

## On the Role of Religion in the Decision to Migrate

*Laura Zanfrini*

In this chapter and in the following two, the attention will move from the societal level to the individual one, focusing on three main topics.

Firstly (Chapter 10), we will concentrate our attention on the role of religion as a push/pull factor influencing the decision to migrate and, consequently, as a factor contributing to trace the distinction between forced and voluntary migrations. Moving from the current debate about the increasing “porosity” of this distinction, we will discuss how the evidence from the fieldwork can help us describe and understand the role of the two key concepts represented by Religious Identity and Religious Liberty (see Chapter 2).

The second topic is represented by the procedure for the analysis of asylum applications (Chapter 11). Given the legislative framework in force in Italy (as it has been described in Chapter 9), we will discuss how the actual implementation of rules and procedures allows the emergence and the acknowledgement of those aspects variously connected with asylum seekers’ religious belongings.

Thirdly, we will discuss (Chapter 12) the space dedicated to the religious dimension and to the spiritual needs of migrants, also during the delicate phase of the first reception and re-elaboration of the migratory trauma, as well as the “functions” and meanings that (forced) migrants for religious reasons attribute to religion, seen both in its individual declination and in the collective one.

Methodologically, Chapters 10–12 are based on the following sources:

- a) A literature review on the discussed topics;
- b) Data and suggestions emerged from five focus groups discussion (FGDs),<sup>1</sup> which have globally involved around 40 key informants selected among executives, officials and operators of the reception system for asylum seekers; spiritual leaders and pastoral agents of different religions; representatives of Italian and international organizations and associations involved in the reception of asylum seekers; managers and members of the assessment commissions for asylum applications; local administrators; executives and officials of police stations and prefectures. The FGDs were held in Milan and Rome, from January to July 2017 and subsequently transcribed;

---

<sup>1</sup> FGDs were conducted by Laura Zanfrini and organized thanks to the cooperation of Annavittoria Sarli.

- c) Six semi-structured interviews with religious leaders and pastoral operators<sup>2</sup> belonging to different catholic organizations involved in the reception of migrants and asylum seekers. These interviews were conducted from May to October 2017, at the domiciles of the interviewed and subsequently transcribed.
- d) 20 in-depth interviews,<sup>3</sup> carried out from March 2017 to December 2018, with migrants and asylum seekers who, regardless of the entry channel and of their current legal status, have been significantly affected by their religious belonging; in other words, religion is a variable that influenced both their decision to migrate and the development of migration and insertion processes. Individuals to be interviewed were selected thanks to the suggestions coming from various experts and informants (including operators of the reception system, religious leaders, pastoral operators, attorneys in charge with asylum seekers assistance, and researchers). These interviews have been conducted either at the researchers' workplace or at other public places such as cafés, places of worship, and cultural associations. All the interviewed were clearly informed about the aims of the study and gave their verbal agreement once assured that no identificative elements would be inserted in the final report of the research or in any other public release of its results.

Notwithstanding these selective criteria and the large spectrum of informants activated, the conduction of the interviews proved to be more difficult than expected, mainly because of the relevant linguistic barriers. Some of the selected interviewed turned out to have a modest knowledge not only of the Italian language (despite in some cases they had been living in Italy for several years), but also of other languages known by the research team (English, French, Spanish, Arab). We also tried to involve a translator during the interview or in the process of transcription –particularly in the case of migrants coming from China– but the quality of the reports proved to be, in many cases, not adequate, thus making us have to remove them from the sample. Some other migrants appeared to be reluctant to describe their religious feelings and experience, despite the strong preparation of the interviewers and the clear illustration of the object of the study. This attitude could have to do with the bias already discussed (Chapters 1 and 2), which produces a rather negative consideration of religion and of religious belongings. As a consequence of these difficulties, we renounced to recur to a sophisticated methodology for

---

2 Semi-structured interviews were conducted by Silvia Serafini as part of the fieldwork for her final master degree dissertation.

3 In-depth interviews were conducted by Francesca Mungiarci and Annavittoria Sarli.

the text analysis, as initially envisaged, and we chose to only transcript parts of the interviews.<sup>4</sup> These, in any case, are particularly interesting and suggestive of the importance of the religious and spiritual dimension.

Finally, despite these weaknesses, remarkable insight emerged from the study, which confirms the general hypothesis of the research and provides new suggestions for their explanation. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the field-work turned out to be quite touching, not only from a professional point of view, but also as human beings. Narratives were always moving, and it also happened that the interviewed would cry and ask for a break to get themselves together. The researchers involved were profoundly hit by these testimonies, which definitely confirmed the awareness of the importance of the discussed topics. In a few cases, the interview marked the beginning of a new friendship between the researcher and the interviewed.

## 1 Faith Based Organizations as a Push/Pull Effect in the Migration to Italy

As described in the introductory chapter of this book (Chapter 1), our research has moved from the hypothesis that religion plays a significant role in the decision to migrate, much more than it is usually grasped. More precisely, together with the forms of mobility specifically driven by religious motives –in their multiple declinations–,<sup>5</sup> religion is supposed to play a greater role than usually acknowledged. Within the context of contemporary literature and theories (Massey *et al.*, 1993), the *institutional theory* offers the theoretical framework to capture the role of Faith Based Organizations (from now on: FBOs) as both push and pull factors, as well the *networks theory* highlights the importance of interpersonal links and social capital, possibly based on a common religious belonging, in reducing the costs and risks of migration, and in making the latter more feasible. As far Italy as a destination country is concerned, there is much empirical evidence on the key role played by religious institutions and

---

4 In some cases, we were obliged to adjust the syntactic of the text, in order to make the English translation understandable.

5 Including some forms escluded from the present study, but surely interesting from a sociological point of view, such as that involving Muslim people who left Europe to go to an Islamic country in order to break with a social model which contradicts their puritan aspirations (see Adraoui, 2015). Not to mention the phenomenon of religious radicalization that has caused the expatriation of so called foreign faighters.

religious affiliations in structuring specific migration chains originating from various countries of the world.

The same Italian migratory transition –from being a predominantly emigration to a predominantly immigration country– was announced, during the 1970s, by the influx of young women recruited as house-maids thanks to the presence, in their home countries, of Catholic missions, schools, and hospitals. Their arrival gave rise to various migratory networks doomed to acquire, with the passing of time, an extraordinary self-propelling power (among the most known, the chain linking Italy to the Philippines: Zanfrini & Asis, 2006). Another suggestive example is the influx from Senegal, mostly composed of young men affiliated to the *Muridiyya* Islamic brotherhood, a component of a larger migration system linking the sending communities with the multiple poles of the Senegal's Diaspora (Schmidtdi di Firedberg, 1994). This latter offers one of the most impressive examples of how migratory models, migratory cultures, and migratory systems can institutionalize around religious affiliations, thus offering even to very disadvantaged people, coming from marginal regions, the possibility to migrate and participate in transnational networks.

As illustrated by these same examples, religious links and connections help to explain not only the upsurge of specific migratory channels, but also the site and characters of the adaptation process. Finally, some of the subject involved in the study suggested that there can be “vicious” links between migration and FBOs, if not a sort of contamination with the so called “migration industry” and –in the case of “fake” FBOs– with its illegal and criminal components (e.g. those involved in human trafficking, sexual exploitation, drug dealing, or in illegal transfer of remittances). This aspect has not until now emerged from “official” sociological research, but it has been directly denounced by some of our key informants and interviewed migrants:

In Europe ... (...), most African Churches are just for money, so people go to church and give offers, but there are others that are from God. I'm not surprised about these things, because it's written in the Bible that when the time comes, so many priests act in the name of God, but are not from God. So, I'm not surprised, because it is written in the Bible. (Man – Nigeria – Catholic Christian)

(...) unfortunately, the immigration channel to request international protection is used by criminal networks, obviously in an inappropriate way, especially for women. I am talking about those who use this channel because they are fleeing from war and then arrive here. Now, I do not know the percentages, but they are certainly not all of those who arrive, and it is a channel used by criminal networks, by networks dealing with

prostitution, and even by those who give alms. Now we are trying to understand ... (Woman – social worker in the reception system)

A particularly emblematic example is provided by the case of Nigerian women forced to prostitution, many of whom are held hostages by their exploiters through woodoo curses threatening their family members at home.

As controversially suggested by an African Catholic priest, met thanks to the teaching activity of this chapter's author, together with family members, also religious leaders contribute to shape the path and the course of migration, as they "encourage, advise and direct the course of affairs not only for the would-be migrants but also for their own personal interests and advantages that they hope to share at the end of the successful journey" (Man – Ghana – Catholic Christian religious leader).

Realizing how desperate many Ghanaians want to migrate to the West, many pastors and religious leaders who are more interested in preaching prosperity than in salvation are now encouraging mass migration by offering endless prayers for prospective migrants. In almost all religious programs in Ghana by the so-called Charismatic Churches, except for the mainstream Churches, such as crusade, all night vigils, conventions, and preaching, pastors pray that the dreams of travelling to the land of the light-skinned man are fulfilled. Some of these are broadcast on radio and on tv. With fake testimonies (...) people are persuaded and believe in them (...) because the "men of God" have spoken. How these poor people make it to their destinations is not the pastors' concern. What they are usually concerned about is the fat monthly "tithe" the would-be migrants would be pumping into their churches' coffers or directly into their pockets once they get there. Out of ignorance, selfishness or greed, they fail to use their commanding position to educate people about the perils and discomfort of migrating to the so-called civilized countries.

Some pastors, quite ridiculously, are ready to pray for the fulfilment of the dreams of someone ignorantly planning to travel to unknown destinations (...). In brief, many pastors have turned into powerful agents of mass migration of Ghanaians to other continents through their prophecies and predictions addressed to people who are weak but ready to go a long way to see "Heaven on Earth". (Man – Ghana – Catholic Christian religious leader)

According to what has emerged during the fieldwork, the suspect of an immigration triggered by "religious" links is particularly pertinent in the case

of Chinese affiliated to the “Church of God Almighty”. Since its establishment –dating back to 1991– this FBOs has been the object of strong persecution by the Chinese government, which has condemned hundreds of thousands of its affiliated to prison, and in a few cases to death penalty, thus encouraging most of them to expatriate.<sup>6</sup>

In China, repression is really very strong. I have been persecuted several times. Even now, I have some wounds and scars. For these reasons, I wanted to leave China. Actually, I had no choice, I was forced. Those reasons were enough for me to leave China. (Man – China – Church of God Almighty)

Exactly during the time-span of our study, the presence of migrants affiliated with this Church has become more visible also in Italy through the arrival of a group of people (mostly women); some of them are now assisted by Evangelic churches. Since they are often “hosted” by co-nationals who exploit them as cheap labor force, someone suspects that they arrived through some sort of smuggling organizations specialized in offering to the victims of religious persecutions the possibility to escape. The fact is that some of these women are still very worried about their situation. They tend to avoid any contact with Chinese people (and are therefore reluctant to ask for Chinese translators, despite their lack of linguistic competences), because they fear to be denounced and eventually forcibly sent back to China; at the same time, they are afraid of the possible repercussions on their left-behind family members, thus showing the “transnational character” of the phenomenon of religious-based persecutions, which reverberates, as suggested by this interviewee, also in everyday relations between the faithful.

I’m always afraid to meet other Chinese people. Sometimes the Chinese of Paolo Sarpi (*author’s note: a district of Milan with a strong concentration of Chinese people*) are businessmen and have strong relations with China. They often go to China for work. I also have a family in China and if they know me I do not want this to harm my family in China. Even among us, Christian brothers and sisters, we do not ask personal questions, we do not want to know details. (Woman – China – Church of God Almighty)

As we will describe later, in contemporary Italy, dramatically involved in the management of “mixed fluxes”, this kind of phenomena –on which, however,

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.cesnur.org/2017/almighty\\_china\\_report.pdf](https://www.cesnur.org/2017/almighty_china_report.pdf).

accurate and in-depth information is still lacking— contribute to fuel the idea that this kind of actors could encourage the arrival of bogus asylum seekers.

Still, FBOs can exercise a pull effect as well. This is particularly true, once again, in the case of Italy, thanks to the presence of the universal capital of Catholicism—Rome and the Vatican City—, where various pontifical universities and general houses of religious congregations are based and are able to attract different categories of migrants (from the members of the religious communities to the international students). Particularly on the occasion of special events (such as a Jubilee), the Holy See magnetizes the arrival of a huge number of “pilgrims”, who sometimes only have a one-way ticket, and who are usually interested in settling in the country, most of the times to rejoin some of their friends or extended family members. Moreover, Italy represents a particularly attractive destination for the so-called *fidei donum*, who are Catholic priests involved in a specific form of “circular migration”, which often turns into a permanent settlement. For the priests coming from the “global South”, the possibility to complete their education in Rome is sometimes interpreted as the harbinger of a future “career” within the ecclesiastical hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> Finally, many of the religious who go to study in Europe do not return to their home countries, either because they are destined for other tasks, or because they simply refuse to return.

Decidedly more relevant, in quantity terms, is the role played by many Catholic (or other Christian confessions) pro-migrant organizations, since they concur to create a “migrant-friendly” environment, which supports newcomers and vulnerable migrants, including undocumented ones, immediately after their arrival and in their process of adaptation. Just to cite an iconographic example, since the 1980s until today, migrants who have come to Milan have often carried with them a piece of paper with the address of the first aid service managed by the local Caritas, close to the Central Station.

Significantly, this supporting environment proves to be advantageous for all migrants, regardless of their country of origin and of their religious affiliations, and any migrant has the opportunity to directly take advantage from goods and services provided by religious charities and other kinds of FBOs (including the legal assistance offered on a free basis to the asylum applicants and to the denied asylum seekers who decide to appeal for a re-examination of their claim). In order to appreciate the relevance of these kinds of actors in the

---

7 Antwi-Boasiako, B. (AY 2016-17). *The Causes of Migration: The Ghanaian Experience*. Roma: Faculty of Pastoral Theology of Human Mobility, SIMI, Università Urbaniana (work prepared for the exam of the teaching of “Sociology of Human Mobility”).

contemporary Italian landscape, it is sufficient to report how, on June 2018,<sup>8</sup> 21,429 asylum seekers/migrants (among which more than 700 unaccompanied minors) were hosted in one of the 2,100 ecclesial structures in the 180 Catholic dioceses involved. 2,589 were hosted directly by the parishes, the remaining part within the SPRAR (protection system for asylum seekers and refugees), the CAS (extraordinary reception centers) or the center for minors managed through an agreement with the Ministry. Significantly, about a quarter of the hosting initiatives were entirely financed by their own funds. Furthermore, particularly in the Northern regions, migrants represent a large portion of the beneficiaries of initiatives addressed to the homeless, the poor, and other vulnerable people managed and financed by Catholic institutions. Single parishes, as well as Catholic movements and associations, are largely involved in a range of “pro-migrants” activity, from the help in the search of a job to the learning-support offered to foreign students. The composite landscape of Protestant Christian Churches as well is significantly involved. For example, we can note the commitment displayed in this field by the Waldensian Church. Through the inclusion services managed by the Waldensian Diakonia, it offers reception services for migrants who are hosted thanks to different programs, which follow the guidelines requested, and which are managed by Sprar services with a “diffused model” of reception (Chapter 9, §4). According to the last available data, in January 2019, more than 700 migrants were hosted in one of the reception services – the majority of which arrived through the “Humanitarian Corridors” program (see later). Moreover, the Waldensian Diakonia has recently partnered with Oxfam Italia and, together, they have opened the so-called “Community Centers” in Turin, Milan, Arezzo, Florence, and Catania, conceived as social meeting places offering consultancy services to the migrants and the local population.

Once again, thanks to the mobilization of some religious organizations (in the framework of an ecumenical initiative), humanitarian corridors were lunched in order to permit the secure travel and the legal entry of asylum seekers coming from unsafe countries. A first pilot project was launched, in December 2015, thanks to a collaboration between the Community of Sant’Egidio (a Catholic organization), the Federation of Evangelic Churches, the Waldensian and Methodist Churches to consider the arrival in Italy, over two years, of a thousand refugees from Lebanon (mostly Syrians who fled the war), Morocco (where most of those coming from sub-Saharan countries affected by civil wars and widespread violence land) and Ethiopia (Eritreans, Somalis and Sudanese). The Corridors are the result of a *Memorandum of Understanding*

---

8 Survey realized by the Italian Episcopal Conference on Dioceses active at 30 June 2018.

signed by the proponents, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and the Ministry of Interior, but are nevertheless funded by the organizations that promoted them, and implemented thanks to the commitment of other non-governmental actors. Beneficiaries have been selected on the basis of their level of vulnerability –regardless of their religious or ethnic background– and are provided with legal assistance for visas, hospitality and accommodation for a reasonable period of time, economic support for the transfer to Italy, and support in the integration process. Following this experience, this approach has been established with the particular engagement of the Migrantes Foundation, i.e. the body of the Italian (Catholic) Episcopal Conference in charge with migrants' pastoral assistance, so as to allow the arrival of new contingents of refugees (Caritas Italiana, 2019). Within the framework of an ecumenical effort, involving both Catholic parishes and Waldensian and Methodist Churches, 4,000 vulnerable people will be welcomed over four years. It is useful to observe that, besides offering a safety migratory route, this experience provides a positive example of how to integrate newcomers through the activation of local communities.

Moreover, FBOs frequently act as advocacy actors, recommending the authorities and civil society to adopt more generous policies and more tolerant practices towards arriving and sojourning foreigners, including the undocumented ones. During the last refugee crisis, this position –embodied by the apex of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis– has translated into various forms of mobilization: from the initiatives aimed to receive and assist asylum seekers to the involvement in the rescue operations, not to mention the large presence of Catholic actors and institutions in the occasion of sensitization marches in support of the right to be welcomed. Various Christian leaders and institutions have yet repeatedly disputed the very distinction between economic and humanitarian migrants, in the face of the deep injustice of the contemporary global regime. Religious organizations have been among the most consistent voices supporting the idea that plight of refugees (particularly from the Middle East) require an ethical and political response emphasizing the centrality of hospitality and solidarity (Petito, 2017). And it is significant to observe how one of the reasons evoked is religious-based, that is a principle of universal brotherhood. The following assertion is just one of the many that we collected during the study.

One of the main reasons why it is difficult to describe the religious theme as a determining factor for forced or unforced migration is linked to the absence of legal access routes to Europe, unless it is through an asylum request. There is a mix of factors that determine the escape, so when you

find yourself in Italy having to apply for asylum, the religious theme can come out among others. The Geneva Convention can't handle the complexity of the flows. The question of mixed flows should not be resolved in the distinction between economic and political migrants, but in a multiplicity of factors that the same person has in his/her individual capacity. Clearly, in some cases, one factor prevails over the other, but there are also situations determined by accessing Europe in a legal manner. When this is not possible for economic reasons, the religious motivation is the one invoked. (Woman – Pastoral operator – Waldenasian Diakonia)

Without entering in the analysis of their motivations (which can be of ethical, humanitarian, or even of theological nature), the point that must be stressed is that, in this manner, FBOs contribute, more or less consciously, to attract new migrants, if not to institutionalize migration patterns outside the legislative framework in force, including the rules governing the acknowledgment of the status of refugee (such as other statutes of protection). Together with the practical difficulty in rejecting and expelling (irregular) migrants, this position has certainly concurred to the wide tolerance manifested by Italy towards them, notwithstanding their formal status. Moreover, at institutional level, the growing porosity among different “types” of migrants was implicitly acknowledged through the introduction (and the large use of) the “humanitarian protection”, that is a third possible outcome of the asylum demand (besides the acknowledgment of the status of refugee and of the subsidiary protection), frequently granted, for “humanitarian” reasons, to those migrants lacking conventional criteria to be acknowledged in need of protection, but who are impossible to expatriate.<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact, during the refugee crises, all around Europe, not only a high number of asylum seekers received a status that is different from that of refugee, but also different countries recorded very different approval rates and tended to grant different statuses (Eurostat, 2017). In this context, Italy stands out both for the very high number of applicants who were granted humanitarian protection, and for the very high number of appeals and successful appeals.

These trends certainly influenced recent changes to the regulatory framework contained in the so-called “security decree” (see Chapter 9, §2). However, what is interesting to observe is that even after the “restrictive turn” in the government's approach towards asylum seekers, many FBOs (supported by the official voice of the Catholic Church, constituted by the Italian Episcopal Conference) have immediately declared that they will continue to help mi-

---

9 Decree Law no. 113/2018, so-called “security decree”, has drastically reduced the possibility of obtaining humanitarian protection.

TABLE 10.1 Results of asylum applications. Italy, 2016–2018

	Refugee status	Subsidiary protection	Humanitarian protection	Denied applications	Untraceable	Other outcome	Total applications examined*
2016	4,808	12,873	18,979	51,170	3,084	188	91,102
2017	6,827	6,880	20,166	42,700	4,292	662	81,527
2018	7,096	4,319	20,014	56,002	7,740	405	95,576
2016	5.3	14.1	20.8	56.2	3.4	0.2	100.0
2017	8.4	8.4	24.7	52.4	5.3	0.8	100.0
2018	7.4	4.5	20.9	58.6	8.1	0.4	100.0

SOURCE: ISMU ELABORATIONS ON DATA FROM THE NATIONAL ASYLUM COMMISSION, <http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/i-numeri-dellasilolo>

grants, even when the latter lack the legal requisites to be hosted in the official reception centers. Together with other civil society's actors, FBOs of different Christian denominations have mobilized not only by making their properties available in order to accommodate migrants expelled from the official reception system, but also by checking the availability of private citizens and families to welcome them in their homes. All this proves that not only FBOs certainly contribute to make Italy an "attractive" country, but also that many migrants –notwithstanding their religious belonging and beliefs– find in (Christian) FBOs one of the most important reference actor during the first steps of their adaptation process.

## 2 Religion as a Belief, Religion as an Identity, Religion as a Way of Life

Above and beyond the role of FBOs and of the migratory chains and migratory systems that they have contributed to establish and strengthen, our study has assumed that religion can be a powerful variable to understand migration choices and trajectories, since it influences both individual (and family) *identity* and individual (and societal) *freedom* (Chapter 1). In this perspective, it has been traditionally deemed in the analysis and management of forced migrations. The main reference on this regard is constituted by the UNHCR *Guidelines on International Protection: Religion-Based Refugee Claims under Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees* (2004), inspired by the work of J. Gunn (2003), and providing a multi-level

definition of religion, on which the procedures of asylum recognition, in different destination countries, are substantially based. The three definition items are the following:

- a) religion as a belief (including non-belief);
- b) religion as an identity;
- c) religion as a way of life.

What is interesting to observe is that, in the narrative of (forced) migrants, these three items turn into special resources when they have to come to terms with their very personal and collective experience. In this perspective, religious affiliations affect the decision to migrate not only because they are the “causes” of violations, persecutions, and discriminations –as we will describe later–; but also because they provide the migrants with the *lexicon* to understand their own (individual and collective) life trajectory, and possibly their migratory trajectory. Finally, they are powerful signifiers to define oneself as a “forced” migrant, largely independently of the migratory channel actually used.

So, religion is a *belief* which provides would-be migrants the force to resist despite the persecutions and, possibly, the reason to see the “opportunity” to migrate, as in the dramatic experience of these two interviewed, both escaped from the threat of being killed:

In Pakistan, people have a very strong faith, no one can stop them ... but the faith of Christians in Pakistan is too strong, even if there are difficulties, even if there are bomb blasts, even if they are kidnapping people, they keep praying, they keep celebrating Christmas, Easter ... they do not stop. (Man – Pakistan – Catholic Christian)

How I know that I could escape through Italy? When we are in the church, the fathers would tell us: pray for the people who are in the hospital, pray for the people who went from Libya to Italy and then died, many people, so everybody pray for them and start fasting, so God will help them. I started asking questions: how did these people die? Crossing from Libya to Italy? Why? Then they told me. Then, from that, I understood. So, in the morning, 1st January 2015, I left my country. (Man – Nigeria – Christian Pentecostal Church [former Catholic Christian])

As a belief, religion makes the concept of a person’s freedom clear –and, in a certain way, provides a sense to the decision to migrate for religious reasons–. In general terms, this concept refers to both the freedom to believe and the freedom to practice one’s faith:

(...) in the Bahá'í faith, the principle is that mankind has the right to choose what to believe, what to do. Instead, in the Islamic faith, everything is decided by the clergy, so the fear is to lose one's .... power. So they are afraid that other people will become Bahá'í or ... have others ... influence other people. (Woman – Iran – Bahá'í)

Perhaps it was made in a different way, because in Iran we do not have a place to see each other, we do not have a very free way to practice our faith. But here it is much easier, much more natural. (Woman – Iran – Bahá'í)

Furthermore, this concept seems to concern the freedom of choosing one's personal way to believe and practice, thus contrasting a misleading conception of religion, where the latter is reduced to an instrument of social control, which exactly denies the very strict association between religion and freedom, as clearly asserted by this Yemeni woman:

It was not a problem that I am a Muslim, the problem is that I am a different Muslim. I'm not the Muslim that they want me to be. They are not Muslims according to one specific model; they are Muslims according to another model. So I told you that religion is a private relationship. I think so: it's a private relationship. Nobody has to tell me that I have to put the veil, or that I have to say the prayer, or that I have to dress this way, or that I have to stay at home and not go out because I am a woman, because God says so. This is what I do not want. (Woman – Yemen – Muslim)

This point is even more palpable in the case of those who choose to not believe, as suggestively expressed, though ungrammatically, by this (ex) Coptic Catholic coming from Egypt. His assertion stresses the right essence of Christianity, made of personal freedom and care for the others:

So if I am an atheist today it is thanks to Jesus Christ. Because I, this gave me freedom. If this person I say are in Italy or in another country, find the clean road because people care so much, even if they are atheists, why? Because they care about their neighbor. (Man – Egypt – former Coptic Catholic Christian)

Secondly, religion is a source of individual and collective *identity*, an identity whose awareness is reinforced exactly through the persecution, and which gives to the latter a theological meaning:

We, Christians in Iraq, have lost our country, our houses, everything we have built. It is very hard, but in this situation we have been able to discover that we are truly at home in the faith. (Man – Iraq – Chaldean Catholic Christian)

Not by chance, it happens that people and communities who share a long-standing culture of migration and persecution keep an iconographic heritage of this experience in their collective memory. Coptic Christians in Egypt, for example, used to engrave their religious roots in the skin, through a little crux tattooed on the right wrist (Ha, 2017). Almost a metaphor of the function of resilience carried out by faith and religious identity (see also Part 5). As this informant reminded us, deciding to get a tattoo of the crux on the skin can also be a strategy to escape the risk of a marriage with a non-Christian partner, thus marking the edge beyond which it is not possible to accept any abuse or harassment, when it comes to preserve exactly one's identity.

This is especially true in Egypt. The Coptic Christians in Egypt have the crux tattooed on the hands, while we (*in Eritrea, author's note*) especially the women, wore the crux tattooed on our foreheads, and this was born ... was born as a form of resistance to the Islamization of the region, to say that ... Christianity and Christ is in our blood, in our ... that is, it is not separable, so we cannot ... it is a sign of fidelity and of not betraying our faith, even in the face of those who force us, so ... because they beheaded those who refused to convert, at the beginning of the Ottoman invasion.

Interviewer: So centuries ago, anyway...

Yes, yes, it was born many centuries ago. For us, for example, it was born in 1500, so when Islam saw that it did not work by force, they chose to marry the local women to convert them, at least the children would become Muslims, so also the fathers, the mothers of these girls have the crux tattooed on their foreheads saying that if the Muslim who will marry this girl, if he marries her with the concrete crux, then it was a form of resistance that they implemented to also say that our daughters are Christian in blood and skin, so if they were to marry, then if they had to marry, he had to take off her head, to marry her, so she wanted to say that it could not be done. (Man – Religious leader – Catholic Christian)

In the bloody scenario of contemporary Eritrea (one of the major countries of origin of asylum seekers arriving in Italy), it is known that, for many youths, migration is the only strategy to escape the "life-long" military service imposed by the regime; however, in the case of certain religious minorities –particularly Jehovah's Witnesses, often deprived of the same citizenship because of their

refusal to provide military service–, this motivation is strengthened by one of a religious nature, relating precisely to their duty to refrain from taking up arms. Significantly, migrants with very different origins (from Iran to Tibet, from Pakistan to Nigeria) and belonging to different religions have clearly expressed this same concept: *it is exactly the need to preserve one's own (religious) identity that gives sense to the decision to migrate*: an exit strategy –the only available strategy– to protect one's faith even before one's survival:

(...) We must not be aggressive, but we must continue to fight for our rights. This fight must be very peaceful, no aggression must exist and then the only thing, the only thing we do not accept is when they ask us to falsely declare our beliefs. What we believe we resist. For example, when you put a gun under your throat and you must declare yourself a Muslim, you still say no. My belief, fundamental beliefs must not be rejected. However, secondary things, which are still important, we accept them so as not to create an aggressive atmosphere. (Man – Iran – Bahá'í)

(...) from Tibet, in 2004 I left my country because there is a problem with the Chinese. Before that, I went to India, when I was little I went to India to study, because in Tibet there is a problem with culture, because the Chinese do not want us to study the Tibetan language, they want us to study the Chinese language too, but we do not want to, because when I do not speak Tibetan I become, I change in Chinese, I study Chinese, Chinese history, everything, so I become a Chinese. (Man – Tibet –Buddhist)

Interviewer: When you received threats, didn't you think: I will stop my political and religious activity, to be safe? Didn't you have this idea? Or did you want to be free?

Yes, he said: you stop your activity, stop activity in religion, especially religion. Yes, political, but religious, stop, is not possible, I am a Shiya, I am Muslim man, this is my right, this is not possible to someone, say you: don't pray, and I say: it is OK, I don't pray, this is not, this is not possible. (Man – Pakistan – Muslim)

They know my problem, that they killed my father, and they tell me to go and worship this ... so they know. They know. People were praying to say: God will protect me. God will protect me. They know. Some people would tell me: you'll better join these people, they will kill you. You'd better join them, even ... they will kill you, they will kill you. I said: I will not join them, I will not join them. I'm a Christian. (Man – Nigeria – Christian Pentecostal Church [former Catholic Christian])

A specular experience is that of people coming from non-religious families and societies, who declare to have “discovered” a religious identity that they did not have the possibility to experience before migrating (or before deciding to migrate). Also in this case, it is exactly the migratory experience that has permitted the emergence of a latent need to believe and to provide the individual biography with an immanent meaning. During the fieldwork, various migrants coming from China have expressed this kind of feeling:

(...) Only by embracing religion we can truly understand where we come from, the origin of man, we can make sense of our origin, our existence. (Young Woman – China – Evangelical Christian [synthesis provided by the translator])

Actually, in the case of migrants coming from atheistic contexts, religion is an extraordinary and unexpected resource that breaks into a biographical journey marked by sufferance and oppression. Among our interviewed, Chinese who have adhered to various forms of Christianity represent a case in point; not incidentally, in their chronicle, religious freedom –even just the mere fact of being able to freely talk about religious arguments– is often conceptually superimposed on the possibility of living in a democratic society.

In Italy, I felt the true freedom to believe and practice. I can say with courage that I am a Christian. Christians are respected here. No one will laugh at them. I can boldly enter the church, praise the Lord without worries. I can watch videos of religions online. I could not enjoy all these rights in China. I don't need to hide the Bible, I can sleep peacefully, I'm not worried that the police will come and take me at any time. I can share the experience of the Lord with fellow believers from other countries with Facebook, YouTube (...). In China, because of the monitoring by the Chinese Communist Party, we Christians do not use these means of communication, the telephone cannot be used. We can't even use the computer. There is no Facebook, Internet is impossible. We can only pray for each other. (...) In Italy, everything is different. (Woman – China – Waldensian Christian [former Zhao Hui Church])

Thirdly, religion crystallizes a specific *way of life*. The most reported expression refers to the multiple ways through which this concept translates into a form of mutual support and protection fed by a principle of brotherhood. As emphasized by many interviews, this character is able to reproduce itself in every place, and to overcome the barriers represented by:

– Social classes:

(...) before I began to believe, I thought that only if a person had a certain social level could have consideration from others. If they did not, they were not worthy of being considered. I really had this idea and for this I was always fighting. When I began to attend the Church of God Almighty, I saw that it was not like that at all. In our community, some were leaders, they had a firm, others had a humbler job, they did the cleaning, others were teachers, but we were the same. In this way, we did not feel suffering, I felt that we lived like real human beings, all equals, in a situation of justice. (Woman – China – Church of God Almighty)

– National borders:

(...) throughout the Bahá'í community, throughout the world there is a form of system that every Bahá'í, wherever it is, found in the world and will have its supportive community. For example, when we arrived in Italy we were welcomed by the Bahá'í community and for us it was like a kind of community of belonging and support. (Couple (Man and Woman) – Iran – Bahá'í)

(...) I chose Italy for one reason only: because there is the Vatican. My thoughts ... then I come here, I am protected, because I live inside my Church, because there is the Vatican (...).

So I was for the first time at Mass celebrated in Italian, I did not understand anything, but I felt everything inside. Then here I made the Communion, I came out of the Church and I cried, and I said: "Long live my Church. This is truly a universal Church. It is not a word, but a fact". (Man – Egypt – Coptic Catholic Christian)

I was very, very happy to meet them, I'm very, very happy, because they are teaching, it is the same teaching that I had before in Nigeria. It is Bible, we read the Bible, they teach you how to live your life, don't do bad, do good, don't follow bad people, don't smoke, don't do this. So I see them as good people, which is why I follow them, which is why I baptize, and when I entered the church, in the church there are also good people. They are helping me.

(...) When time come you hear balan-balan (*he imitates the sound of the bells*), then you know it is the time, I attend the evening Mass in Catholic church to pray to God, all the church is the same, because they are

preaching the Word of God, they are preaching the same, to follow Jesus Christ, to do good. As Catholic preach about Jesus, this church is preaching about Jesus, Catholics preach to be good persons, to repent, don't do bad, this church also preaches to be good persons, don't do bad. So, when you see, you will know it is the same. (Man – Nigeria – Christian Pentecostal Church [former Catholic Christian])

- As well as overcoming the distance traced by the passage of time:

There were some Iranian families who went to Greece forty years ago, fifty years ago, or even the Greeks who were Bahá'ís. So having this Bahá'í community in Greece has helped me a lot, well, even in Italy, because you already had some friends, even if you did not know them (she smiles), but there were these people who could help you, you trusted them, and ... it was very easy. [Woman – Iran – Bahá'í]

Finally, as has also emerged from previous studies (see, for example, Levitt, Jaworsky, 2007), religion connects migrants over time, allowing them to remain part of a chain of memory with the coreligionists from the past, present, and future.

### 3 Religion as a Direct “Cause” of Migration

There is certainly a situation of irregularities in religious freedom in most of the countries of origin of asylum seekers. If we analyze the scenario, there are serious problems of abuse, apologetic interpretation, lack of equal dignity, freedom of worship. (Man – Religious leader – Muslim)

In the previous paragraph we have described how the concepts of belief, identity, and way of life mark the life-trajectories of (forced) migrants, making migration –independently of the specific decisional context– a sort of accomplishment of an existence characterized by the need to affirm one's own (religious) identity and projected to the realization also of the spiritual dimension of the human being.

However, to understand how these elements can influence the decision to migrate, and possibly give rise to a request for protection, it is necessary to take a further step. In this paragraph, we set the goal of classifying, through the evidence gathered with field work, the cases in which religion can become a direct or indirect cause of migration, following a distinction largely employed in the migration studies.

According to the existing literature, the *direct causes* are first of all represented by a *sending context clearly compromised by the presence of religious-based conflicts and of religious-based persecutions*, which pose an immediate risk to be murdered, injured or violated. As a matter of fact, since the strong majority of people in the world live in countries where they experience high restrictions on religion,<sup>10</sup> democratic nations are expected to become increasingly involved in the arrival of migrants escaping their country for this kind of reason. Considering the current migration fluxes directed to Italy, the most patent example is that of Nigeria, where both Christians and non-conformist Muslims are often perceived as potential victims of *Boko Haram*. Born in 2002, this terroristic organization has subsequently joined Isis, subverting the political situation of the country and producing plenty of forced migrants. The following testimony gives us a raw example of how a risk reduced to the rank of geo-political data in the analysis of the Italian media, materializes in the concrete life of people who, despite having escaped, will always remember it in their personal history:

During the course of the past two years, I lost two colleagues to terrorist attacks from Boko Haram and it wasn't even outside the city, it was inside of the city. There was one who was involved in the suicide bomb attack and he died, and there was another who was shocked to death by a member of Boko Haram in the center of the city. After the second death, the company decided to stop operating and they moved to other offices in the country and they closed the office in Meiduguri, so I lost my job. (Man – Nigeria – now attending an Adventist Church)

However, the fieldwork has provided many other cases in point. Christian migrants, left to the margins of the attention by the Italian media –rather “attracted” by Muslim immigration and by all the connected questions– reappear here as the unarmed victims of dramatic violence committed against them in different countries, from Africa to Asia:

(...) the father told us that they had tried to kidnap one of his children. Muslims. They just took the child in motion and he was saved by a neighbor who threw himself on him, pulling the child away from the motorbike. And he said ... then we told him: “Why kidnap him like that? You're

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/>.

not...”. And he said that “Muslims kidnap our children or give them back in exchange for a ransom in dollars or there is organ trafficking”. Then he, to make us understand, said: “Open them”; we did not even understand because he could not say the word “organ trafficking”. (Women – Nuns – Christian Catholic)

So something happened, they were planning, so at one point we started hearing a shout outside, we were hearing because our neighbors are Christians, so we understood their language and they were...

Interviewer: So you heard someone shouting outside?

Yes, they were shouting that my father should go, leave the house, leave the house ... and those people were running away ... and some people came and they wanted to use the knife so I jumped away ... my father was inside but I was the one who jumped outside the window ... but my father managed to defend himself ... he was the one who cut the hands of the chief's son, so when I jumped outside the window, there I heard they were shouting at Allah ... I asked where is my father, where is my father but then I discovered my father was dead too, so they were telling me to go away from the community, so I went to the bus stop, they might cut me and kill me, so I didn't have an alternative, so there were some cars to Niger, so it was one of those cars I was in, so I come to Niger, so that I can show I come to Niger and it was from Niger that I started the journey. (Man – Egypt – Christian)

Interviewer: How is the situation of Catholics in Pakistan? What happens to Catholics?

It is a little bit difficult because when Catholics are going for work or for their jobs it's difficult because Muslims think we cannot live in the same place because they think they are superior. They think that their religion is superior. There are many many things because sometimes they burn Christians in fire; sometimes they cut their head. (Man – Pakistan – Christian Catholic)

We are believers; the other Chinese came here to make money. China is a country with an atheistic government; we grew up with an atheistic education. The books we studied when we were young said that this world is without God; so many people do not know the truth. Later, when we met God we became Christians, but the Chinese atheist party did not allow us to believe in God, to walk on the right path. For this, they were arrested, persecuted and even killed. (Woman – China – Church of God Almighty)

As in the emblematic case of Egypt, frequently cited during the fieldwork, open persecution and violence can represent the “evolution” of a situation traditionally marked by discrimination towards minority groups. So, in the case under discussion, the advent of Muslim Brothers has made the country one of the most hostile towards Christians in the world, rendering their condition more and more dangerous. According to the interviewed migrants, persecution towards Christians has spread extensively in society, and has taken on multiple forms. From the humiliation inflicted on Christian students – obliged to study and repeat koranic verses during the school time– to the practice of seducing young female Christians, “just to take their virginity and then abandoning them” (Man – Egypt – Coptic Orthodox), not to mention the repeated terrorist attacks that claimed dozens of victims among the faithful gathered in the Church for the Mass. This context has favored the reactivation of already established migration chains linking Egypt and North Italy (Chapter 17), giving rise to an Egyptian immigration where the share of Christians is largely overrepresented compared with the situation in the origin country:

(...) we have families, like these Egyptian ones, who have come away for persecution reasons. Another who ... for example, the classmates of a girl ... where the first bomb, that was in Egypt, Christmas Eve, Cairo, Alexandria, where the mother and the three little girls were going out (...)and all the classmates of this little girl, who was then small, now in high school, died. And this is the reason why they escaped, they came to Italy in 15 days, to reach her husband was this. (Women – Nuns – Catholic Christians)

(...) especially in the period from 2010 to 2014, in Italy there was a migration linked to discrimination; at that time there were the Muslim Brothers in the government ... practically, there was an attack to the Church every week, so at that moment immigration in Italy had a peak. (Man – Pastoral operator – Catholic Christian)

Furthermore, as observed by this key expert, the public perception, largely shaped by the selective attention of the media and of the political debate, often tends to ignore the “production” of asylum seekers due to different kinds of “religious wars”.

The religious wars are the engine of history and today they are also touching Europe. Our time is characterized by “holy” wars of religion. For example, the Chechen conflict, largely ignored by the media, but a reality that continues to exist and produce a large number of asylum seekers. (Woman – Officer of the asylum seekers’ reception system)

A second direct cause of migration can be identified in *a sending context characterized by serious violations of religious rights of minority groups*.

These include, first of all, the right to believe:

(...) after they arrested me, they took me to the secret police, because he said that with my association ... we help the terrorists to get into Cameroon ... that's not well known, because Buddhism is not a bad religion, it's not a religion of violence, but because he has power, he sent the army to arrest me (...).

There is this psychology to make you afraid, every time when you go around, they show you with their fingers: "It's him, there he is, he's a Buddhist, he's the Buddhist, he's the Buddhist". (Man – Cameron – Buddhist)

Until 2013, when the Chinese government restricted control over Christians, we were spied upon. Within a night, they arrested all those who did the work of "guidance" within the churches in Zhejiang Province. After this fact, the others and I who were still free moved to other provinces, I stayed 14 months, but I was always locked in the house, I could not go out, talk to other people. I was disconnected from the world, I could not call home, I did not hear from my family. At that time, to better control the government, they began to control the residences. Every time someone knocked on the door, I was afraid and, in this context, I began to think that I could not stay in China, that I was always in danger. I kept moving, changing house. I do not even know how many houses I've lived in. So I started thinking about emigrating, coming to a democratic country, to keep on believing. (Woman – China – Church of God Almighty)

With regard to the right to believe, special attention must be given to the topic of conversions. As this testimony illustrates –one of the many that we could bring back– the belonging to an "undesirable" religion is sometimes tolerable when it is a legacy of a family history, but it becomes a fault to be punished when it is the upshot of an individual choice. This is a sort of counter-test of the profound link between religion and individual freedom.

We have not asked for (international protection) but many Iranians make this request, they are those who (...) have converted to the Bahá'í religion because according to the Islamic rule, if one comes out of the Islamic religion they can kill them quietly and then it is more dangerous for those who convert than for us who were born so. (Woman – Iran – Bahá'í)

Secondly, the right to publicly manifest one's own religious beliefs:

We cannot even speak as we speak now. Everywhere there are cameras. Not only in the rooms, but also outside, in the neighborhoods. And so the government can come to know anything. Now they are also putting cameras in rural areas. (Woman – China – Evangelical Christian)

We stayed hidden for a long time, but at some point we decided to go out to serve in a suburb, far from the city. There, sometimes, the soldiers arrived at night to take away the young people. We seminarians were often in the church and the soldiers did not enter here, so we managed to hide. But the situation was heavy and dangerous and the area was on the border. We discussed with each other and we decided to cross the border to go to Ethiopia, rather than go back to the city and keep hiding. (Man – Eritrea – Catholic Christian)

And of course the right to take part to collective celebrations:

In Libya forget about Christians! (*he laughs*) You can only pray in your room. (Imam – Nigeria – Catholic Christian)

In China (...) we did these things in the house, secretly, we had to close the windows and the door well. We sang the hymns of the Word of God in a low voice. When we wanted to talk about the Gospel we were arrested, tortured, killed. It was very dangerous, so we had to leave our country, our family. (Woman – China – Church of God Almighty)

A third direct cause is constituted by *a sending context characterized by various kinds of discriminations and abuses towards minority groups.*

One case in point is represented by the presence of (legal) barriers limiting the possibility to enter some sectors of the educational system and/or of the occupational market. According to the testimonies gathered, the impossibility to access the university is one of the most recurrent examples:

(...) why did we arrive in Italy? Because for reasons based on religion we could not go to university, because university in Iran is exclusively for four main forms of religion and ours does not enter this ranking...

(We are) both of the Bahá'í religion, so we have ... In Iran there is a form of movement in which the Bahá'í boys ... try in some way ... then ... because of the convention, from 2005 if you wanted to enter university you had to enter your name, surname, father's name, identity card

number and religion ... so you are immediately rejected on the admission test ... (Couple [Man and Woman] – Iran – Bahá'í)

There are a lot of difficulties in Pakistan for Christians to go to university. When you go to university the level of difficulties grew up, because in most universities there are a lot of Muslim groups, so sometimes they forced the other students to join them as a groups, sometimes they are terrorism groups, they use drugs, they use guns, they fight and they kill other people ... they are not scared of police because they have too much money, so when the police come to arrest them, they have the money to pay ... (Man – Pakistan – Catholic Christian)

When she embraced religion she (*the interviewee*) involved some friends in reading sacred texts. Then they began to plague posters in which people were discouraged to believe in religion. That's why one of her friends was scared and decided not to continue, and she told the teacher everything. The fact of having religious students at school can be a danger to the students themselves who are precluded from the chance to graduate and job opportunities, but it is also a danger for teachers, because they risk being denied the opportunity to continue teaching. (Woman – China – Evangelical Christian [synthesis provided by the translator])

Another case is constituted by the different kinds of limitations in the exercise of political and social rights, and particularly by the exclusion from certain welfare amenities, including the possibility to attend school:

(...) I was in fifth grade and there was a specific school for talents, a kind of high school, and I passed the entry exam but they did not let me in because I was Bahá'í. It was the first time I had to face this ... because at that age you're hardly still a Bahá'í, you're very little. But they told me: "Since you are Bahá'í, you cannot enter". (Woman – Iran – Bahá'í)

(...) there are many obstacles that the regime also creates to the Catholic Church, especially after the law issued in 1995, where the regime avails all the activities of a social, charitable nature, and the aid to those in difficulty, but also in the field of health care, in education, then all the parts of charity that concern the action of the Church. There are very strong obstacles created by the regime, which a few months ago came to close eight clinics run by the Catholic Church and closed a school in the capital, a school of the Catholic Church which among other things was the school attended by our seminarians from the minor seminary, so there

are a number of obstacles; for example, the regime closed all the information, the Catholic Church published different types of magazines, newspapers, and all this was closed by the regime, so in Eritrea today there is freedom of worship, but not religious freedom. (Man – Religious leader – Catholic Christian of Eritrean rite)

Not to mention the recurrence of abuses and injustices, in the form of, for example, a boycott of entrepreneurial or working activity (an example reported during the focus group discussions is that of Hindu fishermen in Bangladesh, who have faced a sudden death of fish), expropriation from their properties, the application of discriminatory methods of evaluation, or even threats to their own safety and that of family members. As evidenced by some individual stories, since their tender age many interviewees have begun to experience the condition of victims of completely unjustified abuses and violence:

(...) the government intelligentsia began to investigate who the pastor was, and they realized it was me. And so the persecution began (...). They come here and tell me: get out of here, out! We'll kill you! The persecution began. We had made 2,400 meters (...) we had the machinery, we had bought it ... I had just committed to it, when suddenly a military commission said that they would expropriate this land. I said no, that they could not do it (...) because I had an ecclesiastical-social project; I wanted to make a church, a technical school, an orphanage and a canteen. They could not do this; I showed them the numbers, the data regarding the situation that was characterizing that area. A young entrepreneur, a profiteer ... they sent the National Guard, they expropriated the land, they hit me, they threw me on the ground, me, my wife, the Christian brothers who were there. The people revolted in the neighborhood. They started pulling tear gas bombs. We resisted, but eventually they took me along with 25 other people, and they took the ground. (Man – Venezuela – Protestant Evangelical Religious leader)

(...) Dad said, "They're not hurting us, but they do not allow us to work. So they do not allow me to be a man and raise my family". So, he came to Italy.

(...) even xxx, the hairdresser's shop, is from this Egyptian father. He had important cloth shops in Cairo, him and the brothers –who still have them in xxx– and they came away because the Muslims cut their trade relations and brought them to close up. So he came away, even with an invalid brother. (Women – Nuns – Catholic Christians)

This was also a big problem because when a Christian is intelligent they give different scores just because you are Christian. (Man – Pakistan – Catholic Christian)

(...) they wanted us to join them (*the interviewed' mates*) in music, because we were musicians. We studied music in church ... when I was 9 years old, after that when I was in college I played different functions, my parents were asking to join them in music but we rejected their offers, and they were jealous because we were good also at sports. I was an athlete, I was a runner, so they were jealous and our problem started like this; my Islamic teacher told me to read some Koranic verses, because there is a book of Islamic verses and it is obligatory to read their verses. So my teacher told me to read it but it was a little hard for me because Koran is only in the Arabic language, so I read something that I was not good at, I made mistakes and he was a little bit angry with me and he batted me and he told me not to make mistakes again. He thought I made mistake on purpose ... like I know how to read, but I made mistake. After that, it was not a problem, but after three or four lessons it was a break time ... three or four students beat me during the break time, they entered the room and started beating me because I had made a mistake.

Interviewer: When students were beating you, did they have to hide from the teacher or could they beat you without any trouble?

No, they don't hide because in Pakistan Muslim students can do whatever they want. They have too much money, so they can do whatever they want. Even teacher sometimes beat students. (Man – Pakistan – Catholic Christian)

After these events I was afraid and therefore I did not go anymore. The director advised me to renounce the faith, so I was forced to leave my job. The manager also told me that if he arrested me again he would not help me out of prison anymore. (Woman – China – Church of God Almighty)

Finally, some interviewees reported to have been victims of discriminations in the access to given occupations and professional roles, due to the presence of "glass ceilings" or to vexatious behaviors. Although certainly not as dramatic as violence and direct persecution, these situations are revealed to us, through the story of those who suffered them directly, as strong obstacles to personal and professional projects, to legitimate career ambitions, or simply to the expectation of enjoying a fair treatment.

(...) the high level must be Muslim, regardless of whether you are capable or not. In fact, the reason I left is because every time I submitted job

applications I passed all the possible and impossible exams with a good mark, the only thing that remains ... my surname is xxx, I am a Christian. And on the identity card this is what is written. (Man – Egypt – Coptic Catholic Christian)

(...) most are out of the country, let's say half, because after we graduated it was not ... the situation was not very good even for work. And even for those who wanted to continue studying there were not so many options, so many opportunities. And then, when I finished, I started working in a private company, but after a year they knew that we are Bahá'ís and they expelled me. (Woman – Iran – Bahá'í)

(...) unfortunately, there is also the difficulty that the company supports you up to a certain point. It does not make all the struggles it does against the State. If the State threatens the company saying it cannot have a Bahá'í employee ... it's difficult. For example, the company where I worked for six years had the problem that you could not build your career any further because otherwise you could spread the rumors in the corridor ... and what happened to me was that, at a certain point, I realized that either I had to do the job I was doing as a junior for a lifetime or I had to choose something else ... (Woman – Iran – Bahá'í)

There was no real persecution, there was never a ... a ban to go to Mass, there was nothing like that. For two reasons: he was engaged in many other wars, not in that against us. The second: we could not bring danger to him. He was afraid of the Shiites, who slaughtered them, of the Kurds of the North, who slaughtered them, the Christians were the good ones that ... (...).

So to speak, like sheep (...), because in order to live together you have to do this. So there were no problems, persecutions in that period there, say 10 or 15 years before the war, to enter. On the other hand, discrimination and various things remain, such as the results of school exams, a job, if you present yourself and introduce other Muslims, you always reach the second place. Those are indirect things, but okay, we lived together, let's say. We lived together. (Woman – Iraq – Chaldean Catholic Christian)

In all these cases, the role of religious affiliations can easily be seen as the reason for the persecutions and abuses suffered. It is therefore relatively simple to hypothesize how they can submit a request for protection based on religious motives. However, based on the testimonies gathered during the study, it is easy to grasp how the violation of individual rights and dignity often passes through subtler practices, which hide behind the appearance of legality. In a

very simple manner, this Egyptian man, for example, describes the exposition to abuses and vexations that marked his everyday life:

For example, when you present yourself to make documents, they ask you: “What’s your name?”, “My name is R.” But it is not known whether you are a Christian or a Muslim. “And what is your father’s name?”, “My father’s name is T.” But he has not yet discovered whether I am a Christian or a Muslim. Up to the fourth, fifth (generation), to great-grandfather, to know if you are a Christian or a Muslim. If they find out you’re a Christian “No, documents are still missing”. It is always like this. (Man – Egypt – Coptic Orthodox)

In this other testimony, a young girl coming from Iran describes how the awareness of their strong vulnerability is part of the everyday life of some religious minorities’ members, to the point of encouraging a sort of spirit of resignation and a sense of vulnerability and danger that accompanies daily existence, regardless of whether or not they directly suffered persecution:

(...) because we are used to living like that, we are used to them every day, maybe they come to take us, so the way of life in Iran for the Bahá’ís is like that, always waiting for someone who (*she laughs*) comes to the door to pick you up. So in the end you’re used to living like this. (Woman – Iran – Bahá’i)

These testimonies bring us to the next paragraph, in which we will analyze how religion can become a relevant factor in the genesis of the decision to migrate well beyond the “codified” situations. In other words, the concept of religion as the direct cause of a forced migration, today, is challenged by the growing complexity of human (forced) mobility, in its turn influenced by the intricacy of the sending countries’ scenario. In this context, religions and religious memberships are a sort of filter through which trying to grasp the two phenomena.

#### 4 How Religion Intermingles Many Contextual and Personal Variables

The first observation worth making is that, in agreement with the international literature (and with what we have deeply analyzed about specific contexts: see Chapter 5 and 6), religious factors are by and large intermingled with ethno-racial, cultural, political, and economic factors, up to the point that it

can be difficult to isolate their relevance. Once again, this aspect finds an immediate –and “suffered”– confirmation in the testimonies gathered during the fieldwork. The following statements made by three “religious” men from three different continents provide a good example. The former explicitly refers to political power and its contamination with terrorist organizations. The second calls into question the links between political authorities and organized crime, by alluding to an instrumental use of religious issues to get rid of any potential dissident. The third concerns the legacy of colonization, as well as the tendency to overlap Christianity and the West, thus making today’s Christians pay for the sins of yesterday’s Christians.

This was before my killing problem. Then sometime after I come here, then coming again: where is Sajjat? Where is Sajjat? Looking for me, my account is blocked and everything, this is not for religion, this is political.

Interviewer: But is the responsibility always of this terrorist group?

No, the Government is the responsible. Terrorists have only tried to kill me, they don’t like Shiya.

Interviewer: So for your religious issue the problem is with a terrorist group, for your political activity the problem is with the Government...

Yes, Government, but the Government is linked to terrorists. Government control ... Government is responsible to make everything stop, but Government is ... it didn’t stop this. (Man – Pakistan – Muslim)

A dean, a military friend of mine, a dean of the president’s escort, told me: “xxx, save your life because they kill you. And your life has a price”. Ten days later they kidnapped me. I do not know who he was, I cannot say who he was, but they kidnapped me, they hit me, they put me in a cell, in a place but I do not know if it was a cell ... I stayed there ten days, then I did not know anything, then they released me and told me: “if you do not go away, we’ll kill you, you, let’s kill your wife, your children, and we’ll say it was ‘el ampa’, delinquency”. At this point, I had to think for my children, for my wife. A person who lives in Italy, an evangelical, knew about this and sent me the ticket. (Man – Venezuela – Protestant Evangelical Religious leader)

My starting hypothesis is that somehow religion comes to identify a group of people not so much as a religion, but as a group of people that is uncomfortable, that I do not want, that I hate, that I do not, to which I do not want to allow entry into my community, and this is why the religious aspect, from my point of view, is not persecuted, that is, there will

certainly be cases in which Christ is why he persecuted the Christians, but I think, at least as a working hypothesis, which in most cases is because those people who are Christians constitute a group of former colonizers, that is the disturbing minority group, people who put you in question ... (Man – Religious leader – Catholic Christian)

Another case in point emerged from the study is that of Tibetan Buddhists, victims of the “assimilationistic” policy of the Chinese government. Here, the violation of religious rights and the persecution of the faithful is only an ingredient of a wider long-standing conflict, in which the independence of Tibet and the preservation of its cultural identity is at stake. But even in the famous case of Nigeria, the explosion of violence against Christians and the advent of *Boko Haram* rank as the pinnacle of an involutory path. As it emerges from this dramatic testimony, in highly compromised situations, the same distinction between majority and minority gives way to a context of general terror and insecurity. And religion ends up trivially constituting the pretext around which grudges and long-standing conflicts crystallize:

(...) in the Northern part of Nigeria we have a lots of different crisis, different types of problems: ethnic problems, religious problems and so forth and in the Northern part of Nigeria, where I come from, Christians are basically a minority and in the Southern part Christians are the majority, so during my time in Nigeria we normally faced a lot of ... for example, clashes between ethnic groups and between religious groups and usually because the Christians were like the minority in the North they were usually the ones who suffered the most and discussions happened. I got admission to the University of Maiduguri, the University of Maiduguri was part of, is located in the city where the terrorist Boko Haram originated from and is a predominant Muslim city, even the school is a predominantly Muslim students' school and after the rise of Boko Haram in the city, the city was like no longer the same. There were so many incidents of terrorist attacks, suicide attacks, some students have been killed, Christians –not only Christians, but also Muslims and any Muslims who don't agree with the doctrines of Boko Haram were also victims– were killed. (Man – Nigeria – Christian now attending a Baptist Church)

It has not always been like that but it escalated. So I was staying with my father so mainly we attended this Catholic church so that Catholic church is not so far from the Mosque and sometimes when we go for Bible story on Friday evening and the priest always preaches peace and not to fight

but at this stage any small thing would become a religious problem. (Man – Nigeria – Catholic Christian)

Moreover, the “simple” contraposition between Christians and Muslims –that is the way in which these situations are often perceived by the Italian public opinion– results in obscuring a very complex state of affairs. As it emerges from the story of this interviewee, the mere fact of coming from a region with an Islamic majority can turn into an unshakable stigma, paradoxically considering as a threat those who flee from the risk of persecution:

(...) sometimes because of ignorance, many people in the South feel that everybody that comes from the North is a Muslim and they have that stereotype that everybody who is a Muslim or who is from the North is a terrorist, so there is this sort of divide between people from the North and people from the South and it's not easy to really adapt to that way of life. It's not that is not possible, is possible but is something that can take time. For example, when I was trying to relocate and to find another place to live and find a job I was in Lagos which is the commercial capital city of Nigeria and there was a place I went to look for a house and the landlord of the house refused to give me the house because he said I was maybe a Boko Haram member and these are like some of the stereotypes that people from the North can face: you are from the North and the Muslims don't like you because you are a Christian, and in the South people don't like you because they think you are a Muslim, so when people in the North, they share similar cultures, not really identical, but people in the North have a certain way of living that is totally different from the lives of those from the southern part of Nigeria (...) many of them don't even believe that there are Christians who live in the northern part of Nigeria, so this was one of the problems, maybe the major problem that contributed, for me; I wanted to leave Nigeria and find some other place. (Man – Nigeria – Christian now attending a Baptist Church)

Religion, when it takes on the appearance of singular phenomena –such as *Ogboni*, a sect rooted in Nigeria–, crystallizes dramatic widespread violence. Following the chronicle of our migrant informants, it is quite impossible to understand if practices such as persecutions towards unarmed people and sacrifices of every kind of creature (including human beings) obey to religious precepts and edicts or to power strategies; as well if they come from the government's initiative or from anti-system militants. According to some of our key informants, it also happens that these organizations are replicated in Italy,

as a way to involve migrants and asylum seekers in deviant activities such as drug dealing and to recruit victims of sex exploitation. In this case, the demand of asylum turns out to be an instrument used by both victims and executioners, thus making the relationship between migration and religion even more complex; not to mention the difficulty in examining asylum applications, as we will analyze later.

Another interesting example is offered by a Pakistani interviewee, who obtained a status of protection after having provided the Commission proofs of the menaces of which he was victim because of his membership in a religious/political Islamic organization. His case actually demonstrates how difficult it can be to define the concept of “minority group” within a context that does not offer protection, despite the clear exposition to serious risks. In this case, the interviewee declared to have survived after a car-accident caused by his persecutors, in which his brother died and his cousin was seriously injured. The accident happened after several threatening letters. According to his interpretation, the reluctance of the police to take his report seriously was due to the strong connection between the political authorities and the Sunni component, traditionally antagonistic to the one to which the interviewee belongs.

Yes, I am threat, I go to police, Chekoala police, I give letter, and police record everything, I have made application, I said: please, I'm not safe. And I have ... they said they give me help, what they can do, but (...) police don't care, police say ok, ok, I said I have this problem, I have this letter, I have this telephone number, please take it, but they don't.

Interviewer: Why do you think they didn't care?

He is Sunni, the Government is Sunni, this Government, Government, No ... So I have myself escort, my cousin, my brother ... (Man – Pakistan – Muslim)

Moving in a different context, the following testimony describes the rapid deterioration of the situation in Iraq, after the arrival of the US arm. The interviewee suggests how the “martyrdom” of Christians has to do with unknown logics of power, evidently hidden behind the rapid materialization of anti-Christian terrorist organizations.

After the arrival of the Americans in 2003, many attacks against the churches began, they were things referred to internal war, religious war, but in reality it is always guided by some external hands as for example if we come to the present Isis, not Isis itself, there is always a power over Isis,

because Isis is not formed in a day and a night and said: “Here we meet and do something”. It is always a programmed thing. Ok, here. And so it was these attacks on churches, so many killings of priests, bishops, in public, on the street, they were beheaded, many lay people were killed, churches were bombed, robberies happened, they entered during the hours of the Mass and threatened people, they exploded bombs. (Woman – Iraq – Chaldean Catholic Christian)

Just to cite another example, a young man who comes from Cameroon, and who has declared to be a Buddhist, has described a sending context strongly influenced by a societal élite hegemonized by French masonry. Strong discrimination suffered by people not affiliated to this organization would have a part, according to his interpretation, in the genesis of migration. Indeed, adherence to this power structure involves strong limitations to personal freedom. It is interesting to note how, in his story, religion can have a different meaning depending on the situation: on the one hand, it can be an instrument of enslavement to the logic of power (a sort of “opium of the peoples” of Marxian memory); on the other hand, a lever that awakens consciences:

Whenever I was at my home for Buddhist meetings, one or two secret agents came to follow the meeting and tried to get some good or bad information, but always to hurt you, because something that is understood, becomes something that he does not get along with the government. They like people who are stupid enough, who do not wake up to the reality of society. Once there is someone who awakens consciences to say that it is useless to wait there and say prayers that do not help you, but it is better to get busy, trying to make money for them is not good. We must have people who always say yes. That’s why I did not get along with them. I had to leave this place and I went very far. (Man – Cameroon – Buddhist)

Here, again, we can appreciate, in all its ambivalence, the strict relationship between religion and freedom. That is, we can appreciate how the theme of religious freedom –and of its violation– constitutes a litmus test of individual freedom *tout court*; alternatively, as the reflection of our interviewee seems to suggest, a litmus test of the future prospects of an entire country and of an entire generation. This solicits us to re-discuss, in depth, the distinction between voluntary migration and forced migration: should the concept of forced migration be limited to the situations in which individual survival and integrity is seriously in danger? Or should it be extended to every situation of serious limitation of individual freedom and lack of democracy?

So that's where it's done, but I did not accept it. I decided to run away because I did not want to work with him and because they persecuted me so much and followed me to my house in the meetings that took place in my house and ... all this there, I had this feeling of fear while walking on the road I used to take to go to my job because I was afraid ... There, one always feels that one was arrested because he said this ... There is not this freedom of speech, there is not this freedom of thought. And young people do not dream, they do not have this support to say that: "I want to become like this gentleman, that..." No, because if you go to the Cameroon Government website, the Minister, the Director, are all elderly. They are old, all. (Man – Cameron – Buddhist)

Finally, this woman coming from Iraq –who proudly declares that she did not follow the "easier" route to request political asylum, "because if my country does not offer protection, I cannot ask another country to protect me"– illustrates, in turn, as, in a context of insecurity, minority groups are most at risk, even independently of a precise wish to persecute them:

So, indirectly, because when I left the country, the country was in pieces after the entry of the Americans in Iraq the year before, there was total chaos at all levels, social, economic, infrastructure, protection, police, we did not have, still if you have a thief in the house you do not even have a number to call, and still things work like that. And ... I had finished the specialty in 2003 and as a law in Iraq all specialists from one to two years post specialties are assigned to remote places, in the countryside, border, to serve the centers there, because otherwise the doctors are not there, then go back to the city of origin, of the residence. So, in 2004, I fell on the list of distribution, I was assigned a city just in the border with Iran, between Iraq and Iran, then go to that place there was almost impossible, because the attacks, the attacks were almost every day, a tide. But more than this I thought the fact that I'm Christian, I do not wear the veil, so you can already see aesthetically, I'm not dark, I have a fairly clear color, that is, we can see that we are Christians.

Interviewer: Also from color?

Even from the color, yes, we are a clearer complexion, us. And then I said...

Interviewer: Can I ask you what it's called ... ethnicity, your?

No, no, I'm Catholic, Chaldean. Chaldea proper, of the ancient origin of the Christians. And ... so I thought that just to go there by bus takes me a week, makes me go back a weekend at my house, it brings me so many risks. Both internal and external objects because there has already been a bit of guerrilla warfare among the races, then it is always the Christians who go in between, even if we do not get involved, we always enter the middle. (Woman – Iraq – Chaldean Catholic Christian)

Lastly, to augment even further the level of complexity of the issue under discussion, we have to consider how religious-based violations and persecutions often occur also in transit countries, and during the most dramatic phases of the migration journey. Therefore, some respondents reported how, during their travel and in the time spent in the refugee camps, they became victims (or spectators) of different kinds of violence and abuses, because they were identified as members of given religious groups. In the dramatic chronicle of this interviewee, bogus religious beliefs can turn into violent fetishes, transforming victims (the migrants who escape from their country) into executioners, who “immolate” other (impure) migrants as a sacrifice in order to reach their “promised land”.

In Africa, you have fetish, you have ghosts that you use to destroy people, or your mission is to come to Europe to destroy, so you are not clean with that. Inside the boat, you start to manifest, you start to confess, you start saying things why you want to go to Europe. So, there's a power in the sea, that you can't ... Maybe you have some medicines in your pocket and take it to Europe to destroy other persons, so you start manifest, maybe rolling on the ground, behaving like a fish, or a snake, and people who are there, know this sort of things, have seen that before, so ... so they will simply take the person and put the person inside the water. So things like this happen. Because in the boat there are more than fifty people, maybe one or two people who have this kind of power, when they get in the middle of this water, they must manifest.

(...) Most of the times you see ladies ... they start falling on the ground and behaving like snakes, or start shouting, so this makes us understand that these people are not clean. And if we don't throw these people in the water, the water, the boat will become full of water, so what they do fast is taking the person and throwing inside the water. (Man – Nigeria – Catholic Christian)

## 5 The Variety of Religious-Based Persecution's Agents

The muddle of religious factors and political factors does not exhaust the intricacy of the contemporary scenario. Reflecting the growing complexity of the current landscape –on which we will enter in more detail later (Chapter 11, §3.1)–, our fieldwork proves the variety of both threats and persecution's agents which can produce (forced) mobility, well beyond the traditional refugee archetype. As well as the widest range of risks, which can justify the request for protection. Governmental authorities –or the other power structures– are surely a crucial actor, when they directly oppress the members of given religions, limit citizens' religious freedom, encourage or permit a discriminating treatment of minority groups, and impose a climate of suspect and intolerance by means of a radical application or religious rules. Nevertheless, several others may be the persecutory agents. We have already cited the case of Nigerians who escape from the violence perpetrated by Boko Haram: in this example, the persecutor is not the State, but an organization that controls part of the territory of the State (while the latter does not want or cannot offer protection).

It is particularly interesting to note that religious authorities and religious leaders are often referred to as the main cause of the troubles experienced by future migrants. Moreover, in the turbulent context characterizing many of the countries of origin of the current migratory flows towards Italy, the concept of religious authority is often very distant from how it is framed in Europe. The chronicles, often confused and emotionally overloaded, of our interviewees, shed light on forms of “pre-modern” religiosity. Forms that make it rather difficult to trace the boundary between “authentic” religious feelings (although expressed in radicalized ways) and the pretentious use of religious obligations to harass “sacrificial victims”. Just to cite an example, one of our interviewees –a young man coming from Nigeria–, reported that he was obliged to escape from his country since he had been selected to succeed, after his death, to the man involved in the worshiping of the “ghost”:

My story is that the reason why I left my country and I come to Italy is that after the man that worships the ghost of our land died on 5th November 2013 they buried the man on 15th November 2013. On January 10th 2014, in the evening by 8 o'clock, three elderly men came to our house and told us that the ghost had chosen me to worship him. And I told them: “Why? Because I am a small boy. How can the ghost choose me, instead of them, that elderly man?” They tell us that the ghost chooses by small age and I told them that I am sorry, that I will not worship those ghosts, because

I'm a Christian, and they go. And they also come again on 20th January 2014 and tell us, they come in the evening by 8 o' clock, the same time, and I also tell them that I won't worship this God, because I'm a Christian. Then go. They also come on 30; they also come on 30 January 2014 by 8 o' clock in the evening and tell us the same thing. I tell them that I will not worship those ghosts, even my father told them that his son would not worship those ghosts, because we are Christians. (Man – Nigeria – Pentecostal Christian Church [former Catholic Christian])

Due to his refusal, the interviewee had to watch the murder of his father, who had opposed to this request. His chronicle is particularly impressive, since it demonstrates the manner in which religious persecution can suddenly break into one's life.

So, since I was born I never participate in their ... idles, worshipping the ghost. Even my family were Christians, I attend the Catholic Church in my village (...).

You know how evil operates? Those are rituals, when they have rituals, people from another people come, you don't know them. Even the time when this thing happened, they give me the 10th of December, when I'm on the way, going to the market, I would see people I don't know, they wanted me, I have to obey them, they were threatening my life, I don't know the person, but the person is threatening my life, he is not in that village, he just met me in the market and he is pointing me...

(...) anywhere they see me they would kill me, because I didn't come, I didn't follow them in worshipping the ghost. (Man – Nigeria – Christian Pentecostal Church [former Catholic Christian])

We have already observed that what is violated is often not the right to believe, but the right to convert to a different faith, a minority or otherwise opposed faith. On the contrary, this interviewee offers us a specular testimony. Once again, in his narrative, considerations pertaining to religion are mixed with others types of considerations, in this case of an economic nature (the impossibility of inheriting goods for those who do not belong to the "right" religion). Yet, "formally", it is his refusal to convert that becomes the cause of persecution, giving it a halo of legitimacy.

So, what happened is that there was a serious crisis in Jos so that I lost my dad for that. It was like a war between the Christians and the Muslims and

my mother she is a Christian so we decided to go back to the village and I decided to be a Christian because I don't love Muslims so when the village they were like trying to kill me because I was supposed to be a Muslim since I was the son of my father. We were three, me and my sisters.

We all decided to be Christians, so the problem is that the village say we must be Muslims but we say no, we are not going to be Muslims, but they say we had to and the problem is that my father inherit this property but we cannot inherit it without being a Muslim, so they were trying to kill my parents but I couldn't go with them because I have a family: I have a wife and a daughter, but I had to leave them so that my son and my daughter are with my mum. My wife left me because of the problem. She has to leave me because they were imposing us to be Muslims, she never wanted to be a Muslim so if she was with me she had to be a Muslim so for not being a Muslim she left me. (Man – Nigeria – Christ Church)

Civil society's actors may be another persecution agent, particularly relevant within non-democratic contexts. Here, the threatened subjects are not provided with adequate protection by the authorities. Moreover, these very authorities are the ones who legitimize abuses and discriminations on a religious basis, even rewarding them as expressions of loyalty to the regime. As we have already observed, the school system constitutes, in this regard, one of the most sensitive environments, together with the field of economics, where religious affiliation can become an easy alibi to justify discriminations, abuses, and frauds.

When I was in middle school, my classmates beat me and teachers criticized me, disrespected me, treated me badly because I was a believer and did not respect my beliefs. Once they beat me so much that I ended up in the hospital. (Man – China – Church of God Almighty)

(...) stalking, the fact that a person fires from a business because being a Christian was derided or discriminated against is very subtle. Hence, persecution in interpersonal relationships is important, especially if there is no rule in these countries to protect against this discrimination. In interpreting relationships, persecution can occur, but it is enough for me to ask the public authorities that the matter is resolved. But if there is no such legislation in the countries of origin or it is not intended to be applied, it is again a persecution. (Man – Expert)

Furthermore, even family members and local communities have emerged, during the fieldwork, as frequently involved in imposing, in the name of alleged

religious precepts, choices and behaviors contrary to individual will. Arranged (forced) marriages are a case in point, together with the lack of parents' consensus towards a freely chosen nuptial union, particularly in the case of inter-religious marriages.

Finally, as demonstrated by the following examples, the family itself can perpetrate abuses and violations in the name of religion. Once again, it is very easy to understand how reasons of economic convenience, social "respectability", political opportunity, and superstition, often tend to prevail over genuine religious sentiments.

They insist I became a Muslim because of my father property. So, we don't give you your property without being a Muslim and they were trying to kill my wife, so she left. When my father died, we think the best place to go was to go back to his village, and the problem started in the village, while I think I was safe but I was not. This is a Muslim village and a Christian village ... both. And in my father family they wanted me to be a Muslim and it was the family of my father who insisted me to be a Muslim. But I want to be a Christian. (Man – Nigeria – Christ Church)

My family, they believe in fetish religion, so from the beginning, when I was young I didn't know all about what it meant to be in a fetish religion, I decided to follow Christ. So it became a problem with my father because I'm the first one of the family. Normally as the first one of the family after my father is dead I'm supposed to take from my father, I'm supposed to continue the fetish religion from my father. But for me I don't like the religion, because it is contrary with Christ, so I decided not to follow up with this religion. Anyway, my father was still alive, so before he died I was supposed to be in this religion called Ogbony. It is popular in Edo State. The majority in Nigeria does not know this religion, because it is with Edo people, who usually have this religion. These people have this religion because they want to be famous, rich...

When I was born, for the first eight years, nine years, my father went to their meetings, to their meetings whenever they meet, all of them came with their sons, their first sons, who will take over from them, we sit down with them, sometimes when they want to do something terrible they go to a place where we cannot go, until we are more than eighteen, then we are fully initiated and we can go to that place where they make these strong, strong sacrifices. When I was young, I used to go with my father, until thirteen years, when I knew the difference between

Christianity and these things, I stopped going. Then when I got to that age when I was supposed to be initiated, at eighteen years, then he started, at the beginning he tried to persuade me peacefully, but when he saw that persuading me was not, that he won't not make me one of them, he decided to make it with force. Then the young ones came, like six of them, trying to force me, to get me to the shrine, because they go to a shrine, where they keep their ghost, but I refused, then they started beating me up, trying to force me, they molested me, and I was able to run away, and I went to my friend's place, but they came to my friend's place and I was so lucky that I noticed earlier that they were coming, so I ran away from there, and I went to Niger, I spent some days in Niger, well I spent some, you know, many years in Niger, before my father's younger brother, he also lives in Niger, so he learned from my father that I was in Niger, then problems started again. (Man – Nigeria – Catholic Christian)

As the reported cases suggest, when acting in the name of religion, the violation of individual rights –be it mediated by political and/or religious authorities, or by an actor of civil society or even by the same family– calls into question the relationship between genders and generations. In other words, besides being influenced by the relations between social classes and between political and religious groups, violations of individual rights often reflect the patriarchal structures of many societies, the gender regimes, the expectations connected to generational roles. Therefore, it is not surprising that to be frequently called into question are matters pertaining to marriage choices (in particular, the choice to marry a partner of a different religion), to the relationships between fathers and children, to the rules that regulate hereditary transmission and the transmission of roles within the community; not to mention the fear to suffer genital mutilation, excision, forced sterilization.

My mother, she is a Christian, but ... she is not able to fully practice a Christian life because she got married to my father, so in Nigeria a woman, it is not like in Europe where a woman can say something, in Nigeria, when you come to my State, a woman does not say, what her husband says, that's what she walks with. (Man – Nigeria – Christian now attending the Adventist Church)

(...) I come from Yemen, from the South of Yemen and I've been here in Italy for almost 5 years, and I came ... I left my country because I had to leave because I do not find my soul there ... Let's say I'm a woman and I'm different I am free, and I want to be as I want ... I have a bit of a Western

woman, but let's say in an oriental, conservative environment where women do not have many rights, they have no rights, let's say. That's why I decided to leave. (Woman – Yemen – Muslim)

Once again, it is immediate to grasp, through the testimonies of our interviewees, the close link between religion, individual freedom, and the quality of democracy. The latter intended not as an academic concern, but as something that pervasively affects individual lives and prospects. The same Yemeni woman sums it up well.

In my country, if the man does not accept the divorce then the woman cannot have it. It is not a decision from two sides, it is always man. If he wants to divorce, yes, but if he does not want to leave you like that, half way. You are no longer married but you are not divorced. These are the laws when we do not have civil laws like in Europe. In our Muslim countries, the law is not civil but it is based on religion, what is written in religion, so we do not have this parity between man and woman because they use religion to make law and instead if we use this because we know that religion Islamic is almost 1,400 years ago ... and all that is written inside the Quran is good for that era, there is written of things we say as law, ok there are, but this was fine for that era of 1,400 years ago but not you can apply it now. (Woman – Yemen – Muslim)

Finally, as we will analyze in the next chapter, asylum seekers' reception systems are more and more challenged, today, not only by the "simple" violations of religious rights and religious freedoms. An important share of contemporary migrants –independently of the migration channel for which they opt–wants to escape a radical interpretation of religious prescriptions, such as that imposed by some authoritarian regimes. Here, the concepts of religious identity and religious freedom appear in their suggestively, and not unequivocally, interconnected nature. As argued by these last testimonies, the violation of the principle of personal freedom can assume different forms and degrees, including a persistent sense of oppression. And, as efficaciously synthesized by the second one, maybe migration is not a forced choice, but just a simple wish: it is the best thing to do, an exit strategy to realize those personal goals made unachievable by an oppressive societal context.

(...) I always had so many questions, "Why do we have to cover ourselves? Why do we have to do this? Why?". And then sincerely after a while I grew up I do not know, I felt that ... all day always I had to think, this is right or wrong, so ... life had become too heavy, distressing. Because, I know,

maybe you said a little lie, but you already felt guilty because you said “now God is staring at me” (...).

So it's not that you say “Okay, Ok, I do not follow and I do not care and it ends there”. At whatever level of your life you arrive there are discussions you have to do. And then if ... like ... if you do not overcome these discussions maybe you lose an opportunity of your life (...).

Then in the field of art it is very difficult, because for example you cannot find the books, the paintings come ... that is, the naked body is forbidden, so maybe, I know, I wanted to study the history of art in Europe ... but I did not find the books, or if you found them they were already all censored. (Woman – Iran – Protestant Christian [former Muslim])

So I thought about it and said: “Now I have three choices in front of me. Or I go and risk my life as a life and as a woman, because there is also the possibility of violence and things that happen ... and they happen! Or I'm at home and I'm a housewife, but I've studied medicine for six years and five years of specialty, if we talk only about medicine it took me eleven years, and I'm at home, which is something ... frustrating. The third choice I escape from this country”. So I thought about it, I wrote a little about the three things and I said: “The best one seems to me the third”. So it's not a wish, but a ... the best thing. (Woman – Iraq – Chaldean Catholic Christian)

At the end, once put in a humanistic perspective and from the point of view of the people directly involved (Chapter 2), it becomes quite impossible to clearly distinguish between voluntary and forced migration; particularly when this distinction calls into question a dimension such as religion and its strict relationship with personal identity and personal freedom. Correspondingly, it is easy to understand how the extraordinary complexity of contemporary (forced) mobility – as it is emblematically illustrated by the evidence discussed in this chapter – turns out to be quite difficult to process through standardized procedures, such as the procedures regulating the acknowledgement of a status of protection. Besides, it is extraordinarily complex to rightly grasp and recognize the role of religion in the asylum seekers' trajectories and choices. These issues will constitute the object of the following chapter.