Christian-Muslim couples in the Veneto region, northeastern Italy: Dealing with religious pluralism in everyday family life

Francesco CERCHIARO
Università degli Studi di Padova, Italy

Stef AUPERS
University of Leuven, Belgium

Dick HOUTMAN
University of Leuven, Belgium

Abstract

Based on a three-year ethnographic study of processes of identity construction in 15 Christian-Muslim couples in Italy, this paper focuses on religion and analyses how partners rely on various strategies in order to deal with religious differences within the context of family life. Does religious pluralism emerge as a problem actually perceived by those couples? Chosen as a paradigmatic case study of 'mixed' couples, the analysis shows how partners, united by a common purpose to minimize their religious differences, often overcome religious pluralism. Four strategies to accomplish this are distinguished: 'renunciation', 'closeting', 'conversion' and 'spiritualization'. It is concluded that what is defined in public debate as 'mixed' – in terms of religious differences – is not always experienced as such within the family context.

Corresponding author:
Francesco Cerchiaro, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology (FiSPPA), Università degli Studi di Padova, Via Cesarotti, 12, 35123, Padova, Italy
Email: francesco.cerchiaro@libero.it

Résumé

Cet article est basé sur une étude ethnographique de trois années relative aux processus de construction identitaire parmi 15 couples chrétiens-musulmans en Italie. Les auteurs se focalisent sur la dimension religieuse pour analyser la façon dont les partenaires utilisent des stratégies variées pour gérer les différences religieuses au sein du cadre familial. Le pluralisme religieux est-il réellement perçu comme un problème par ces couples? Choisie comme étude de cas paradigmatique de couples mixtes, cette analyse montre comment les partenaires, unis par un objectif commun qui minimise leurs différences religieuses, surmontent souvent ce pluralisme. Pour y parvenir quatre stratégies sont distinguées: la « renonciation », la « confidentialisation », la « conversion » et la « spiritualisation ». En guise de conclusion, les auteurs affirment que ce qui est défini dans le débat public comme « mixte » – en termes de différences religieuses – n'est pas toujours vécu comme tel dans le cadre de la vie familiale.

Mots-clés

couples chrétien-musulmans, couples mixtes, mariage interreligieux, pluralisme religieux, recherche qualitative

Introduction

This paper is based on a three-year ethnographic study (2009–2012) examining the processes of identity construction in 'Christian-Muslim' families in Italy. The main aim of this work was to clarify how partners rely on various strategies to deal with religious differences within the family context. The focus of the study was therefore on religion as it emerges in the 'narrative practices' (Bertaux, 1998) of its protagonists.

An extensive theoretical discussion examines the case of mixed couples and revolves around the concept of difference, implicitly assuming the existence of separate groups which, in meetings and interactions, make a union 'mixed'. Difference between groups is characterized primarily by their religion, class and education (O'Leary, 2000), and there is a common tendency to marry within the group. Studies of mixed couples therefore use several approaches, most of which are based on the poorly defined idea that the mixed couple is some kind of monolithic entity. In this article, we discuss two contrasting approaches: that every couple is in some way mixed, and that there are many categories of mixed couple. The contribution of qualitative studies to our understanding of what makes a couple 'mixed' is still relatively new, and requires more knowledge about how one partner relates to the other, examining the strategies and mechanisms that lie behind the differences experienced by the partners in the family context. Examining how partners live their daily lives and negotiate their differences shows how the boundaries between the (presumed) different religious groups are established. Does religious pluralism emerge as a problem actually perceived by partners? If so, when and how is it addressed?

By choosing Christian-Muslim couples in the Veneto region of northeast Italy as a paradigmatic case study of 'mixed couples', we aim to answer the first of the above

questions, analysing how (and if) it emerges and influences the life stories of the partners. Publicly more visible in a hegemonic Catholic context like that of Italy, such couples are stigmatized as the quintessence of the 'incompatible'. We offer a new close-up perspective, not only going beyond the rigid categorizations and conceptualizations that are usually connected with the 'mixed' phenomenon, but also discussing the wider processes that underlie the increasing pluralism of our societies.

Mixed couples: A 'black box' beyond exogamy

Secularization, privatization and pluralization, closely associated with globalization, are rewriting the plurality of our societies, which, at a first level of interaction, goes beyond the plurality of Italian family models (Allievi, 2006). Closer comparison with *others*, as a consequence of immigration flows, includes the context within which religion is placed in the contemporary world: the 'pluralism of values' that characterizes all Western societies also affects the legitimacy and credibility of religious institutions themselves (Pace et al., 2010). 'Interfaith' couples therefore become a kind of microcosm of the wider pluralistic society, in which family members individually rely on various creative strategies to develop and negotiate their multiple identities. In an everyday life dimension, these processes include the way in which partners seek to balance the practices and beliefs of their respective backgrounds (Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010).

Quantitative research has generally approached the question of mixed couples in the macro-terms of enlargement of the marriage market, viewing them as the sum of an indicator of integration. Several studies have examined the issue as an indicator of social distance between status groups, ethnic and racial groups, and religious groups (Kalmijn, 1998). Conversely, positioned at the crossroads of various disciplines (cultural, religious, family, immigration, sociology), qualitative researches have approached the same question by focusing generally on how partners deal with their different backgrounds. Going beyond mere description, scholars focus on the mechanisms by means of which differences are constructed, observing how seemingly inevitable marital conflicts are handled (Neyrand and M'Sili, 1998).

In both quantitative and qualitative studies, scholars must first approach the controversial word 'mixed'. The ample debate in the literature emphasizes the evidence that 'mixed' contains a clear-cut idea (or better, an ideology), such as the existence of 'non-mixed' couples (Barbara, 1985). In this sense, the concept 'mixed' gives rise to two contrasting macro-related discourses: on the one hand, it is argued that every couple is in fact 'mixed' in gender, class, level of education and social status' (Falicov, 1995). On the other hand, a wide range of studies addresses the same issue by dividing it into many categories in the search for a less generalized term. A terminological struggle thus arises around the concept of 'mixed': terms such as 'intercultural families', 'cross-ethnic intermarriages', 'mixed marriages', 'mixed faiths', 'mixed ethnics', 'cross-cultural marriages' and 'inter-marriages' are used to identify a range of marital unions in which partners have differing cultural, religious or ethnic backgrounds (Breger and Hill, 1998). These terms are often used to define couples in the relevant literature. Without intending to make a contribution to an essentialization of the category, we prefer simply to use the term 'mixed', like several other scholars (Tognetti Bordogna, 2001; Song, 2003;

Caballero et al., 2009), which allows us to discuss, one by one, the diversities that partners experience.

A mixed couple resembles a 'black box', which is always difficult to identify and locate, within the panorama of the social sciences (Peruzzi, 2008). The concepts of exogamy (marriage outside a social group) and endogamy (marriage within a social group) which define the mechanisms of composition of a couple cannot capture it because, as Davis (1941: 376) pointed out:

> Intermarriage must be viewed as the violation of or deviation from an endogamous rule. Above all, it must not be confused with exogamy. Whereas intermarriage is a deviation from an endogamous rule, exogamy is not a deviation at all but a rule in itself.

To understand the phenomena related to the concept 'mixed' is thus a question of understanding how boundaries are established in our society (Voas, 2009). To this end, opening the black box and examining mixed couples' narratives becomes the most appropriate way of understanding these divisions and clarifying them.

Data and methods

The attention given to Christian-Muslim couples in public and academic debate is due to their implicit macro-dimension, which comprises various cultural and religious systems as they are socially perceived and represented. as they are socially perceived and represented, in both public and academic debate. Today, the hegemonic discourse of migration-related phenomena, at macro-level, sees male Muslim immigrants at the centre of a debate that is constructing a monolithic 'Muslim identity' as a social problem that affects the permeability of their cultural model, often used in the public space to recall the paradigm of the 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington, 1996). Speaking of Islam and mixed families thus becomes a pretext for speaking about pluralism in general (Allievi, 2006). The Islamophobic rhetoric of the secessionist right-wing Italian political party Lega Nord (the 'Northern League', firmly established in Northern Italy[1]) and some parts of the Catholic Church means that the Veneto region is an interesting context in which to analyse this type of process. 'Mixed couples', as a social construction, is in fact a concept tied to social and historical space: this means that it helps to reveal what, at a precise moment, is perceived as 'diverse', in opposition to the assumed 'normality' of a couple (Ambrosini, 2008). Mixed couples represent a locus of symbolic interactions in which various cultural backgrounds can be compared in the micro-context of family life. Examining Christian-Muslim couples may reveal something more, because they embody various layers of differences (cultural, racial-ethnic, socio-economic, religious), while at the same time they are defined solely in terms of their religious difference. The religious dimension is thus assumed to be strong (Saraceno, 2007), creating opposite essentialist ideas of a couple: this dimension emphasizes, on the one hand, secularization (decline of religious influence and individualization, facilitating the formation of these unions) and, on the other, the partners' ecumenical ability to share and enhance their differences. In the latter case, every couple becomes a unique microcosm symbolizing an inextricable complexity.

Both these discourses contain elements of truth, but both also tend to polarize the terms of the discussion, contributing to a monolithic idea of culture as a somewhat poorly defined entity in which only one, essentialized, Christian-Muslim couple is represented.

In this sense, isolating the religious issue does not mean asserting religious centrality *a priori;* it means avoiding confusion, isolating the processes of religious *mixité* in order to understand when and how they come into play in their different ways. On the basis of 30 individual interviews with the partners of 15 Christian-Muslim couples, we analyse how these couples deal with religious diversity, the various strategies they adopt and how those strategies relate to the issues of pluralism and secularization.

The biographical approach and interviewees[2]

This research is based on analysis of ethnographic records and in-depth interviews from more than 50 meetings with 15 families (characterized by male immigrants originally from countries with Muslim traditions married to Italian women). Due to the heterogeneity of the Muslim presence in Italy, we decided not to choose one particular ethnic-national group, but to maintain the complexity of the label 'being a Muslim' in Italy[3] (Saint-Blancat, 1999; Pace and Frisina, 2011). Individual interviews were carried out with partners and, where possible, with their children. In this paper, we focus only on the information derived from the partners' interviews, which can properly be called life stories. Throughout our continuing relationship with these families, we reconstructed their personal and family biographies, focusing on some key themes: family of origin, in what circumstances the partners met, the reactions of the 'external world' (neighbours, relatives, friends, local institutions) and the strategies adopted to deal with them. We then discussed daily life interactions, focusing particularly on the couple's attitude towards important and symbolic decisions regarding their children's education.

These interviews were thus valuable tools in the study of processes in which words are the main vehicle, essential for revealing what is 'taken for granted' within the interviewees' world, and examining the 'narrations of practices' (Bertaux, 1998) that could reveal the mechanisms at work within the couple's life together. Beyond words, by means of ethnographic observations carried out during entire days spent with these families (lunches, dinners, informal meetings), we were able to include many interactions that mere interview transcriptions obviously could not capture.

It should be noted that the choice to interview only mixed couples in which the man was the exogenous component was theoretically based: to define better this particular kind of couple. From a sociological point of view, the different dynamics observed between the partners were even more interesting because, at micro-level, they refer to the public debate over gender relations within Islam, where Muslim men are often associated with control over women. To have interviewed also couples composed of an immigrant woman and an Italian man would have meant extending the field of study to comparisons involving theological (and institutional) aspects (mainly the fact that, according to the Koran, a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim, whereas the opposite is possible[4]) and aspects related to the marriage market and the complexity of immigration processes.

Results

Discussing religion, and above all Islam, means discussing a large affiliation which is not organized monolithically through the words and practices of the people (Saint-Blancat, 1999). In the narration of everyday life, in the strategies adopted by partners to direct their actions, there is a constant overlap between what is attributed to 'culture' and what to 'religion' (Roy, 2007). It was therefore not our aim to discuss how culture and religion are connected and overlap, but rather how the religious dimension empirically emerges from partners' negotiations. In line with Bertaux (1998), we believe that all members of human groups, including small groups like families, are under pressure to adapt their behaviour to expectations shared with other members. This implies exploring 'the couple' as a dimension in which the partners try to build a common space of meanings and a balance that go beyond them as individuals. These considerations suggested that we look at the mechanisms and rules relating to that process of construction in order to understand how partners deal with religious diversity.

The data identify three main discourses on religion: the feelings of religious identity between partners, the management of religious practices, and attitudes towards children's religious education. These three dimensions represent the symbolic arena in which the partners empirically experience their mutual recognition of the significance of religion in their everyday lives: in this arena, they must draw a common line, converge and make joint decisions, define alliances, and build their own appropriate *mixité*. It is especially within the sphere of children's education that partners encounter problems in constructing a properly shared relationship: the debate cannot be left open; choices cannot be avoided; even delegating them becomes a choice in itself. So this dimension unveils better than the others the strategies adopted by the partners, the power dynamics between them and the weight of the hegemonic contest.

Analysing these dynamics and trying to reduce social complexity, we first observe that no single, fixed weight is given *a priori* to religion, since there is no single way of identifying and belonging. The data show that partners adopt several ways of working out the power balance, in deciding who gives and who takes. This does not mean that there are successful and unsuccessful ways of reaching a point of equilibrium, because we start from the consideration that, whatever works adequately for the couple, whether ideal or not, can be viewed as functional in itself (Romano, 2008).

The various strategies adopted by every couple may be connected to one or a combination of (or alternation between) four main types of marital strategy for dealing with religious pluralism: they are 'renunciation' or 'resigning', 'closeting', 'conversion' and 'spiritualization'.

The 'renunciation' or 'resigning' strategy

The first type of marital strategy is renunciation by one member of the couple with regard to the management of the religious dimension. As regards children's religious education, the partners define at what point one of them accepts the decision of the other, while maintaining their religious diversity. One partner becomes the decision-maker for

the family. Partners' narratives show that they do not build a new shared space in which both are religiously present and represented.

Sometimes it is the Italian wife who decides to give her children a formal Catholic education and the immigrant man accepts this for the sake of peace in the family and because it is perhaps easier to 'go with the flow' and not try to find a Muslim school in an area where there is none or where the local Italian population is hostile or opposed to creating such a school – even though this involves an overriding of his wishes. The initial distance between the partners on religious matters may later be disrupted, when the children's religious education comes to the fore. In immigrant men, this strategy of resignation in the interest of family harmony may create a kind of identity loss and a feeling of being oppressed by the hegemonic Catholic context that his wife represents:

> There was friction at that time. … I did not want to have my children baptized. I thought it was not right. … as I didn't have religious imprinting, I didn't want religious imprinting by my wife either. … but I can understand her … It was the effects of her parents, especially her mum. You know, they said: 'They have to be baptized.' Listen to me. When parents take over the life of a couple, from the outside, they can influence and damage the couple's equilibrium. … So I accepted and suffered about it. But I had to succumb and renounce. … I feel my children are less mine. That day, while my daughter was being baptized, I went out to a café, on my own. Got it? (Nadir from the couple Nadir/Giulia)

> Francesca wanted to baptize our children. If I had wanted, I could have created conflict. In fact, I resigned from the decision. … It was not easy but I did it for the family. Otherwise it [family harmony] would be impossible. … I try to focus on things [we have] in common and try to convince myself about it, and now I am happy with the way my daughters have grown up. (Hamid – Hamid/Francesca)

> At the beginning, he experienced it as an imposition. There was a lot of external conditioning and he suffered. (Francesca – Francesca/Hamid)

These narratives make it clear that deciding on children's religious education is crunch point, which disrupts the previously privatized position adopted by both partners. What might originally appear to be a couple that does not care particularly about religious issues acquires a new dimension, in which the partners no longer share a common position. In these cases, the female partners overcome their male partners' wish for neutrality in accordance with the hegemonic Catholic context, while the male partner shows that he has interiorized the domain of the hegemonic religion. Instead of referring to religion as such, the immigrant partner talks mainly about what it means to forgo educating his children as Muslims, and about his minority status as an immigrant in Italy. The sentence 'I feel they [my children] are less mine' exemplifies a loss in terms of the transmission of *self* to the next generation and resentment in terms of identity costs.

Sometimes the partner who strongly perceives and represents personal identity in terms of religious identity states that the question of children's religious education was an important crossroads in that it determined the success or otherwise of the couple's relationship. The fact that the Muslim male partner must transmit his religion to the children therefore becomes a non-negotiable point in continuing the relationship, and the other partner must accept this and try to explain her choice:

… first of all, I said, 'I'm the father and if we have a child I want him to become Muslim,' and she accepted. At any rate, she didn't oppose me. (Latif – Latif/Pamela)

Yes. I was afraid at the beginning when I accepted this situation. I said to myself, 'I'm crazy to accept this. I can't speak about my religion.' … Then I thought, 'Religion is also theology, ok' … and I accepted it. (Pamela – Pamela/Latif)

Clearly, one of two main factors comes into play when one of the partners renounces: either internalization of the hegemonic Catholic context by the Muslim partner or acceptance of the patrilineal transmission of Islam by the Catholic partner. In the couple's dimension, one partner accepts an isolated position and gives up the 'struggle for recognition' (Honneth, 1995).

The 'closeting' strategy

In the second type marital strategy, the respective religious backgrounds of the partners lie outside family life, and explicit attempts are made to avoid any conflict that might result from them. Religion does not seem to emerge as a concern during the relationship; it is not narrated as an important part of their respective identities or as a difference perceived between them. Unlike the 'renunciation' strategy, both partners narrate a shared position, through similar narratives, in which religion appears only in terms of the hegemonic Catholic context which they must negotiate. In this sense, religion is sometimes narrated as something that is not (or no longer) present either at the individual level or at that of everyday family life: the partners note their distance from religious affiliations and speak about religion only in terms of their own religious education. They prefer to view religion as a container of universal values and meanings that are still considered as fixed points in their own lives but are represented in terms of cultural heritage, beyond any institutionalized religious meaning. The aim of keeping religion out of the family context is thus the central point of some narratives:

… when I arrived here, I just adapted quickly. … It's not that I don't believe in God. I believe. … Religion, I put it in a closet, out of my life intentionally. Yes. Because otherwise, it would create conflict. I know. … I said, 'I do not fight for religion and I'll never do it'. It's not religion that has to control your life. You have to stress this point in your research: without religion you are freer. I'm freer. (Ismail – Ismail/Carla)

Hussein speaks about his religious education, often pointing out that it was 'not strictly Muslim like that of other people in my country'. He thus describes a sort of continuity with his own education, focusing more on the transmission of human values considered in a lay sense. We were unable to find narratives in which religion informed everyday practices at either the individual or the family level. There were no dogmas or theological questions involved in the family's discussions.

Carla, Ismail's wife, gives similar reports of their relation with the religious issue:

He was Muslim, and I was Catholic, but you know, over the years we both distanced ourselves. (Carla – Carla/Ismail)

Both partners narrate their clear-cut attempts to leave religion outside the family context, with particular emphasis on the autonomy of their decisions on religious matters, stressing that religious matters never became an important topic in their lives as a couple. Religion did not become a factor of identity negotiation between the partners ('It is not religion which controls your life'); it was something which could be 'put in a closet'. Some religious practices are respected during holidays, in both the private and the public spheres, but are experienced in terms of social interaction. Men in particular make it clear that they have no kind of relation with religious practices, showing their implicit attempt to distance themselves from the stereotypes that are invoked to represent Muslim men.

Religion is discussed more in terms of its social and cultural implications with the 'outside' than in terms of spirituality. The partners do not talk to their children about their different religious backgrounds and emphasize the fact that there is no clearly defined religious dimension in their daily lives. Religion represents something not related to God but to an institution.

However, although initially both partners put their religious background 'in a closet' in order to avoid conflict, their children's education leads to renegotiation of the question, viewed in terms of social inclusion or exclusion within the hegemonic Catholic context. This obliges both partners to make a choice, which is perceived as much more important than anything else, because 'it is no longer about just me and you' (Giulia), that is to say, it no longer relates solely to the partners. Again, what was previously a couple's affair becomes a larger issue in which new external actors come into play: religious educational systems at school, the local Catholic church with its sacraments, and the organization of catechism and youth associations linked to the parish. Power relations between the partners may thus change slightly. Through various kinds of negotiation, they decide not to accept any formal religious affiliations (no sacraments) but to negotiation with the local religious institutions, being open to religious teaching in school (and sometimes also in relation to parish activities). In this way, they try not to isolate their children but at the same time try to give them some historical knowledge about religions. Attention focuses on not disrupting the couple's equilibrium, which they consider as the most important aspect of their relationship. More emphasis is thus put on the symbolic importance of not accepting that the Catholic Church should give their children sacraments, which would formally affiliate them to one religion, against the wishes of one of the partners:

> No. They are not baptized. We decided that these aspects are up to them. But they can't be baptized because I'm not a Christian. This was excluded. (Hussein – Hussein/Lara)

> Yes, my husband made it clear immediately that he didn't want to baptize them. I was a bit disappointed to tell the truth, but anyway, that's right. But, for example, both my children attend religion classes at school. Then our older son also started catechism, but he dropped it after the first two years, before communion. (Lara – Lara/Hussein)

The religion class at school and catechism, although without sacraments, show how the Catholic religion requires negotiation with the social context in which the partners live. Religion is therefore treated by the partners as a 'soft' difference (Saraceno, 2007), which can be 'put in a closet' so that they can share a neutral balance without religious elements.

The initial search for religious neutrality seems to be a better arrangement between the parents (that is, one without explicit choices or negotiations) because of their previous distance from their respective religions. As regards their children's education, the matter re-emerges into a wider sphere, requiring further negotiation with the hegemonic Catholic context. These dynamics are revealed through easier assimilation for their children, in an attempt to maintain a non-religious dimension between the parents. Their choices regarding religious education are thus expressed through social and cultural meanings (with the emphasis on controlling religious teaching, just like the teaching of history or mathematics) and not through spiritual or theological meanings (distance from all sacraments and religious practices).

The 'conversion' strategy

A third type of marital strategy is that of presenting homogeneity of religious affiliation through the religious conversion of one of the partners. When a religious difference within the couple is perceived by one of them as a 'strong difference' (Saraceno, 2007), religion becomes the main locus in which identity is presented as something which cannot be modified by negotiation between husband and wife. Only one religion appears here in the foreground of their life stories, and the partners' narratives focus on the symbolically important decision, the moment at which they constructed a common religious dimension (one of them converts). The question of conversion becomes the focal point of negotiation, the *sine qua non* for the relationship to continue. Religion is presented as inextricably part of an individual's culture and identity, as something that cannot be negotiated. The interests of the individual and of the couple are presented as two entities in opposition, until one partner 'takes the plunge' and accepts the other partner's religion.

The 'conversion' strategy contains two main dynamics, which must be analysed carefully: on the one hand, the Italian woman converts to Islam, and on the other, the male immigrant partner converts to Catholicism. The two conversions have common dynamics in the management of religion within the family context, but several differences emerge in the couple's connections with the 'outside'. Without entering into excessive detail about the complex issue of conversion, we focus here only on findings that show how partners can solve the problems associated with religious pluralism by convergence on one religion. In such cases, both parents state that, at the beginning of their relationship, they solved 'in just one step' what was perceived as a problem for the future of their relationship: religious diversity. After the conversion of one partner, religious pluralism within the couple disappears and, with it, also negotiations about religion. Through discussion of their children's religious education, the partners find not just a balance between their religious backgrounds but also the only way in which they can live peacefully together.

When the Italian wife converts to Islam, the couple tends to reinforce connections with the husband's immigrant community and to maintain a selective and conflictual approach toward the Italian hegemonic context. The whole family observes regular public and private religious practices and daily life is regulated by precise observance of religious norms. The couple takes part in the public religious life of the Muslim community, to which their children are introduced at birth (through weekly mosque

attendance, in which they eventually start studying Arabic and the Koran). The partner of one couple clearly summarizes the importance of that 'choice', which was made at the beginning of their attendance:

> Yes, first of all, even before I was officially engaged to her, there was a moment. I remember very well that moment … . It was the most difficult 'decision' – the big question, the moment, really something between us, a serious matter. I said, 'We are together. Maybe we will have children and we should get married.' And I said, 'What can I do? Now, you have to come into Islam and we'll continue this relationship, or we must finish our relationship now. We can't go ahead. Because when we have children … you know very well, mixed couples don't work. Either you leave before you have children or you will have even more problems. It would be a mess'. … It's a choice that must be made. In my opinion, mixed couples reach that point … If a person cares about his faith, he can't go ahead. How can you grow if you have one faith and your son has another one? (Murad – Murad/Elena)

> Yes. He said to me, 'If you decide to stay with me, conversion to Islam is the only way.' But he didn't insist. (Elena – Murad/Elena)

The woman usually converts to Islam before her children are conceived. This fact is usually emphasized to make it clear that the children were conceived 'in the Islamic faith'. There is a clear demarcation in these couples' narrations: the religious dimension at the beginning of their relationship creates tensions mainly with the 'outside'. The parents and relatives of the female partner, after her conversion to Islam, look askance at her partner, stressing the fact that their representation of Islam is one of a religion which oppresses women and subjugates their wishes. In order to protect and preserve the autonomy of their choices, these couples often tend to put a greater distance between themselves and the 'outside':

> To protect my first pregnancy I converted to Islam and then we moved away from my family. I told you. There was that period, at the beginning of our relationship, when we decided to distance ourselves from everybody, even our friends. (Rashid – Rashid/Giorgia)

After several initial struggles and problems, both parents tend to focus on the serenity and happiness of their union, the complete absence of tensions (not only about religion) and mutual agreement in all life decisions. For the male partner, religion may become a reason for him to talk about his roots and cultural heritage; it becomes the main way of preserving his identity and marks his wish to be separate from the immigration context. 'You can't go ahead without faith' and 'How can your son grow up if you have one faith and he has another one?' (Murad). These words emphasize the fact that identity and education are inextricably connected with religion. It is here, mainly on the part of the man, that we see a clear attempt to polarize the terms of the discussion on religion, stressing the differences between the two systems and describing them as representing a clash between two worlds with different conceptions of divinity: 'You think that God could pee like a man … this says more than you think about your vision of the world … this is blasphemy for me … Islam protects and considers women and children better than Catholicism' (Rashid).

In the particular case of the immigrant man who converts to Catholicism after meeting his future wife, we see how the couple relates to the Italian social context, which emphasizes how convergence on one religion has led to definitive homogeneity on religious matters, without the need for further negotiation:

> At the beginning, we never spoke or quarrelled about religion. But when we started talking about getting married and having children, we wondered 'What shall we decide to do?' He was always very open – definitely more than me. That's it. If he had asked me to change my religion, I would never have done it. But he did change his. (Moana – Moana/Luciano)

> I didn't want them [the children] to feel different … I didn't want them to find themselves one day living here but with a different religion, which is not favourably regarded here. (Luciano – Luciano/Moana

The relationship with the new cultural context may lead the male partner to think that conversion emerges as an attempt to lower the perception of difference and its effect on children, a sort of anti-discrimination strategy against the fear of 'something different,' which Islam embodies.

The 'spiritualization' strategy

The fourth type of marital strategy is characterized by negotiations between the partners, in which the two seek to create a balance between their religious differences. The search for a compromise is narrated as a 'never-ending story' in which partners examine ways of reaching stability within religious pluralism. Religion is discussed as an important question by both partners, as an intrinsic part of their identities. There is no evidence of isolation on the part of one partner (the 'renunciation' strategy) or processes in which both partners keep a distance from their backgrounds in order to reach a neutral shared space, putting religion outside the family life context (the 'closeting' strategy). Nor is there a convergence on one or other religion to create religious homogeneity within the family (the 'conversion' strategy); rather, there is an attempt to construct and share a new 'faith', characterized by a personal relationship with God that goes beyond dogmas and institutions. The partners try to maintain a pluralistic religious dimension within the family, while negotiating with the 'outside'.

This challenge leads partners to reach an agreement that empirically establishes a fourth mode of religious *mixité*, a sort of 'new order' of dealing with (and living within) religions, in which partners focus on the things they have in common and enhance them in order to facilitate their coexistence. The differences between their two religions are seen as relating to institutions rather than to the (single) God in which they both believe. Both partners narrate their attempts at convergence, focusing on the need for a common desire to understand the *other*. The narration of their life stories suggests that, at the beginning of their relationship, things they felt they had in common as regards religion were a common base used to overcome other cultural differences. They therefore do not deal with their religious differences by 'putting religion in a closet', because what makes their union possible is above all the fact that they share the same God. Their aim is to reach a compromise (see Romano, 2008), to reach the *other* by constructing an equilibrium between them. Religious practices influence family life, in which partners

and children sometimes try to share the experience of Catholic and Muslim prayers or feast days, emphasizing the common meanings of these rites and partly modifying them. The choices of marrying and planning to have children may lead the couple to look for a balance beyond religious confessions, closer to a common spiritual space, in which religious institutional practices tend to disappear in favour of the construction of a new spirituality. This is often narrated as a path that is not easy to follow, because both partners are afraid of losing more than the other:

> I was a fervent Catholic, and I continued after I met him … but when we started living together, for me it was ridiculous to go to church on my own. So I stopped going, but we both prayed. Sometimes I also try a bit of fasting during Ramadan with him. … So, after a lot of problems and struggles, we understood that religion had become too narrow for us … I would say, 'God is love' … this helped us to discover a spiritual dimension, not strictly religious … You can't cut off the person that you love most, so it no longer made sense to be attached just to a religion. (Giovanna – Giovanna/Mohammed)

> I am a Muslim and I am proud of it. And she must be proud of being a Christian. … I have a clear idea about this issue. The facts that show that I believe in my religion create problems only for those who don't believe in anything. We both believe in God. This is the main point for me. (Omar – Omar/Cristina)

> … just change the name in my opinion. God is one. It's more important to 'believe' in that. (Hamid – Hamid/Francesca)

Religion is thus used dynamically in the family context: it moves from the foreground to the background depending on whether it is likely to create tensions or commonality. The partners try to talk about religions and God within the family dimension, not involving mediators (churches or mosques) or dogmas, which could disrupt the harmony they have achieved. The feeling of being proud of their religion is explained by the importance of being united in a common belief in God. A symbolic border is established between those who believe and those who do not. The perennial message 'God is love', often recurring in Giovanna and Mohammed's life stories, summarizes the fact that a compromise has been reached, which solves cognitive dissonance, emphasizing the mutual construction of common meanings beyond different world views. The desire to reach a compromise beyond religion leads the partners to abandon their public practices and to create a new religious dimension within the family context, where they try to achieve convergence on religious experiences, beyond religious institutions in themselves.

According to this approach, both partners decide on the best way of raising their children. They usually choose not to give them religious instruction through public institutions like school (religion class) or parish (catechism), but just to let them experience religions at home:

> We give our children the principles from both our religious sides, without any 'confessional' – in short, without pushing them into any one religion. (Mohammed – Mohammed/Giovanna)

> We decided from the beginning not to let the children take religious instruction at school, because their mum is Christian, and she can transmit what she wants by herself. This I tell you right away, because I do not want anyone to force me to do anything. (Amir – Amir/Renata)

Children always represent a challenge that obliges partners to look for new strategies. Relatives and institutional actors (schools, the local church) influence and create obstacles for the existing agreement between the partners and prompt them to seek a new balance. Renata explains how she and her partner try to balance the different interests and pressures on them from the outside world, inventing new ways of living religious occasions outside religious practices:

> We live day to day, in the sense that many problems are not insurmountable, and when there are religious holidays, we celebrate Christmas and we celebrate Ramadan. … We have always talked a lot about these. So first of all, they [the children] did not take religion at school. We explained that, since there are two religions in the family, they will decide in the future. (Renata – Renata/Amir)

By adopting a new way of experiencing both religions in everyday life, the partners can also reach a new balance, which they experience as a sort of *bricolage* of their personal beliefs. As regards religious education, as a result of their negotiations, Omar and Cristina show that they have achieved a good new way of living their religious pluralism beyond sacraments and dogmas:

> They knew the 'pater noster' before the 'Fatiha' – you understand what I mean. If they decide to become Christians, I will have no problem. … It's more about God for us. (Omar – Omar/Cristina)

> They [the children] have experienced both religions but, you know, in a new way.

> (Cristina – Cristina/Omar)

According to religious individualization theory and despite secularization theory, these couples demonstrate that the decline of traditional Western Churches does not necessarily mean a loss of religiousness for the individual. On the contrary, more subjective and privatized forms of religion, like those that these couples are trying to create, are replacing institutionalized ones (Houtman and Mascini, 2002; Houtman and Aupers, 2007; Pollack and Pickel, 2007), constructing a new way of experiencing and sharing practices.

Conclusions

Most quantitative data relate the question of interfaith marriages to a lower rate of religious participation (Iannaccone, 1991), which is seen as a threat to institutional religions and the stability of marriage (correlating lower participation with a higher divorce rate) (Sherkat, 2004; Davidson 1998; Heaton, 1984). This is often approached (and reified) as a single phenomenon and interpreted as an indicator of an ongoing process of individualism and isolation from the common skills of civic life (McCarthy, 2007). Our data contribute to enrich reflections on 'mixed couples' literature, showing how it is related to various processes that often overcome single categorizations. The notion cannot be defined *a priori* in terms of a rootedness in different groups that mechanically translates into differences that the spouses first bring into, and then preserve

within, their relationship. Instead, as we have seen, partners actively deal with the issue of religious difference on an everyday basis so as to achieve a workable and stable relationship. We have demonstrated that they do so in four different ways, which we have referred to as strategies of 'renunciation' or 'resigning', 'closeting', 'conversion' and 'spiritualization'. Other qualitative studies of how marriage partners deal with religious difference in everyday life are mainly focused on the management of conflicts and tensions within the family (Speelman, 2001; Kaplan, 2004; Røthing, 2007; Froese, 2008). Our analysis, however, empirically demonstrates the various ways in which partners actively work to eradicate religious difference altogether. So, through various negotiation strategies, partners often work to reach a new shared space in which religious differences are eliminated and a new homogeneity has been attained.

Our results show that only in what we call the 'renunciation' strategy do partners not construct a new dimension for themselves and do not overcome religious pluralism for a 'new order' beyond previous individual differences. From the religious viewpoint, these partners do not share the idea of a 'family' but keep their different identities. One partner gives up the search for a compromise and yields to the hegemony (in his adopted country) of the Catholic religion, of which his partner is a representative. These couples are therefore still religiously mixed; their religious pluralism is something that has not been solved by the couple's negotiations.

However, it is interesting to emphasize that partners, united in their common purpose to remove religious differences, often 'solve' religious pluralism in several ways, reaching a new shared dimension which, *de facto*, overcomes pluralism. In this sense, they demonstrate that what was previously viewed as religiously 'mixed' is in fact no longer so. Partners can privatize religions, removing them from the family context (the 'closeting' strategy), convert to the other partner's religion (the 'conversion' strategy) or reach a new balance by reinventing ways of experiencing religion beyond institutionalized practices and dogmas (the 'spiritualization' strategy). In these three types of strategy, religious pluralism is overcome through *praxis* and is no longer experienced in family life.

Mixed couples, as units that go beyond exogamy, interpret the complex processes transforming our societies. In the 'closeting' strategy, according to secularization theory on the declining influence of religion on social life (Wilson, 1982; Dobbelaere, 2002; Norris and Inglehart, 2004), the interaction of partners, at family level, removes religious identities, which are no longer viewed as significant issues for the family members. In the 'spiritualization' strategy, according to religious individualization theory and despite secularization theory, there is no necessary correlation with a loss of religiousness for the individual. On the contrary, more subjective and privatized forms of religion, like those which our interviewed couples are trying to create, are replacing institutionalized ones (Houtman and Mascini, 2002; Houtman and Aupers, 2007; Pollack and Pickel, 2007), constructing a new way of experiencing and sharing spirituality and practices based on ecumenical tolerance between differing faiths (Wuthnow, 1993).

Funding

Notes

1. Since late 1994, Lega Nord politicians have occupied strategic ministries in the Italian Parliament: in 2001 'Institutional reforms and devolution' (Umberto Bossi), 'Justice' (Roberto Castelli), and 'Labour and social politics' (Roberto Maroni), and in 2008 'Internal Affairs' (Roberto Maroni) and 'Institutional Reforms and Federalism' (Umberto Bossi). This long and still ongoing presence on the political scene has earned the party public legitimacy and institutionalization. During these years, Lega Nord has explicitly built its political actions around the public visibility of Islam. Examples are the daily disinformation campaigns appearing in the party's newspaper *La Padania*, anti-Muslim demonstrations ridiculing the prophet Mohammed, and protests against the building of mosques (Allievi, 2003).

2. The discussions with the 15 'mixed couples' studied here were originally transcribed in Italian. In many cases the immigrant men's spoken Italian was poor, and the English translation reflects the imperfections of their speech while making corrections in the interest of comprehensibility.

3. The presence of Muslims in Italy, in comparison with the Turkish presence in Germany or that of North Africans in France, represents a wide range of countries. In numerically descending order, it is characterized by migrants from Morocco, Albania, Tunisia, Senegal, Egypt, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Algeria, Bosnia, Iran, Nigeria, Turkey and Somalia. In the sample presented here, we conducted interviews with six immigrant men from Morocco, two from Palestine, two from Senegal, and one each from Egypt, Kashmir, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey.

4. Cor. 2,221ss.

References

Allievi S (2003) Sociology of a newcomer: Muslim migration to Italy – Religious visibility, cultural and political reactions. *Immigrants & Minorities* 22(2–3): 141–154.

Allievi S (2006) *Pluralismo*. [Pluralism]. Bologna: EMI.

Ambrosini M (2008) *Un'altra globalizzazione. La sfida delle migrazioni transnazionali*. [Another globalization. The challenge of transnational migrations]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Arweck E and Nesbitt E (2010) Close encounters? The intersection of faith and ethnicity in mixed-faith families. *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 31(1): 39–52.

Barbara A (1985) *Marriages sans frontières*. Paris: Le Centurion.

Bertaux D (1998) *Les Récits de vie*. Paris: Nathan.

Breger R and Hill R (1998) Introducing mixed marriages. In: Breger R and Hill R (eds) *Cross-cultural marriage: Identity and choice*. Oxford: Berg, 1–32.

Caballero C, Edwards R and Puthussery S (2009) Parenting children from 'mixed' racial, ethnic and faith backgrounds: typifications of difference and belonging. *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33(6): 949–967.

Davidson JD (1998) Interfaith marriage, *Commonweal*, September 11, 12–13.

Davis K (1941) Intermarriage in caste societies. *American Anthropologist* 43(3): 376–395.

Dobbelaere K (2002) *Secularization: An analysis at three levels*. Brussels: Lang.

Falicov CJ (1995) Training to think culturally: A multidimensional comparative framework. *Family Process* 34(4): 373–388.

Froese R (2008) One family, two religions: Child belief or child grief in Christian-Muslim families? *British Journal of Religious Education* 30(1): 37–47.

Heaton TB (1984) Religious homogamy and marital satisfaction reconsidered. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 46(3): 729–733.

Honneth A (1995) *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Houtman D and Aupers S (2007) The spiritual turn and the decline of tradition: The spread of post-Christian spirituality in 14 Western countries, 1981–2000. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46(3): 305–320.

Houtman D and Mascini P (2002) Why do churches become empty, while New Age grows? Secularization and religious change in the Netherlands. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41(3): 455–473.

Huntington S (1996) *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Iannaccone L (1991) The consequences of religious market structure: Adam Smith and the economics of religion. *Rationality and Society* 3(2): 156–177.

Kalmijn M (1998) Intermarriage and homogamy: Causes, patterns, and trends. *Annual Review of Sociology* 24: 395–421.

Kaplan J (2004) *Interfaith families. Personal stories of Jewish-Christian intermarriage*. Westport: Praeger Publishers.

McCarthy K (2007) Pluralistic family values: Domestic strategies for living with religious difference. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Religious Pluralism and Civil Society* 612(1): 187–208.

Neyrand G and M'Sili M (1998) Mixed couples in contemporary France. Marriage, acquisition of French nationality and divorce. *Population: An English Selection* 10(2): 385–416.

Norris P and Inglehart R (2004) *Sacred and secular: Religion and politics worldwide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Leary R (2000) Religious intermarriage in Dublin: The importance of status boundaries between religious groups. *Review of Religious Research* 41(4): 471–487.

Pace E, Berzano L and Giordan G (2010) Experiencing the paradox: Within and beyond secularization. In: Giordan G (ed.) *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion, Youth and Religion*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, I–X.

Pace E and Frisina A (2011) Italian secularism revisited? Muslim claims in the public sphere and the long struggle towards religious equality. In: Keskin T (ed.) *The Sociology of Islam and Muslim Societies: Secularism, Economy and Politics*. Reading: Ithaca Press, 291–317.

Peruzzi G (2008) *Amori possibili, Coppie miste nella provincia italiana*. [Possible relationships. Mixed couples in the Italian province]. Milan: Franco Angeli.

Pollack D and Pickel G (2007) Religious individualization or secularization? Testing hypotheses of religious change – the case of Eastern and Western Germany. *The British Journal of Sociology* 58(4): 603–632.

Romano D (2008) *Intercultural marriage: Promises and pitfalls*. Boston, London: Intercultural Press.

Røthing Å (2007) Who gets the final word? Gender and negotiations in late modern interfaith relationships. In: Furseth I and Leer-Salvesen P (eds) *Religion in late modernity: Essays in honor of Pål Repstad*. Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 101–116.

Roy O (2007) Le découplage de la religion et de la culture, une exception musulmane ? *Esprit* (mars-avril): 242–252.

Saint-Blancat C (1999) *L'Islam in Italia. Una presenza plurale*. [Islam in Italy. A plural presence]. Roma: Edizioni Lavoro.

Saraceno C (2007) Coppie miste, un'ancora di salvezza? [Mixed couples, a lifeline?] *Reset* 103: 89–98.

Sherkat DE (2004) Religious intermarriage in the United States: Trends, patterns, and predictors. *Social Science Research* 33: 606–625.

Song M (2003) *Choosing ethnic identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Speelman G (2001) *Keeping faith: Muslim-Christian couples and interreligious dialogue*. Zoetemeer: Meinema.

Tognetti Bordogna M (2001) *Legami familiari e immigrazione: I matrimoni misti*. [Family ties and migrations: intermarriages]. Turin: l'Haramattan Italia.

Voas D (2009) The maintenance and transformation of ethnicity: Evidence on mixed partnerships in Britain. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35(9): 1497–1513.

Wilson B (1982) *Religion in sociological perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wuthnow R (1993) *The future of Christianity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Author biographies

Francesco CERCHIARO has a PhD in Social Sciences from the University of Padua (2013). His research interests include the sociology of religion, sociology of culture, sociology of migration and sociology of gender.

Address: Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology (FiSPPA), Università degli Studi di Padova, Via Cesarotti, 12, 35123, Padova, Italy

Email: francesco.cerchiaro@libero.it

Stef AUPERS is Professor of Media Culture at the Institute for Media Studies, University of Leuven in Belgium.

Address: Institute for Media Studies, University of Leuven, Parkstraat 45, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

Email: stef.aupers@soc.kuleuven.be

Dick HOUTMAN is Professor of Sociology of Culture and Religion at the University of Leuven, Belgium. His latest book is entitled *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (Fordham University Press, 2012, edited with Birgit Meyer).

Address: Centre for Sociological Research, University of Leuven, Parkstraat 45, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

Email: dick.houtman@soc.kuleuven.be