Intergenerational Processes and Diasporic Religious Identity Among Immigrant Coptic Families

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Abstract. Considering the scarcity of psychological studies on Middle Eastern Christian immigrant families experiences, this chapter aims to explore the post-migration experience of Coptic Orthodox families immigrated from Egypt to Italy and chooses to adopt a family intergenerational perspective to compare narratives of two different family generations (first-generation parents and their second-generation adolescent children). Based on empirical data from 10 Coptic Orthodox families, for a total of 30 interviewed participants (10 first-generation fathers, 10 first-generation mothers, and 10 second-generation adolescent children), the chapter reveals that religiosity in its intertwined individual and social expressions is a salient part of interviewees' everyday life and an essential source of resilience. However, identity-specific content reveals differences when comparing parents and children's narratives. While a "diasporic" religious identity seems to emerge among first-generation parents, religious identity among children emphasizes the opposition with a highly secularized and "threatening" Italian society.

Keywords. migration, religious identity, diaspora, intergenerational processes

1. Intersection of migration and religion in psychological research: identity and family processes

In the last two decades, academic interest in the topics of religion and migration – and their intersections – has grown steadily. However, for a long time, migration studies have neglected to thoroughly investigate the role played by religion in migrants' integration processes [1, 2, 3, 4]. Among the several factors concurring to said gap in the literature, these are especially apparent within psychological research. Drawing on this acknowledgment, the following paragraphs briefly introduce the factors concurring to the gap in psycho-social literature on the role played by religion in integration processes.

Firstly, it is worth noting that a "deficit model" has for a long time dominated scientific psycho-social literature on post-migration processes. In other words, psycho-social research on post-migration processes has been conducted from a perspective focusing on the stressful and traumatic nature of migratory transition [5]. Moreover, reliance upon theoretical perspectives emphasizing stressors, trauma, and risk factors has become increasingly prominent in studies on groups and categories of migrants generally

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considered as more vulnerable. These include forced migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, as they generally cope with multiple traumas in pre-migration, during their journey, as well as in resettlement countries [6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11]. The focus on adverse conditions, struggles and suffering faced by vulnerable and not vulnerable immigrants has prevented from acknowledging that religion plays a central role in migrants' lives, and one of the sources of support they can turn to during all phases of migratory transition. Furthermore, in the case of forced migrations, individuals' religious affiliation has only been considered as a key factor in identifying pre-migration traumas and motives to migrate from their respective country of origin [1].

Secondly, until recently, an almost exclusive focus in psychological studies on psychological acculturation [2] has prioritized the role played by ethnic-cultural components in migrants' integration processes and migrants' adjustment to the host society over the role played by religious aspects [12, 13, 14].

As an upshot of these two factors, not only have religion and religiosity often been neglected, but also frequently identified as a hindrance for migrants' integration, adaptation, and psychosocial well-being. Religion and religiosity have been considered a source of discrimination and prejudice (in host societies as well as in origin countries), a barrier to integration and acculturation, a cause of radicalization and legitimation of hate towards outgroups, and a threat to social coexistence. This is especially true in the European context (as opposed to the North American one) characterized by highly fragmented and secularized societies, by the presence of ambivalent and hostile attitudes toward religion and towards Muslim immigrant communities [4,15,16]. More recently, the adoption of a salutogenic[3] point of view in clinical and family studies has led to a renewed interest towards protective processes and positive resources capable of supporting individuals and families during resettlement life phases [5, 6, 17, 18, 19, 20]. Among different types of individual and relational resources that enhance migrants' resilience in the face of migration challenges, religiosity is increasingly recognized as a crucial, positive dimension at every stage of migration and across different sub-groups of migrants (adult or youth migrants, forced migrants or labor migrants, migrant belonging to specific ethno-religious minorities) [1, 3, 21, 22, 23]. Challenging the notion that "religion" constitutes a problem for migrants' integration in host societies and for social cohesion, many studies have contributed to explore migrants' religious experience at the individual level and the family level. In what follows, these two levels are addressed in turn.

On an individual level, religious faith, spiritual beliefs, and sense of belonging to a religious community are key protection factors [24]. This is especially apparent as migrants – and especially vulnerable migrants such as refugees – resettle in a new society and try to tune into a new culture [8, 9, 12, 18, 23, 25, 26, 27]. Although academic interest in this area has largely neglected the experience of children and youth [3, 25], many scholars have contributed to show that religion and spirituality can alleviate pre- and

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[2] The process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups [28]. This two-dimensional model of acculturation aims at assessing how immigrants are able to both navigate between their own heritage culture and the host culture, combining customs, norms, values, and practice stemming from these two cultural frameworks [29].

[3] The word "salutogenesis" derives from Latin "salus" which translates into "health", and Greek "genesis" which means "origin". Unlike deficit model investigating negative consequences and maladjustment caused by critical events and traumas, a salutogenic perspective [20, 30, 31] focuses on sources of strength and capacities that people and groups can mobilize in facing stressors and challenges and that contribute to positive adaptation.

post-migration suffering and delusion by providing hope for the future, meaning, and sense of purpose. Religious beliefs and practices help migrants maintaining a sense of identity and to mitigate the fear of losing original cultural identification. Moreover, religious beliefs and practices foster connection to personal history and cultural identity. On an individual level, studies have shown that faith provides a reliable source of inner strength to survive vulnerable conditions and adversities that migration and resettlement experiences present. A recent qualitative study conducted by Zanfrini and Antonelli [32] with forced migrants is a testimony to the supporting and empowering function that religion and spirituality have played in participants' migration trajectory, representing for many vulnerable migrants a "balm for the soul" all along the perilous journeys, extended time in transit countries as well as resettlement [33].

On the family level, two main relational processes pertaining migrants' religion have been explored and identified as crucial in explaining adjustment to the host context. These processes are to be found, respectively, a) inside the family, in the strength of intergenerational religious transmission; b) outside the family, in social ties within religious communities and faith-based organizations.

Along migration transition, family is the privileged place for transmission of values between different generations. More specifically, intergenerational religious transmission refers to a long-term process by which the system of religious values, beliefs, and practices held by previous generations is passed down to the next ones. This mechanism has almost exclusively been explored from a dyadic parental perspective, by measuring the distance from or conflict in values, traditions, and practices within parent-child dyads. In this regard, some studies in comparative empirical research seem to suggest that religious transmission is stronger and more effective in ethnic/religious minority families, in particular when comparing Muslim families migrated to Western Europe with native families or non-Muslim immigrant families [34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40]. Furthermore, several authors tend to consider this struggle to preserve ethnic and religious identity through generations a successful strategy to ensure in-group solidarity, loyalty and family cohesion among immigrant families who feel threatened by secularized Western European contexts [2, 29, 41, 42, 43, 44]. Aside from the few studies involving Christian minority migrants [45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50], research has primarily explored said theme in relation to the experience of Muslim families migrated to "Western" contexts. At any rate, such studies corroborate the observed continuity in religious values and practices across generations and a strong intergenerational solidarity that characterize religious life in these immigrant families.

As far as the second topic explored in family-based literature goes, migrants' experiences in resettlement countries are frequently characterized by aggregation around religious institutions and faith-based organizations (Churches, places of worship). For many migrants, and especially for forced migrants and refugees, positive network relationships within religious communities and Church attendance represent an essential part of life [22]. As well as being places of worship and prayer, these are places where migrants seek and receive material and emotional support, where migrants build social networks and bond with other migrants and with members of host societies, where they can relive a cultural connection with their history and their country of origin, they preserve cultural (linguistic, religious, ethnic) identity and a sense of belonging, can find responses to the need for community affiliation [1, 4, 22, 23, 51, 52, 53].

Despite the growing literature about the salience of religious experience in personal and family migration histories, most European psychological literature focuses primarily on Islam and Muslim migrants [13]. Other religious (both Christian and not Christian)

affiliations hold a marginal position in current research, either because they remain numerically marginal, or because they are not perceived as threatening. This situation presents few exceptions, including recent studies [33, 49, 50, 54, 55] on migration experiences of Middle Eastern Christians who have suffered religious persecution and discrimination in their home countries and who resettled in Western Europe. For example, the resettlement experiences of some Middle Eastern Christians groups are the focus of multi-site fieldwork projects conducted in some North European countries [45, 48, 49]. In addition to highlighting the prominent role played in the host countries by religious institutions and churches around which immigrants aggregate, these studies show how marginalization and double minority condition (in their country of origin and in the host country) experienced by these migrant communities in the host societies affect their diasporic identity and integration processes [49]. In other words, resettlement experiences and cultural encounters that Middle Eastern Christian migrants live in host societies risk to reproduce marginalization and exclusion, «due to being made invisible as Christians and visible as Middle Eastern Muslims» [49].

Considering the lack of psychological studies analyzing Middle Eastern and African Christian immigrant experiences, the present study[4] aims to explore the post-migration experience of Coptic Orthodox families immigrated from Egypt to Italy. In addition, unlike the vast amount of existing research focusing on individual immigrants, this study adopts a family perspective by collecting and comparing narratives of two different family generations (first-generation parents and their second-generation adolescent children).

The migration experience of Egyptian Coptic minority in Europe – and Italy in particular – is especially noteworthy. Numerically, migrant Copts represent a small community within a religiously and ethnically diverse migratory landscape. Based on Ismu's recent figures,[5] migrant population in Italy exhibits an extremely diverse religious composition. Whilst Muslim immigrants make up 29.3% of all resident foreigners, several Christian minorities (in particular, 29.4% Orthodox Christians, mainly Romanians and Ukrainians; 3.1% Evangelical Christians; 0.3% Copts) and other religious minorities (Buddhists 3.2%; Hindu 1.8%; Sikhs 1.0%) enrich Italy's religious landscape.

Numbering between 18,000 and 40,000 individuals,[6] Immigrant Orthodox Coptic community in Italy constitutes a religious minority both within the Italian context and within the Muslim-majority Egyptian immigrant group officially residing in Italy, that numbers 128,095 individuals (84,258 males, 43,837 females) as of January 1, 2020 [56]. About the 70% of Egyptian immigrants live in Lombardy, the region in Northern Italy where this study has been conducted thanks to the collaboration of the Coptic Church.

[5] https://www.ismu.org/immigrati-e-religioni-in-italia-comunicato-stampa-14-9-2020/
[6] https://www.ismu.org/ventottesimo-rapporto-sulle-migrazioni-2022/

2. The empirical study on migrant Coptic minority

Thanks to the mediation and supervision of a few members of local Coptic Churches located in Northern Italy, in 2017 ten migrant Coptic Orthodox families coming from Egypt were recruited to participate in the empirical explorative study presented here. For each family belonging to the recruited sample, both parents and a preadolescent\adolescent child took part in the interviews, totaling 30 participants. These consisted of, respectively 10 first-generation fathers, 10 first-generation mothers, and 10 second-generation children. Aged between 37 and 51 (M=44.9), interviewed fathers had been living in Italy for 19.4 years on average (range: 17-27 y.). Migrated from Egypt to Italy through family reunification and aged between 34 and 43 (M=38.4), mothers had been living in Italy for 15 years on average (range: 9-18 y.). Aged between 13 and 16 (M= 13.5) and for the majority born in Italy (only 2 had been reunited with their families before they were two), pre-adolescent and adolescent children (5 males, 5 females) were mostly attending secondary school.

Upon granting anonymity to participants and collecting their signed consent forms, individual semi-structured interviews with each adult or adolescent participant took place at the Church the respondents regularly attend. Interviews were conducted by researchers with extensive experience in qualitative interviewing and (forced) migration-related topics [57, 58].

The interview template aimed at gauging interviewees' perceptions of the changes occurred in their lives following migration (only for adult respondents), of the challenges and hardships faced in Italy, personal and family immigration history, identity construction processes, intergenerational dynamics family relationship and community context (family, school, work, leisure).

Interviews were conducted in Italian. On average, adult and young participants presented differing levels of fluency in Italian, and the interview process faced some linguistic hurdles with adult interviewees.

To carry out a thematic analysis of the interviews, the latter were recorded and professionally transcribed. To conduct data analysis, Atlas.ti 7.0 was used [59]. Subsequently, transcripts were uploaded on the database and separately coded by two researchers. To increase the study's credibility and validity, transcripts were reviewed by external team members without direct involvement with the data analysis.

The findings deepened our understanding of the experience of several families sharing a strong ecclesial belonging and keen participation in what their Church promotes. However, due to the potential bias in the sampling process, it is not possible to gauge the extent to which said results may be considered representative of other Egyptian Coptic immigrants living in Italy.

3. Results

Thematic analysis carried out on the interview transcripts allowed to identify several themes, as well as specificities and commonalities emerging from parents' and children narratives.

Findings have been organized around four main themes: *relevance of religiosity as private and public experience; religious intergenerational processes; religious identity in parents and adolescents; perception of world outside the family*. In what follows, each theme will be addressed in turn.

As far as the relevance of religiosity is concerned, said theme emerged from parents and children's interviews alike, both at the individual level and at the collective level. Independently from age and generation of immigration, interviewees consider religious faith and religious experience as a remarkable and essential part of their private and social life. The centrality of the religious experience is articulated both on a private level (strength of personal faith, religious beliefs, attachment to religion and own Church) and on a community level (Church attendance, community ceremonies, ritual celebrations, social gathering in religious place). Furthermore, for both children and parents, these two dimensions of religiosity are deeply intertwined: personal faith finds expression in collective rites and practices occurring in spaces for community encounters (the Coptic Church). Interviewed families acknowledge the centrality of faith as a personal resource, and the salience of their attachment to the Churches and clergy thanks to the fundamental role they play in the countries of immigration.

> For me it is important to live, to pray, to meet someone who is also a priest and maybe make confession, to stay in church. [Mother 5]

> Faith is fundamental in my life, everything I do is related to faith... during the day there is Mass, a specific prayer, and I attend it every day and every week I go to the Sunday Mass and on Saturday, too, on Saturday morning, then there are the afternoon prayers and the vespers at night which I always attend… [Son 1]

> … we love the Church… […], it is part of my identity, something specific of our life and Church, Mass, and prayer always! [Mother 6]

From conducted interviews, *intergenerational religious transmission* emerges as shared responsibility of adults (mother, fathers, priests, bishop) towards younger generations that –contrary of first-generation migrants– have never, or only briefly, lived in Egypt. Interviews have highlighted how parents and religious ministers strive to pass down faith, religious belief, and practices. Said intergenerational transmission of values aims at granting adults a certain continuity of individual churchgoing experiences as well as at ensuring loyalty to a sacred tradition and obedience to what the Mother Church preaches to diasporic churches. On the family and community level, said intergenerational dynamic is therefore articulated through a strong bond with homeland Egypt.

> No, faith hasn't changed our church, here it is the same as the one in Egypt, nothing changes. Even there, all my life I was like him (points at her son) always at church and always at Catechism with parents always for us. [Mother 1]

> We are Christians, we have been used to it since we were born, we are always in church and do a lot of things we grew up like this and then I want that my children, too, grow up like we have lived, always growing up here in church and become children of God, not children of the world, that is what we want to be, children of God. [Mother 1]

> No, I can't see the difference. Here the church does everything… all Masses, the Holy Week, Christmas, Easter, everything, everything…. [Mother 5]

Most of all my dad and my mum are very devoted to the church, to Christianity, they never let I go, my dad always prays for anything and most of all my dad ... [Son 1]

My parents even at Catechism they always tell me: when you don't manage to do something… let's make an example, during a school test, you know that you have studied a lot, say that you've been studying that book for three hours, to pass the History test and then you can't remember anything and then you recall the teaching of your parents at Catechism and you make the sign of the cross and maybe then you calm down, you trust in Jesus and then maybe you can also hope that the school test goes well. [Son 2]

Each Saturday I come here, I do catechism, we do the lesson … Then after the lesson we do a very small in-depth session to go over a bit of history, then at the end of the lesson they ask us what did you understand and what it is it seems best to you to make up for your mistakes. [Son 1]

I think I gave everything, the right path and the wrong path. So, the church is always important […] that children are born like my son, young, so young until they marry her inside the church […] otherwise even children outside get lost. I mean, the church is our mum, a mother… which is also our very own mum. [Mother 5]

Families see priests, bishops, and metropolitans as a guide and a crucial reference point. Aiming at concretely helping families as well as, it seems, marking the distance from outside society and its institutions – such as schools and young people's places to gather and socialize –, these figures take part in families' ordinary and extraordinary decision-making. Moreover, compared to other Christian denominations (e.g., Catholic Church), because within the Coptic Church priests and ministers are allowed to marry, family roles (father, husband.) and religious roles (priest) sometimes overlap. The upshot of this is that in some cases the line between the domestic sphere and the religious sphere, and between family roles and religious roles is blurred. This is especially apparent in the words of interviewed children whose father is also a priest.

In my community I'm considered different because of my father who is also a priest, so I am also a little privileged in my religion for example I can stand on the altar to help the priest compared to another even older than me, I can greet the bishop, may have more contact with the bishop than another ... I'm also an altar boy and my dad always told me that the altar boy is like the angel and when I do something stupid or wrong, my father asks me "well, are you behaving like an angel?" I answer: "No". "If you are an altar boy you should be behaving like an angel" he says to me. [Son 1]

For Coptic people, the priest is a very important figure, then always rely on this priest when they don't know where to come, for me with my community there are always meet-ups, when they have problems they call me, always some… and …strength… joy to gather together. [Father 1]

> We followed advice from metropolitan A. who even before becoming priest, for us he was always a father, a father for everything, and he tried to give the right advice, put people on the right path and, I mean, has always passed on that who does good, finds good, a right path is always right, so, I mean… we have, we have that he has pointed in the right direction, so let's hope that we did very few mistakes, or almost none at all. [Father 5]

As far as *religious identity* is concerned, self-identification as migrant Egyptian Copt and the belonging to the Coptic community are central elements both for first generation adults and for their adolescent children. However, identity-specific contents also reveal differences when comparing narratives of parents and children. Amongst interviewed mothers and fathers, the main religious identity contents concern the themes of *diaspora* and of *martyrdom*, underlying the continuity between their own identity and their origins, as well as with the history of the Coptic Church. As far as identity is concerned, individuals unite in their being "scattered" and "suffering" because of this fate. At the same time, they are strong, they are not scared, they are proud, and they brave said destiny with inner strength and faith. Martyrdom conveys the same spiritual strength that animates Coptic diaspora and thus the destiny of all migrants and immigrant Coptic Egyptian families. Diaspora and all the suffering it implies acquire meaning because they are a testimony to faith, because they are inscribed in serving Christ and in taking on the mission for others. Attributing at once sorrow and glory to the decision to migrate, a woman claims, "*That's why they're scattered – our pain is our glory*".

For parents, then, religious identity forms through continuity with the millennia-strong history of the Coptic Church as well as with fellow Egyptians currently living in Egypt or migrated elsewhere. Speaking of Christians who were killed in Egypt, mothers taking part in interviews state and reiterate that "*No one is afraid to die*"; martyrdom is "*not a bad thing*" – rather, the latter is a destiny, ultimately a testimony of faith.

It is also worth pointing out that, among parents, religious and ethnic dimensions of identity are closely intertwined.

> None of us wanted to leave Egypt because it is the most beautiful country in the world for us, but with all these bombs, with all these martyrs he has urged of us to go and bring the mission to others. [Mother 1]

> [being Coptic] is the most beautiful thing in the world even if suffering is a part of our glory as a Church. This is our core teaching. The martyrs of the Coptic Church and the suffering in the Middle East, the whole Church, especially us because the Christian majority in the Middle East has taught me our bishop, he has always taught me that our pain is our glory… this is part of their cross also for us. If you are Christian in Egypt, you are not Muslim, this has been our identity and this to nurture oneself. [Mother 2]

> I had to leave family behind to go to a place where you don't know where you're going to stay, what to eat, but this is why there is faith within us, that we serve Christ this is why there is not fear to go far away and serve like this, my family gave me the courage to serve like this… [Father 1]

Coptic means that the Coptic Church has always… been persecuted, it has… they have offered to their sons, as martyrs do, so I'm happy… uhm… I'm Coptic, uhm… and so our Church… let's say…we were few in our country… [Father 5]

Like the presence of the Lord in Egypt and Christians in Egypt keep on until the last day on Earth and they proclaim his presence here, […]. They are scattered because of this, because it is a very honorable thing… not for us to be the only ones to keep his Kingdom, we need to give it for others, too [Mather 1].

Among the second-generation participants, religious identity draws on comparisons with Italian society. Furthermore, participants clearly distance themselves from their Italian peers and from their attitude towards religious experience. The comparison revolves around identity contents such as the relevance of religion in everyday experience, articulated in the extent to which individuals attend religious services, engage in assiduous prayer and practices. For second-generations individuals, then, religious identity is built by contrast with the outside world (the world of their respective Italian peers, of Christian and Non-Christian Italian families). Comparison acquires and holds a central role and is articulated on the plane of community religious practice – churchgoing; attending service; confessing; taking part in rituals and ceremonies.

We are different from Italians... [Daughter 6]

Very few Italians go to church… some [of their Italian peers] are Christians and they have no faith at all, they are Christians, but they do not even believe in Jesus… [Daughter 6]

Being a member of a Coptic family is something that surely makes us different from the others… because everyone is used to one way of living, whilst I am used to a very different one. Nowadays, I see that the religious sphere shrinks in Italian families, whereas it grows a lot in Egyptian families where it is always increasing because of the persecutions, the suffering, and the suffering of Christians worldwide and most of all in the Middle East and in the East and most of all in Egypt. [Son 1]

Lastly, the *representation of world outside* the Coptic community, the "Other" (host society, Italian society, Italian school, and Italian institutions) that Coptic families met after resettlement also appears as a prominent topic. Representation of Italian society is monolithic, without differentiations: the interviewees feel they must face an external world not only perceived as culturally alienating, but also as "threatening" and "negative". Interestingly, parents and children share said representation of a threatening and dangerous world. As a specular counterpoint, the space of the Church is "home", safe and quiet refuge, in which to find religious, affective, and material support, as well as reconnect with a collective memories and identity.

I mean, they [priests] teach you a lot about how to behave outside, when somebody is unkind to you, I mean from the lives of Saints you learn how to react outside. [Son 2]

No one manages to live here in Milan without the church, because the church is just too important… important to live, to pray, to meet someone who is a priest and maybe confess, the chance also to be in church that is a quiet place, far away from life, from the stress of the outside world and so church is simply too beautiful a moment. [Mother 5]

The outside world is also ugly, boys outside, what happens in schools…. otherwise even children outside get lost. I mean, the church is our mum, a mother… which is also our very own mum. [Mother 5]

…so about friendships only at church, there is not friendship at school… girls have many friends they attend catechism together and afterwards they play together, there is quite a few friends, the churches for us I cannot live without churches. [Father 3]

4. Discussion

This study provides interesting and original findings on the post migration experience of Coptic Egyptian families who represent a Middle East Christian minority migrated to Italy and living in its Northern regions. Compared with Muslim immigrant groups who are at the center of political, societal, and academic attention, Middle East and African Christian minorities have rarely been studied and our results highlight the complexities of their resettlement experience as a (forced) migrant and religious minority who relocated in a European Christian and secularized context. For interviewed families, immigration represents a crucial transition where identity and belonging are renegotiated and reconstructed.

In addition, combining the voices of several members from the same migrant family into a family-based scope whilst designing the study has allowed to explore processes of adjustment and identity redefinition. It is possible that bias in the sampling process limits the generalizability of our finding, as collected narratives are related to experiences of families who share a strong attachment to Coptic Churches and high involvement in religious activities. But it is also worth noting that our results are in line with other research conducted in Europe involving minorities of Christian and non-Christian immigrants [46, 47, 49, 50].

Religiosity in its intertwined individual and social expressions is a salient part of interviewees' everyday life and a key fact in personal identity. Parent and children's narrations share many elements that reveal the strong attachment to own religion, the deep sense of belonging to a religious community, the rooted link with own country of origin and the Mother Church in Egypt, recognizing faith and spiritual life as an essential source of resilience.

Before being a matter of personal and private choice, religion and religiosity are regarded as a responsibility of the Coptic community towards the younger generations who are the heirs of cultural heritage, history, and ties with the Motherland. Parents are not alone in this effort but are supported by Coptic Church, religious structures, and religious clergy.

The salience of religion finds expression as great effort and commitment on the part of that adult generations (parents and religious leaders) to pass religious values, traditions, and faith onto younger generations, as well as to preserve practices and rituals [60, 61,

62].. Interviewees emphasize the importance of religion in the education children receive within family and in Churches where youth have also the opportunity to socialize with co-ethnic peers.

Focusing on ingroup religious and ethnic distinctiveness acts as an intergenerational social glue, maintaining the link between past and present, between "here" and "there", and between diasporic Churches and Mother Church.

As already corroborated by several psychological studies, intergenerational transmission of a strong ethnic religious identity plays a key role as protection factor for migrants who frequently face distress and fatigue due to immigration itself [2]. Therefore, focusing on the history of the Egyptian Coptic Church and its features responds to the needs of communities of immigrants living in Western countries where they face marginalization [63].

Through the voices of two generations interviewed, Coptic families bear a clear religious identity in which continuity/closeness with the tradition of their Mother Church and opposition/distance from the host society find expression at once.

If both the narratives of parents and adolescents confirm the salience of religion in post-migration, it is worth dwelling on how they reconstruct religious identity in the host society and what different strategies they use to reinforce their collective distinctiveness. These identity strategies are different for first generation adult and second-generation children.

Among first generation parents seems to emerge a religious "diasporic" identity. The term "diaspora" – that in the last two decades has uncritically proliferated in political and academic discourse as noted by some authors [64, 65, 66] – has been chosen here to underline that core identity aspects among parents reference the symbolic and practical connection with a "home" outside the country of immigration (the homeland, the Mother Church), as well as with all dispersed persons of similar religious affiliation [60]. And yet, in Vertovec's words [66], this «type of consciousness (involving aspects of collective memory, desire and an awareness of identities spanning 'here-and-there')» (p. 7), keeps the return myth alive. Diasporic identity contents (suffering and enduring like the first martyrs, struggling for their faith, brave and protagonist of their destiny) convey continuity between the past and the present, between the "here" and "there", as well as a proximity with the martyrs of the Mother Church in Egypt.

Indeed, within such identity contents, it is possible to also recognize components and lexicon belonging to the narrative promoted by the Coptic Orthodox Church on the transnational level [47, 60]. Said elements include the Pharaonic heritage, the twenty centuries of Christianity, the apostolic foundation in Egypt and the glorious early era, throughout the past fourteen centuries. These provide evidence for the resilience of the Church, for its strength and spirituality, alongside the "miracle of survival". Drawing on the interviews, it can be suggested that parents view migration as emphasizing the celebration of the group's destiny. In this view, mission reflects the strong link between Mother Church in Egypt and diasporic churches. In comparison with second-generation narrative, findings suggest that parents seek more strongly after a teleological, transcendental meaning to their painful migration experience.

Unlike their parents, religious identity contents among adolescent children emphasize opposition with a highly secularized Italian society and with Italian peers, who are considered as little or not at all actively religious. For the youngest – born or arrived in Italy – the religious themes of martyrdom and of the diaspora remain in the background, emphasising the gap with the outside world, especially when it comes to the religious practice.

The two elements emerged from the narratives – the general orientation towards the homeland and the perception of an irreconcilable religious difference with Italian society – seem to be intertwined with feelings of threat from the outside world. The cultural encounter with the Other recurring across the interviews coincides with the encounter with "Italians". Interactions with Italian people often bear negative shades. This is because Italian society is essentially considered non-religious and removed from faith and religious practice. The emphasis on the distinctiveness of the Coptic identity raises doubts and questions on the risks that could arise from such a stark juxtaposition to – and separation from – Italian people and the Italian society as stereotyped in the interviews. This choice of remaining separate and distinct from mainstream society is in line with what suggested by recent studies conducted in Western immigration countries and involving migrant Coptic communities [48, 63, 67]. At the same time this choice of separation seems also linked to another element, namely a certain invisibility of this ethnic-religious minority within resettlement country's society [48] which appears to hamper cultural encounters with the local majority and its communities (Christians, other immigrant communities). In other words, Coptic immigrants are likely to experience marginalization in the society of immigration as Coptic minority (minority both within their country of origin and within the Muslim-majority migrant Egyptian community living in Italy) remain invisible as Christians.

In the long run, the identified gap can become challenging, especially for younger generations who are born and raised in Italy. This happens because it is expected of them to be loyal to a migration mandate that requires them to preserve and reproduce their cultural and religious heritage, and to prioritize the latter opening towards the new culture. Indeed, it can be suggested that a strong commitment to the values passed down from their parents and the Coptic community is a strong protection factor. However, these considerations should be weighed against the question of whether said tendency enables intergenerational negotiation, if the choices of the younger generations deviate from prescribed norms and rules. In addition to this, even if younger generations fully endorse the value system passed down from their culture and family of origin, a relationship with the outside world grounded in defensive or utilitarian attitudes and behavior would be problematic. Across immigrant communities, it is not uncommon to underscore their own distinctiveness and unique features in opposition to the new context. The main issue concerns the extent to which the Coptic community and families want to maintain this separate acculturative orientation or instead pursue a perspective of greater integration, allowing their members to be open to the new society and culture while maintaining their cultural roots [28, 67, 68]. In the long run, integration is widely acknowledged as the best solution for immigrants and the host society in terms of personal and social well-being. Nevertheless, to achieve this goal, both the Coptic community and Italian society must accept the challenge of crossing their respective borders and dare to start interacting with each other. The fact that they share a common Christian faith can help bridge the gap, allowing for mediation and personal contact.

In our research, the challenges encountered by the families interviewed when facing the encounter with the Other are articulated in the perception of the external world as full of pitfalls and threats, a world of which one must be cautious. However, at the same time, in the external world it is possible to reaffirm the particularity and strength of one's own Church. The risk of an introverted tendency and of exhibiting reactive solutions and behaviors remains evident.

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