman... [C.]

Instead, for R., migration, along with the expansion of her religious “frame”, has given her the opportunity to grasp new nuances and embrace other experiences, allowing her to live her relationship with God with more conviction and commitment.

When I was in Ecuador, I was doing religious practices, but I had not yet grasped what it meant to accept Jesus in your heart, as if he were within you and guided you. I experienced this here in Italy thanks to my spiritual mother, my

mother-in-law, who invited me to the Evangelical Church. It was an engaging atmosphere, and I felt totally at peace. [R.]

To sum up, it can be argued that migration leads to forms of conciliation between one's own religious heritage and the particular conditions one is experiencing. This process can be more or less tiresome, depending on the personal characteristics of the subjects, the time spent in the new environment, and their affiliation to the religious community. Most likely, it needs to "creatively" read and live some religious practices by strongly grounding them on one's own history.

7. Religion that is "outside", within oneself, with others

Migration brings those who experience it to become more critical towards their culture of origin than those who continue living in it from birth and throughout their life. Those who leave their native land, in fact, have to decide what to bring along and what to leave behind. They feel the burden of sacrifices and achievements made, and experience first-hand the need and sometimes the responsibility to defend and bear witness to a history that includes an essential trait of their identity. And this also involves the migrants' religious beliefs or attitude towards religion. Vital issues like relating to suffering, facing insecurity, losing the original emotional bonds, constantly revising expectations, needs, and desires, bring the subject to become more inquisitive and take steps of great transformation that remain mostly silent and hidden, perhaps overshadowed by practical and operational contingencies.

At the end of the focus-group and interviews, these women were very grateful because by reflecting on these issues they had the opportunity to remove many personal insights from their hidden-away location and bring them back for their fruition. They also highlighted how there is a significant distinction between external elements, such as practices, rites, worship, and intimate dimensions that accompany them or develop in a personal and independent way. It is almost like there exists a fine line of separation between appearance and interiority, and migration increases it, underscoring especially the inner growth of the subject.

For me it is important not only to read the Koran, but to understand who the Muslim is and what she must do. She has to do some practice, but also something more. Practice is part of religion, but then there is something beyond that. What we think of God, how we respect others. It is important to respect the basic rules, but also to understand the meaning of what you do. Ramadan does not mean only not eating, or not drinking, but means purifying one's whole being to meet God and feeling hunger and thirst within one's own body to get closer to those in need and understand what they are feeling. [M.]

Similarly, F. points out,

If a hair is out of place from the veil, this is not important. It is important to respect others, helping them, not telling lies, or talking behind their backs, and treating women and men equally. [F.]

In one's own relationship with religion, therefore, what was previously lived in an intuitive and repetitive way, is subsequently invested by a personal meaning. Therefore, there is a passage from just a practice of religious precepts to a participation that is more consistent with one's own history and feelings, from an *extrinsic religiosity* (aimed at improving self-security and obtaining comfort, defence) to an *intrinsic religiosity*, which recognizes faith as a value in itself and is willing to commit and sacrifice for [27], by considering the practice of religion a source of personal and community fulfilment. In fact, the concrete practice of religion gives a chance to find in others an echo of personal expressions, as well as community answers to personal questions.

The migratory experience, however, limits, conditions or sometimes drastically compromises participation in community life, as J. complains in this regard,

Since 2014, I started reading some Buddhist books and I would really like to become a Buddhist, but in this city it is difficult. I have not found a Buddhist temple and therefore I live and practice it within myself. [J.]

Times and places of the community represent moments of social cohesion and necessary nourishment for one's own journey.

The "public" dimension of religion, which often, precisely in the most difficult and delicate moments of life, is underestimated to pursue a more intimate and personal approach, contributes instead to strengthening the sense of belonging and community ties. This is also stated by A., Senegalese, Muslim, mother of 2 boys and 1 girl, "*I do miss the public call to go and pray, which I consider a very beautiful thing.*" The collective invitation to prayer strengthens the bond with all those who share the same creed and experience.

In migration, then, the complex religious dimension takes on a dual meaning: it is a place, where questions of meaning, enlightening choices, and providing comfort spring up and accompanies the processes of research; it is also a time of harmony and references not to a solipsistic experience with the transcendent, but it is a way of sharing life with its changes and finding elements of continuity.

8. Religious support in migration

Migration is a peak event that inevitably marks a beforehand and aftermath, setting a boundary in a person's existential journey. For some migrants, it is a traumatic and dangerous experience, representing a delicate challenge that opens new opportunities and often activates unexpected resources. It is the time when the difficulty of determining the destination comes to play, completely or partially, by exploring what is unknown, *mysterious*, when someone deals with something unintelligible, outside the schemes of what the person has so far experienced [28].

These are the peculiar features of the sacred realm that the theologian and historian of religions, Rudolf Otto, explores in his 1923 book. Anything intimidating (*tremendum*) finds reassurance and attraction (*fascinans*) in the elements of love, mercy, and piety. The consolation the sacred provides inspires in return a sense of respect and veneration (*augustum*) [29]. Changes in life, then, represent a moment when the experience of uncertainty is intertwined with the hope of Good, the intensification of questions is accompanied by the encounter with the beauty of human

solidarity, the fear of emptiness and the end is overcome by trust in the Transcendent. This strengthens the awareness of being *creatures*, connected and entrusted to their Creator, in a close relation with the real world and people living in it.

Therefore, migrants' religious experience is not only shaped by their life before and after migration but is also oriented by the places where they dwell and by the social networks they are connected to [30]. The first encounters with other people and joining a community are considered paradigmatic experiences, as relational casts supporting and shaping impressions, expectations, openings, or closures. R. says:

When I got to Italy, I arrived at a place where nuns helped me look for a job, and they welcomed me. We were also praying with other people from our country and were supporting each other to face the difficulties of our landing. When you deeply have the awareness of an almighty God who listens to us, who is with us when we look for him..., religious practices, faith help a lot to respect others. That is how I found the strength to leave behind two children who were born in Ecuador. [R.]

Religion fosters links of meaning in a broader horizon and can support the migrant's spiritual journey. At the same time, belonging and involvement in a religious community can also help in a concrete and material perspective, through relationships and meetings. In this regard, C. explains:

Belonging to the Catholic Church gave me the opportunity to establish human connections that have marked my personal project and migratory journey, both positively and negatively. There has never been a case when my religion has been an obstacle to me, and I believe that is because of my religious confession, Catholicism, which is the major one in Italy. [C.]

Not all religious affiliations have the same value in a foreign country, but it depends on their greater or lesser social representativeness. In this sense, C.'s account is an exception, since adherence to the Catholic religion from the beginning of her life marks a continuity in the discontinuity of the migratory experience. Sometimes, however, it is having common values that fosters integration between different religions; or the invitation to being open, as stated in one's own religion of origin, creates the conditions for the person's attitude, avoiding any closure and resentment. A. asserts this, when she says:

When you are a practicing Muslim, you become a good person – by worshipping God you find peace in yourself and will become a very sociable person, in any country you go you can live well and be together with everyone. When I arrived, I integrated. Even the Muslim religion invites the foreigner to respect in the host country the rules and traditions of that place. [A.]

Thus, religion supports the process of integration by helping people feel good about themselves and being with others, and this gives them the opportunity to experience personal and community harmony. The ethical-social direction is, then, the resource necessary to strengthen the relational bases and offers a broader horizon within which to build one's own path of integration.

9. Children's questions and search for meaning

The study of the link between religion and migration gave us a chance to look at the generational educational experience in a natural way, as a direct consequence of one's own personal experience; and one of the transversal aspects that emerged was certainly the role of *example*, of *witness* as a special way to foster religious education. Giving to close people - especially if they are members of the family, like a child - the witness of their own choices and values of reference is an indirect, respectful, and effective form of religious education. As C., a Catholic Christian, attests, "*I am a Christian, but I do not impose anything on my family. I hope to sow a seed by setting an example.*" F., a Muslim, echoes her, "*He [the son] gets his education in the family, by being with others. What he sees, he does it. If he does not see, he does not.*" Likewise, A., a Muslim, states, "*Children do what their parents do, they follow suit.*" R.'s opinion, an evangelical Christian, is similar,

We parents are like a mirror in which our children can see their reflex and can find themselves. I bring my children to Church. What is sown, it will stay forever. Fruits will be reaped even after a long time. The first years of life are crucial. [R.]

Also A. insists on the importance of example,

As we learned when we were little, in turn we teach our own children. I try to make them learn the values of religion: do not steal, do not lie, do no harm to others. Ramadan is good for your health, so you feel the way others do, when they have nothing to eat, and so you help them. Pray, so that you are always close to God with a clean body. You just have to find the way, and you also need to be the example for your children... If the values you make your children learn are right, they accept them; but you have to be convinced first. If they sense that you are not sure, how can they believe? [A.]

Religious experience is an inheritance passed along silently; it is something conveyed by concrete example. Education is sowing, it is an act of faith, writes the Swiss theologian Romano Guardini, because it implies entrusting oneself to the other, to life and to God [31]. It is awareness of the freedom of the other person, whom the educator is called to let be, by being present without invading, reaffirming thus a message of trust in one's own resources and skills.

The philosopher Nathalie Sarthou-Lajus makes an interesting remark, when she writes:

The difficulty of transmitting also recognized by educators today pertains to the content of the transmission (knowledge, beliefs, values), as well as to the very act of transmitting, of which we have lost the taste. (...) Transmitting and educating are two distinct acts. Education is based on the emancipation of the subject. Transmitting is to insert a human being into the chain of generations and to show him that he is one among others. Education imbues the transmission with the sense of personal re-appropriation. (...) Human transmission does not consist in reproducing the same person, but in generating another one that always sparks surprise, a source of both amazement and

disappointment. The content with each generation is to be regained in a new way. Only thus can he be freed rather than crushed (...) making room for the other person to take it back. It is not the will that determines the transmission; it is more so the enthusiasm [32].

Even on the religious level, education and transmission are intertwined, and contribute by providing important elements of growth, as well as by fostering a critical and personal revision of the heritage received. As a matter of fact, some women interviewed underscored in religious education the importance of a community, of a wider family context able to enlighten the choices and the path of life. F. in this sense shares her concern and asks herself,

You teach some things, but it is missing the supporting element of the family context. I think I did not do much, because I was not ready to face certain situations. I found myself far away, alone with my children. I have to keep this connection with my origins and religion, but I do not know to what extent I succeeded. [F.]

M.'s experience is also similar,

I am sorry because [the son] cannot learn our religion and all the things I learned as a child. I am sorry because he cannot experience as a child the whole religious dimension. (...) I wish my son could experience our religion more deeply and get information about the other religion and be able to choose. [M.]

The "knowledge" these mothers speak of is not theoretical, abstract; it is a concrete and lived experience, an immersion in a context where the religious dimension can be "breathed". It is a knowledge that grows and develops through an inquisitive process, made up of dialogues between parents and children, which also include grandparents and other important figures. As A. says: "*When my children turned 7 years old, I began to teach them the religious precepts. Children ask a lot of questions and often, if I do not know, I send them to my mother who gives them an answer.*" M. also shares the same prudence, but unlike A. she has no other adults to turn to, "*My son asks me questions, but I am not an expert. When I do not know, I do not want to confuse him.*"

Religious questions about life attest that there is a search in progress, a desire to discover, a relationship to be established with the parent, the teacher, the educator, but also with an indirect, "higher" interlocutor, that is God. Religious questions, in fact, lead to the threshold of infinity, feed on amazement, introduce to a wisdom of life that realizes the evolutionary tension of both children and adults, «Those who give children a chance to ask questions of faith will discover something wonderful. (...) Children with their questions can help us to better focus on ours» [33].

From an educational viewpoint, it is important to welcome questions, listen to them, but also to direct and orient them not with a spirit of delegation, but with the authentic attitude of those who find themselves searching just like their own children. At the same time, it is necessary to identify together some answers, albeit provisional, which will strengthen some steps and then continue searching again. «My invitation to focus on these questions is not in contradiction with the duty to come up with answers, but answers that keep the questions going and do not end them, that at the same time take a stand and refer back to the question» [33].

E. states:

[My children] ask me, “Mom, why do you do Ramadan?” I do it because it is good for my health, and to feel how the poor do since they have nothing to eat; so, you will learn that if you only have a piece of bread, you share it with the person that does not. There is nothing in Islam that does not have its why, and without a doubt there is always a clear answer. [E.]

In a foreign environment, questions also arise from the comparison with others and from some practices that are different from others. A. tells us that his children had a recurrent question, repeated every day, “*Why don’t we eat pork?*” They did it when they came home from school because their diet did not include it, and they were curious to taste it and understand the reason for this difference.

Motivating one’s religious choices, explaining what one experiences is the educational orientation that allows the little ones to continue to ask questions, to sense the “strangeness” of what they do not know how to explain, as an opportunity to look even further and start a dialogue with adults.

There are times in children’s lives when they ask more questions and constantly challenge their parents and their beliefs. It is the time of adolescence, when so many certainties creak, and children start questioning the values handed down and critically assess the meaning of the teachings they have received. R. tells that

There were conflicts during their adolescence because the boys moved away from the Christian life. But as a mom I think that once you have sown, sooner or later the harvest will come. Children challenge and ask, ‘What if [God] does not exist?’. I say to my daughter: in case he does not, then I was born, I grew up, I die, I disappear. In case he does, I have missed this unique opportunity to live in the Kingdom of God. I do not lose anything by believing. Instead, I gain something. When a mother prays and is in God’s grace, her children are well. I pray that sooner or later they will be able to meet him. [R.]

Edith Stein’s words echo here, “The search for God belongs to the human being... A pedagogical science cannot reach its fulfilment if it does not investigate, in the whole field of revealed truth, what it means to live by faith and, through the life of faith, to attain the goal in life” [34]. The *care of the soul* of one’s children and not only the task of responding to their most material and concrete needs is a very precious family educational dimension. It speaks of the need to continue cultivating transcendence in a historical time, when insecurity and the phenomenon of secularization seem to undermine the original traits of the person.

10. Conclusions

The study on the links among religion, migration and education is placed within a broad and complex framework, that the focus-group and the interviews have allowed us to approach, by shedding light on a wealth of insights, reflections, autobiographical narratives that should be taken into consideration to enhance pedagogical research and educational action. At the end of the group meetings with the women who accepted our invitation to tell their stories, it was brought up the observation that it was hard to speak

of an intimate and partly unintelligible relationship, such as the one related to mystery and transcendence, the search for a higher order, necessary to understand (or perhaps more simply to accept) life's events. Those who were interviewed also reiterated that the relationship with religion is exceptional and profound; although it is essential, it remains implicit, partly untranslatable, but also resistant to rationalization and comparison. The way in which religious experience contributes to promoting the dignity of human beings constitutes a transversal element and an educational gain, that is not at all trivial and obvious. In the current socio-cultural horizon, marked by value uncertainty, relativism, forms of technicality and alienation, religion represents that *humanizing tension* able to link particular to universal, the individual to the community, immanence to transcendence, visible to invisible. As A. summed up, "*Religion must be a simple thing, which you can live within yourself. Everyone can live quietly respecting the others' religion.*" These words are connected to R.'s,

It is wonderful to be able to stand in God's presence. I am convinced that there is an intelligence full of wisdom and love that organizes and regulates the cosmos, even if we do not see it. He is on our side. The search for God only gives us so much love. [R.]

Simplicity, interiority, respect are the threads that are constantly found in those mothers' words, pointing out almost to a maternal role that every educational subject can assume beyond the task and position that a person has. In this regard, if we accept Guardini's perspective [35], educating is, in itself, an act of faith requiring a great and deep trust in the resources of the o/Other and in reality. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the educational task present in every culture, that is called to support moments of passage and change such as migration, when intentions and values, meanings and perspectives are being disrupted. Jacques Maritain also states, "Inaccessible and at-hand, God invests man from every side. It does not exist a single way, as for an oasis in the desert, or for a mathematical idea through the expanse of the science of number. For man there are as many itineraries to God as passes on earth or roads to one's own heart" [36]. Accompanying the subjects to reach the depths of their soul and the heights of the encounter with God means contributing to the possibility of promoting their well-being with themselves and with others, and this is an educational task that is the foundation of every process and every encounter, which does not hide the conflict, but considers it and develops it. To this the maternal role, specialized in handling delicate balances, can certainly make a unique and indispensable contribution. A contribution that sees in the work of educational care – defined by listening, dialogue, capacity for decentralization and contextualization, attention to detail... – traditionally feminine, a great work of civilization, of which even the interreligious perspective can effectively take advantage.

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