

Editorial

Introduction for Special Issue “The Role of Religions in a Pluralistic Society”

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There are often events that reshuffle the cards, that is, challenge theories and methodological perspectives. These occur in every field of science and in religion, too. We can start with 11 September 2001, and the subsequent events dealing with jihadism and radicalization processes: the aftermath has reshaped relations between Islam and the West, and Muslims (sometimes European or American citizens) have come “under scrutiny” in a climax of mistrust (Bonino and Ricucci 2021). More recently, three events have helped enrich the debate about the role, visibility, and place of religions in the world and the lives of men and women: the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the rise of nationalism in several countries stressing the link between identity, religion, and national belonging (Kostruba and Fishchuk 2023; McLarren 2023).

The global pandemic closed houses of worship and brought religion indoors quite unexpectedly, through new, often demonized technologies. Paradoxically, the sacred has returned through rituals held online, on television, and in religious group chats, even though much research on religious socialization has shown that the role of the family in passing on religion is diminishing. Even if one wants to distance oneself from it, messages about distancing, about the management of places, and about the lack of care for the ritual of death, have inserted the themes and languages of religions into often-dry messages and daily news. Several studies reported a revival of prayer and religious participation during the pandemic, underscoring the still vital and effective link between religion and well-being (Kowalczyk et al. 2020; Upenieks and Ellison 2022; Jacobi et al. 2022; Bueno et al. 2023).

Two years after the pandemic, war returned to Europe, with the deployment of religious leaders and calls for shared values across religions in a general political debate occurring as far-right and nationalistic parties returned to power (Morieson 2021; Yilmaz 2023; Haynes 2020; Sadlon 2021). Religion is again intertwined with politics, entering the public debate and returning to the stage of international relations after the long wave of the French secularism debate reduced religion (at least in the European context) to a symbolic element in the political arena (Kaya and Tecmen 2019). The scenario is quite different in the United States and in various contexts—from Africa to Asia—where religion is again becoming a justification for regime change and the imposition of norms and behaviours in the name of a radicalized interpretation of religions, as happened in Afghanistan in August 2021.

Therefore, one could conclude that religions not only have not disappeared but are enjoying the best of health. At least, this is true if one judges by their pervasiveness and their capillary presence in all spheres: public and private, political (religiously motivated governing parties), economic (if we take the significant development of Islamic finance and Sharia-compliant products in Western markets into account) and social (the role of social-shock absorbers displayed by religious organizations from Caritas to Islamic Relief, to name a few) (Smith 2017; Wuthnow 2020). Additionally, in sports, there are more and more athletes thanking their God (think of the Moroccan player during the Soccer World Cup in summer, 2022, or the athletes—from various countries and religions—in the Summer



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Olympic Games in Tokyo after the pandemic), even if more attention used to be devoted to the discriminatory practices that occurred due to religious identity (Alpert 2022).

If the thermometer of visibility shows steadily increasing values, what about actual religiosity? What can be said about religions in heterogeneous cultural, economic, historical, and political contexts in terms of belief, affiliation, and behaviour?

The pivotal issue is that of integration (or clashes) among various cultural, religious and spiritual traditions in an increasingly multicultural social context—although, however, an intercultural approach is often feared (Coleman and Collins 2004). Although religions have experienced substantial changes to their diffusion and nature over time, one fact remains constant: they are inextricably entangled with the history, economics, politics and culture of societies and individuals. In this regard, religious and cultural identities form a significant part of current discourses on diversity within and beyond the European context (Giordan and Pace 2014; Pollack Detlef and Pickel 2016). These contributions try to develop the debate by considering various contexts (with both a comparative and single focus), social groups and religion(s) from scientific perspectives such as sociology and anthropology.

The contributions discuss the role of religion in plural societies from very different perspectives. Luca Bossi and Giulia Marroccoli place themselves in the Italian context, a country where the Catholic subculture continues to be prominent, and discuss the case of minorities in the context of immigration. In Italy, the socialization dynamics of intergenerational transmission are still an under-researched phenomenon (Cipriani et al. 2020; Costa and Morsello 2020). This is also true regarding the impact of migration on religiosity (Ricucci 2021). However, in a country with ongoing religious diversification, it is precisely the role of migrants that becomes increasingly important. In “«We Are Alone»: Intergenerational Religious Transmission and the Effect of Migration in Italy” the authors examine the importance of religious socialization in emigrant families. This study examines some of the most important elements of the intergenerational transmission of religion in Catholic, Muslim, and Orthodox families in Italy. What does it mean to transmit values, practices, and knowledge in a context where one’s religion is the religion of a minority and where the protagonists themselves, as immigrants, are expressions of minorities?

Then, we continue with the Italian context, which is an interesting field from the point of view of the intertwining of old and new scenarios of the religious, between the ongoing processes of secularization of the Italians (Garelli 2020) and the new contaminations due to the strong migration processes in the Mediterranean area. Rossana M. Salerno’s contribution “Interreligious Dialog and Pilgrimage: The Case of the Tamil Community in Palermo” presents some qualitative and ethnographic research findings on aspects of the religious experience of the new generations of the native Tamil community in the Italian city of Palermo, analyzed in comparison with the first generations of immigrants. The analysis focuses on particular occasions of religiosity that have taken place over the years, including the traditional and heartfelt celebrations in honour of Santa Rosalia, the city’s patron saint, and some interfaith dialogue meetings.

The discussion of religious pluralism is also intertwined with the issue of ethnic minorities and the connection between identity, religion, and national belonging (Sadlon 2021). This is the case with the Kashubs in Poland. The paper “The Role of Religion in Creating and Maintaining Ethnic Identity—The Example of the Kashubs in Poland”, written by Monika Mazurek, presents a case study, which is also battered by the winds of secularization, albeit to a lesser extent than in Italy. The Kashubs are a people now living in northern Poland on the Baltic Sea. They have no official status, as they are not considered an ethnic or national minority. Their community identity is formed on the basis of language, origin, inhabited territory and religion. Based on a study conducted among the members of the Kashubian-Pomeranian Association (Zrzeszenie Kaszubsko-Pomorskie), the paper analyzes the role of Catholic religion in this dynamic and sheds light on the process of ethnicization of religions.

If the view of Europe is predominantly Christian Catholic, two contributions invite reflection on other territorial contexts. The first concerns Malaysia, whose authors offer a reconstruction of the dynamics and processes of coexistence between Buddhism and Islam

in a country characterized by a strong religious pluralism, which can be considered a case study “par excellence”. A group of researchers composed of Wong Chin Yew, Abd Hair Awang, Sivapalan Selvadurai, Masor Mohd Noor and Peng Kee Chang, in the essay “A Comparative Study of Islam and Buddhism: A Multicultural Society Perspective”, aim to highlight the similarities and differences between Malaysia’s two major religions, Islam and Buddhism, from a pragmatic and multicultural perspective. The two religions are considered through a documentary analysis of secondary sources available on the Internet that relate to religious tenets, religious conflicts, and ideas for promoting harmonious social relations among believers.

Finally, the essay “Hybridising Minjian Religion in South China: Participants, Rituals and Architecture” discusses the nexus between tradition and modernity in the religious field in China. Traditional religion (Minjian or “folk religion”), which is widely practised in rural areas of southern China, has long been the subject of study. The authors (Huanyu Guo, Canglong Wang, Youping Nie, and Xiaoxiang Tang) point out the intellectual debate on this topic from the perspective of the relationship between state power and religious sentiment in contemporary Chinese society. Through field research in two villages, the authors focus on the blending of Minjian with modern elements in the form of rituals and elements of religious experience, which is presented as an ongoing phenomenon and a factor in the revival of traditional Chinese religion.

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