

Country Report

Italy

Tina Magazzini

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This Country Report offers a detailed assessment of religious diversity and violent religious radicalisation in the above-named state. It is part of a series covering 23 countries (listed below) on four continents. More basic information about religious affiliation and state-religion relations in these states is available in our Country Profiles series. This report was produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, secularism and religiously inspired radicalisation.

Countries covered in this series:

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

<http://grease.eui.eu>



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The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Asia for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Raciunas from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

For further information about the GREASE project please contact: Professor Anna Triandafyllidou, anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu

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GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

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Religious governance in Italy: socio-demographic context, the role of the Catholic church and radicalisation challenges

Introduction

Italy represents a peculiar case with respect to the governance of religion, in that it could be said that Church-State relations are older than the state itself.

An article in the NY Times once labelled Italy as “the European nation where religion and state have mingled most”, claiming that

“the debate over church and state has not stopped for 1,700 years, in this nation with a public Christian heritage stretching back to the Emperor Constantine’s conversion early in the fourth century, where a neighbourhood in Rome is its own country and seat of the Roman Catholic Church. Those years seem to have lent enough time and hard experience for church and state to settle into an almost indistinct whole, where the very real secularization in Italy in the last few decades is balanced by its history, culture, architecture and, even though church attendance has declined significantly, faith.” (Fisher 2004).

Yet, Italy has been a unified nation state for less than 160 years old. The city of Rome only became part of Italy in 1870, and the country’s unification was not really completed until after the First World War, when in 1918 the territories of Venezia Giulia and Trentino (previously belonging to the Austro-Hungarian Empire) were annexed.

This report focuses on contemporary Italy, its challenges, the existing official recognition of (or lack thereof) religious groups and the regulations between the state and the different confessions practiced by various religious communities, old and new. It would however be difficult to make sense of Italy’s current institutional asset and religious governance without considering the central role that the Catholic Church and the Vatican State have played over the centuries, particularly in Italy’s nation-building and state-building.

In the following sections I will therefore first provide an overview of the current challenges and opportunities in the field of religious diversity governance. These are namely the country’s demographics and the changing composition of the population, mostly due to an aging population, recent migration (both of Italian youth leaving the country and of immigrant flows arriving from EU recent member states as well as from Africa, Asia and South America) and the significant economic, political and cultural regional differences across Italy.

In order to understand the North-South divide, the role of the Catholic church in welfare provision and the importance of the family in the context of an unstable economy, the second section provides a historical background of state-organised religion relations

and analyses the current institutional framework that governs religion and religious diversity today.

The third section moves to examine the main violent religious radicalisation threats, explores why there have been relatively few incidents of this kind so far, and what kind of policies and practices have been put in place to prevent and to tackle them.

Even though the media and some political parties' discourses have, in recent years, made an instrumental usage of religion for political gains (mainly by pandering to a fear of foreigners and of Muslims) contributing to widespread perceptions of insecurity, to date there have been no victims of violent religious extremism in Italy. What has been, and continues to be an ongoing threat, is rather violence tied to organised crime (which has a long history and very autochthonous roots) and hate crime rooted in extreme right-wing ideology.

The conclusions aim at briefly summarising the various sections and to provide pointers regarding possible avenues for future research and for meaningful comparisons.

Socio-demographic context

Italy's population, according to the last official census (of December 2017), is of slightly less than 60 million and a half inhabitants, which places it roughly in same group as France and the UK. What is noteworthy of Italy's demographics is however that while in the 1980s its population (at 56,5 million) was slightly larger than the French and British ones, it has practically stagnated since, while both France and the UK count now around 67 million inhabitants.

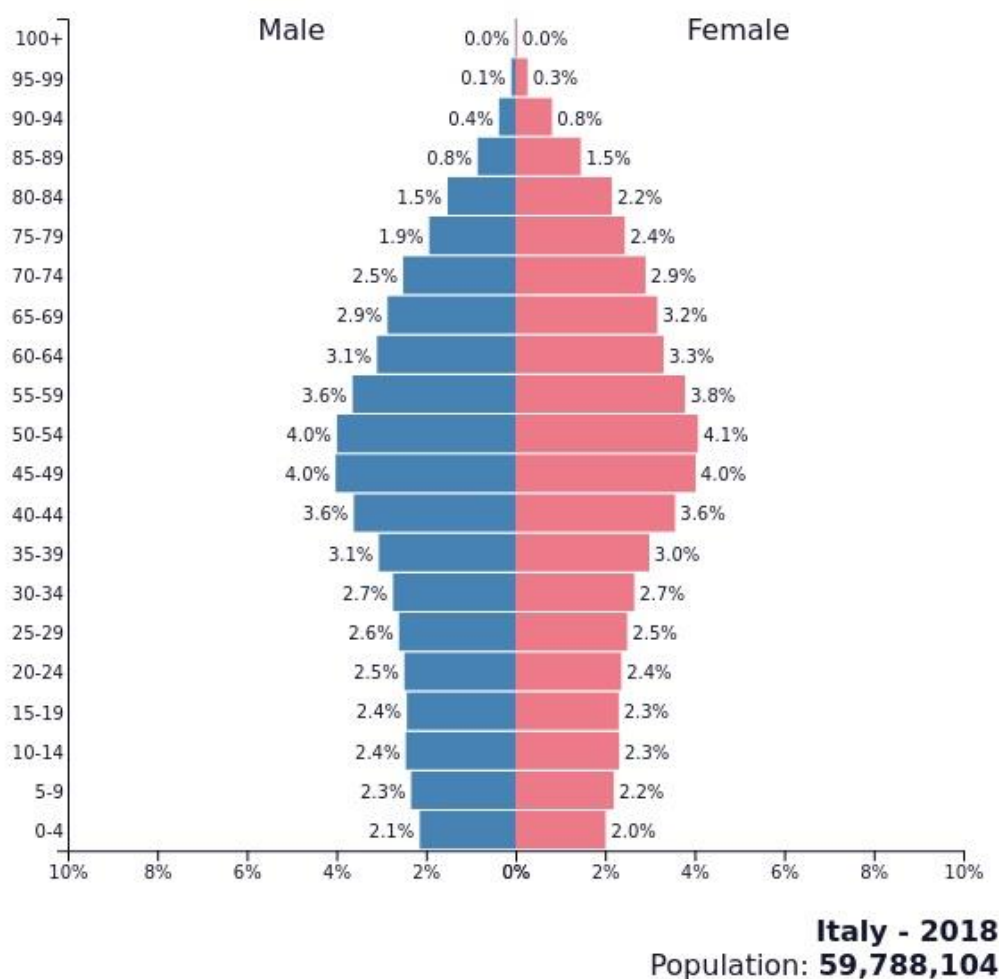
Italy's birth rate, after a demographic boom that lasted from the end of the Second World War to the 1970s, has been declining for decades, leading governments across the political spectrum to raise the alarm about the country's aging population. Despite campaigns such as the controversial 'Fertility day' and 'National Fertility Plan' promoted by the Ministry of Health in 2016, or the 'natality plan' announced by the first Conte government (June 2018 – September 2019), the urgency and concern over Italy's aging population have however so far involved more political statements than concrete measures in terms of social policy or welfare reform (Markoviti and Molokotos-Liederman, 2017).

While the overall size of Italy's population has remained fairly stable over the past decades, its composition has not. From being a large-scale emigration country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries¹, it has only in the past few decades become a destination country for migrants coming from CEE countries, North Africa and Latin America. As Simon McMahon pointed out, in Italy the underground labour markets have provided employment opportunities for immigrants (albeit often in precarious, irregular and temporary conditions) regardless of their legal status, fostering high levels

¹ An estimated 13 million Italians emigrated and permanently settled in their host countries between 1880 and 1976 (Ben-Ghiat and Hom 2016) and by the late 1970s an estimated 25 million Italians were residing abroad (King, 1978), even though a Registry of Italians Resident Abroad (A.I.R.E.) was not created until 1988, now counting approximately 5 million registrations.

of undocumented migrants that have been addressed through ad hoc, but fairly regular, amnesties (in 1986, 1990, 1995, 1998, 2002 and 2009) (McMahon 2015, p.6).

Table 1. Italy's population pyramid by age and gender (2018)²



Arguably immigration is, together with a low birth rate, the defining characteristic of Italy's population shift in the twenty-first century. It is a trend that holds both great promise (as most migrants are younger than the average Italian population and immigrant families tend to have a higher birth rate than the average Italian family) as well as challenges (mostly tied to the fear held by part of the population of being 'replaced', both in the increasingly precarious job-market as well as in terms of cultural practices, and which has led to a rise of racist attitudes both in society as well as in political party representatives).

Table 2. Changes in total population and percentage of foreign residents in Italy (2004-2017)³

² Data based on the Italian Statistical Office (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, ISTAT), available at <http://www4.istat.it/>

³ Data based on the Italian Statistical Office (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, ISTAT), available at <http://www4.istat.it/>

Year	Total population	Foreign residents	%
2004	58.462.375	1.990.159	3,4
2005	58.462.375	2.402.157	4,1
2006	59.131.287	2.670.514	4,5
2007	59.619.290	2.938.922	5
2008	60.045.068	3.432.651	5,8
2009	60.340.328	3.891.295	6,5
2010	60.626.442	4.235.059	7
2011	59.394.207	4.570.317	7,5
2012	59.685.227	4.052.081	6,8
2013	60.782.668	4.387.721	7,4
2014	60.795.612	4.922.085	8,1
2015	60.665.551	5.014.437	8,2
2016	60.589.445	5.026.124	8,3
2017	60.483.973	5.046.994	8,3

The data regarding religion identification is neither systematically collected nor easily available. As elsewhere, the national census includes no question aimed at collecting data on religious affiliation, and even though a number of surveys have been conducted by the Pew Research Centre, as well as by Ipsos, Eurispes and the Eurobarometer in recent years, they all use different questions, samples and methodologies, which make comparisons unreliable.

In terms of general trends, however, all surveys show a decline in the percentage of those who declare themselves Catholic, and the most comprehensive study, which is conducted yearly based on a sample of 60,000 interviews (Ipsos), has documented over the last decade (1) a rise of about 10% in the number of people who identify as non-religious—which coincides with a decrease in those who declare themselves Catholic—as well as (2) an increase of religious affiliations other than Catholic from 1,6% to 3%.

Table 3. Changes in total population and percentage of foreign residents in Italy (2007-2017)

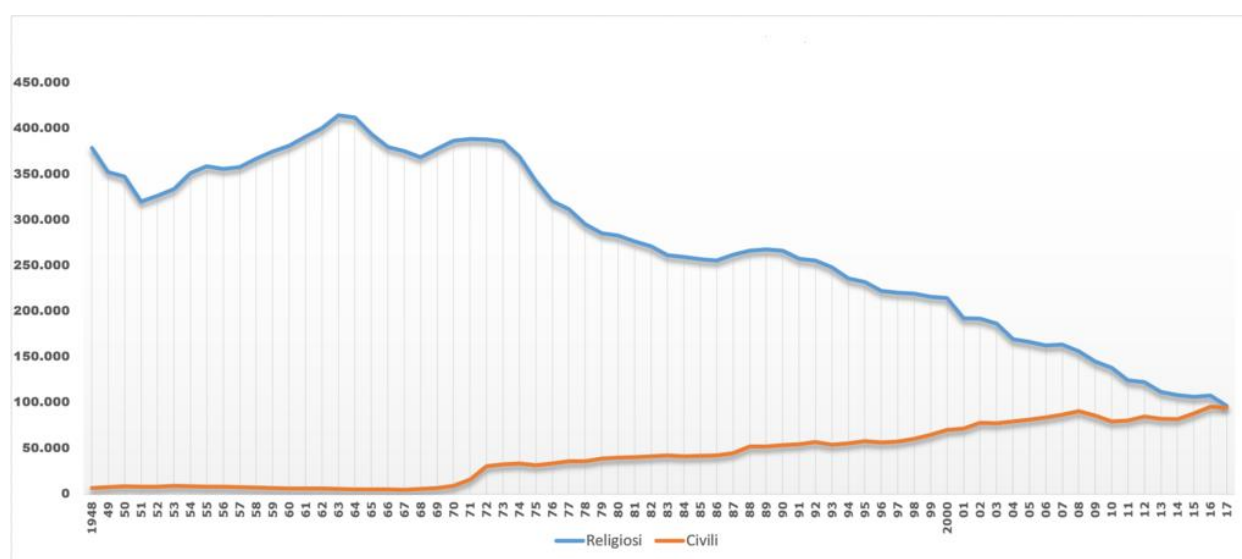
Year	Catholics (%)	Non-believers/ atheists (%)	Other religions (%)
2007	85,4	13	1,6
2008	87	11,4	1,6
2009	84	14,2	1,8
2010	83,2	14,5	2,3
2011	81,9	15,6	2,5
2012	80,7	16,8	2,5
2013	81	16,5	2,5
2014	80,2	17,2	2,6
2015	78,4	18,9	2,7
2016	77	20,1	2,9
2017	74,4	22,6	3,0

Of those who self-identify as Catholic, most claim to go to Church 'occasionally' (35% of the overall population in 2017), while approximately 27% of the total population

declared to be a frequent church-goer or to be actively involved in church activities in 2017.

Other than the above-mentioned surveys, one available indicator of the role that religiosity plays in contemporary Italian society is the number of religious weddings versus the number of civil weddings. The proportion went from 98,34% of religious weddings in 1948 to 50,49% of religious weddings versus 49,51% of civil weddings. More noteworthy than the shift from religious to civil weddings is however that the overall number of weddings has decreased significantly, with more couples choosing not to get married at all.

Table 4. Number of religious weddings (in blue) and of civil weddings (in orange) from 1948 to 2017⁴



Regarding foreign residents, approximately one third identifies as Muslim, around 30% as Christian Orthodox, and around 18% as Catholic, which is not surprising considering that the main sending countries are Morocco, Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine.

Table 5. Religious affiliation of immigrants residing in Italy (2018)⁵

Religion	Members	%
Orthodox	1.523.300	29,6
Catholics	918.100	17,8
Protestants	224.400	4,4
Other Christian denominations	39.900	0,8
Muslims	1.682.600	32,7
Jews	4.600	0,1
Induists	152.500	3
Buddhists	117.200	2,3
Other East Asian religions	83.700	1,6
Atheists	241.700	4,7

⁴ Data based on ISTAT figures.

⁵ Data based on the Statistical Dossier on Immigration of 2018, available at <https://www.dossierimmigrazione.it/>

Tradition religions	65.300	1,3
Other	90.700	1,7

Main trends and challenges

What has the relatively recent shift from an emigration to an immigration country meant for Italy's religious traditions, church-state relations, and religious governance?

As we have seen, while Catholicism remains the most widespread and well-established majority religion in the country—to the point that the historian Paul Ginsborg has defined Italy as a country characterised by a feeling of “widespread religion” [*religione diffusa*] (Ginsborg 2006)—the percentage of Italians who identify as Catholics has been slowly but steadily declining, as is the case in most Western European countries. Of these, even less self-identify as ‘practicing Catholics’.

It can therefore be said that, with secularisation as a backdrop, immigration to Italy increases the percentage of religious members of the population, since estimates from 2017 and 2018 see only 4,7% of foreigners residing in Italy identifying as ‘atheists or agnostic’, against a 22,6% of Italian citizens that declare themselves as non-religious. The novelty and perceived threat on behalf of the majority has however little to do with whether immigrants are religious or not, as the concern is squarely with migrants from non-Catholic countries.

As Gulio Ercolessi has written

“Italians considered themselves ‘naturally’ non-racists. Throughout the years of the civil rights struggles in the U.S., and during the years of apartheid in South Africa, the Italian media in particular often showed a sense of superiority and considered their Catholic and/or humanistic heritage a sort of insurance against every possible racist virus within their own ranks. The illusion faded once Italian society became more diverse.” (Ercolessi, 2009, p.17)

The consequence of institutional racism and of a generalised incapacity to acknowledge and to accept immigrant Muslim minorities has translated into serious discriminations toward members of minority religions in general and of Muslims in particular.

If, until the late 1990s, the main challenges related to religious governance in Italy had to do with the obstacles in advancing civil rights that the Catholic church opposed (such as abortion rights, LGBT equal rights, and so on) and protecting the freedom of the non-religious minority *from* Catholic religion (more on this below, see the Lautsi v. Italy case), the country now faces a dual challenge.

While the threat of majority religious norms being imposed on atheists or agnostics persists (for instance, while accessing legal abortions is a right according to Law no. 194 of 22 May 1978, the right of doctors to opt out from providing them based on their religious conscience, effectively renders the norm void in certain regions), the discrimination in treatment between different religions is also a serious issue.

Such disparity between the privileges (economic, legal, mediatic and more) of the Catholic church and the limited recognition of minority religions will only continue to widen and become more evident due to the increasingly diverse religious composition of the Italian society, unless the institutional framework on which such disparities are based is reformed. In order to understand how the state relations with the Catholic church came to evolve into the current institutional framework, a brief overview of the historical background must be provided.

Historical background of state-church relations and current institutional framework

Church-State relations' role in Italy's nation-building

The Catholic church in Italy has always been, above and beyond a religious institution, a political one. One of the vastest and most powerful entities in the peninsula, the Papal States controlled most of what is now considered central Italy for about a millennium⁶ and played a crucial role in the formation of the Italian state. Even though most of its territories were lost to the Kingdom of Sardinia in 1861 (when King Vittorio Emanuele II of Sardinia was proclaimed King of Italy), Turin was declared Italy's capital—since Rome and Lazio were not yet part of Italy.

The Kingdom of Sardinia, which already in 1848 had recognised equal civil and political rights to Jews and Waldesians, favoured a separation of state and religion, despite many of the political leaders of the Italian Risorgimento being religious (and often Catholics) in their private lives.

When Italian troops conquered Rome in 1870, putting an end to the temporal power of the Pope, the so-called 'legge delle guarentigie' [statute of the guaranties] was passed to ensure the independence and diplomatic status of the Holy See. However, the then-Pope Pius IX retreated to the Vatican, where he declared himself a 'prisoner', excommunicated the king and the leaders of the Italian government and ordered 'good Catholics' not to recognise its legitimacy and to abstain from participation in Italian political life and parliamentary elections (*non expedit* policy) (Ercolessi, 2009; Kertzer, 2015).

Even though the 1848 Albertine Statute (the constitution of the previous Kingdom of Sardinia, adopted by the Kingdom of Italy in 1861) considered Catholicism the official religion of the state, it adopted a regime of separation between church and state based on the principle of individual freedom.

This meant that the first half century of the Italian state was characterised by the absence of Catholic factions in politics, since the *non expedit* was only definitely revoked in 1918, even though in 1905 Pius X had modified it so that the bishops could ask for a suspension of the rule in case of the need to prevent the election of a 'subversive' candidate.

⁶ Beyond the Lazio region, the Papal States controlled the Marche, Umbria, and most of Emilia-Romagna.

In the general elections of 1919 a Catholic party, the *Partito Popolare*, participated, obtaining approximately 20% of the votes, which was abolished as all other parties by the Fascist dictatorship in 1929. That very same year, however, the Holy See and the Italian Kingdom signed the Lateran Treaty, which created the Vatican City State and restored many of the prerogatives of the church, to the point that Pius XI referred to Mussolini as the man of providence (Kertzer, 2015).

While Italy's regulatory framework has been slowly changing in response to diversity, acknowledging some religious minorities through ad-hoc agreements that provide a certain degree of legal recognition and the access to public spaces and tax provisions that come with it, the fundamental regulatory framework has remained that of 1929. The ad hoc agreements between minority confessions and the Italian state hinge therefore on the political will on behalf of the state, as well as on the capacity of minority religions to speak with a single voice. This has translated into the fact that Muslims, which are divided between various religious associations, despite representing the largest religious minority of approximately 1.5 million, have not yet obtained an official recognition as a religion by the Italian state.

Current regulatory framework

The 1848 Albertine Statute, Italy's first constitutional document, recognised Catholicism as the state's official religion, yet also declared the toleration of "other currently existing confessions". Such 'toleration' was eroded and eventually completely done away with under fascism, despite an initial formal window-dressing with the so-called "Law on allowed worships" (law n. 11593/1929) passed in the same year as the Lateran Treaty.

Matters of religious freedom are to be found in the current Constitution of 1947 at articles 2, 3, 8, 19 and 20, which read:

"2: The Republic shall recognise and protect the inviolable rights of the person, both as an individual and in the social groups where *human personality is expressed*. [...]

3: All citizens shall have equal social dignity and shall be *equal before the law, without distinction of gender, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions*. [...]

8: All *religious denominations shall be equally free* before the law. Denominations other than Catholicism shall have the right to self-organisation according to their own statutes, provided these do not conflict with Italian law.

19: Everyone shall be entitled to *profess freely their religious beliefs* in any form, individually or with others, and to promote such beliefs and celebrate rites in public or in private, provided they are not offensive to public morality.

20: No special limitation or tax burden shall be imposed on the establishment, legal capacity or activities of any organisation on the *ground of its religious nature* or its religious or confessional goals."

Despite such provisions, one telling controversy that provides a good example of the kind of debate still ongoing in Italy regarding freedom of religion in society is the *Lautsi v. Italy* case. The case was raised by Mrs. Lautsi, who complained about her children having to be exposed to the Catholic crucifix in class while attending public school, which is supposed to be non-confessional, and asked for it to be removed from the classrooms. When the school in question decided not to do so, the case went first to the regional administrative court of Veneto, then to the supreme administrative court and finally to the European Court of Human Rights. The final decision was that the presence of crucifixes in public schools did not violate the principle of secularism, so Mrs. Lautsi lost the case. What is noteworthy is however the reasoning based on which the Italian government defended the presence of crucifixes in public schools, claiming that the crucifix symbolised not a religious confession but rather Italian civilization, its historical roots and universal values.

While increasing religious diversity is becoming a normal feature of Italian society, particularly in large cities where globalisation and migration's, one telling indicator of the differential treatment still rooted in the current regulatory framework is that the Central Directorate for Religious Affairs—the institute in charge of religious affairs, including the key role of stipulating agreements between the Italian state and religious groups—is divided into two branches: Catholic affairs, and non-Catholic affairs. All non-Catholic religions are grouped together, and the law that regulates them is, to date, still the so-called “norm on the admitted cults”, Law no. 1159 approved on 24 June 1929 by the Fascist regime. While article 8 of the 1948 Constitution does envision the possibility for non-Catholic religious groups to enter into an agreement [*Intesa*] with the Italian state, this ultimately depends on the discretion of the Directorate for Religious Affairs since the competence to initiate negotiations, in view of the stipulation of an agreement, lies with the Italian government. So far agreements between the state and the government (which in any case are far from resembling the kind of privileges afforded to the Catholic church) have been stipulated with the Waldensian Evangelical Church, the Evangelical Christian Churches Assemblies of God in Italy, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI), the Baptist Evangelical Christian Union of Italy, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Apostolic Church, the Italian Buddhist Union, the Italian Hinduist Union and the Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute (IBISG).⁷

No agreement nor recognition exists for Muslims, the largest religious minority, and such status is unlikely to change soon, taking into account that the Directorate for Religious Affairs falls under the Ministry of Interior (a position held, in 2019, by an extreme-right politician who campaigned on an explicitly xenophobic and anti-Muslim platform).

⁷ See the official governmental webpage ‘Service for relations with religious denominations and institutional relations’, accessible at http://presidenza.governo.it/USRI/confessioni/intese_indice.html

Overall, in the current legislative and administrative framework of religious governance in Italy, while freedom of religion is officially ensured, not all minority beliefs are tolerated in the same way.

Violent religious radicalisation challenges and policies responses

Between the late 1960s until the late 1980s—the so-called “Years of Lead”— violent attacks, kidnappings and bombings were tied not to religious motives but to political terrorism, both ‘red’ (far-left) and ‘black’ (far-right).

Other groups that engaged in political terrorism in the second half of the XX century were independentist movements in South Tyrol and in Sardinia.

Considering the religiously attributed violent attacks that have been taking place over the last two decades in Europe, Italy has however so far not seen the same degree of violent radicalisation. Whether because of successful preventive measures (a number of planned attacks have been discovered and blocked before they could be carried out), because international networks have been less successful in training and organising radicalised individuals or because of higher societal control at local community level, crimes related to “international Islamic terrorism” have been relatively few.

On issue that has increasingly raised the attention of politicians and radicalisation experts is the phenomenon of radicalisation among inmates, often non-nationals, in overcrowded prisons. As a response to a surge in the number of individuals flagged for radicalisation in prisons, the Italian government has activated de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation programmes carried out by authorized Imams. Meanwhile, it has also started placing detainees sentenced for religiously inspired violent radicalisation in high security special sections (separated from other inmates), and when they have served their sentence, many have been expelled from Italy (79 in 2018).

In January 2016 a proposed law (draft law no. 3558) on the prevention of radicalisation made it through the Lower House but was eventually not approved by the Senate. One of the concerns raised during the debate was the association of word “jihadist” with that of “radicalisation” throughout the legislative text. As a matter of fact, radicalisation was described as “the phenomenon of those persons who, even without any stable link with terrorist groups, uphold ideologies of jihadist origin, inspired by the use of violence and terrorism, even by Internet and social media”.

Such a phrasing meant that the scope of the law would have been limited towards the prevention of radicalisation of jihadist inspiration, while the violent religiously inspired crimes committed over the past years in Italy have largely been Islamophobic and racist attacks perpetuated by Italian nationals.

Conclusions

While Catholicism remains the most widespread and well-established majority religion in the country—to the point that the historian Paul Ginsborg has defined Italy as a country characterised by a feeling of “widespread religion”—the percentage of Italians who identify as Catholics has been slowly but steadily declining, as is the case in most Western European countries. Of those who identify as Catholic, less than one third self-identify as ‘practicing Catholics’.

With secularisation as a backdrop, immigration to Italy increases the percentage of religious members of the population, since estimates from 2017 and 2018 see only 4,7% of foreigners residing in Italy identifying as ‘atheists or agnostic’, against a 22,6% of Italian citizens that declare themselves as non-religious. The novelty and perceived threat on behalf of the majority has however little to do with whether immigrants are religious or not, as the concern is squarely with migrants from non-Catholic countries.

From being a country of emigrants—the numbers of Italians residing abroad have been estimated to be around 25 million in the 1980s—since the 1990s Italy has become a country of both emigration and immigration, with migrants arriving from the Balkans, Central Europe, North Africa and Asia.

The current Italian Constitution, which entered into force in 1948 reinstating democracy after two decades of fascist dictatorship, incorporated the Lateran Treaty at art. 7, acknowledging both the political treaty which recognises the full sovereignty of the Holy See in the State of Vatican City and the ‘Concordat’ which regulates state-church relations. While the Constitution also guarantees the right of freedom of religion, a number of legal cases such as *Lautsi v. Italy* have in recent years highlighted the difficulty of disentangling religious and state matters.

Overall, Italy’s current religious diversity management approach reflects an underlying framework according to which minority religions are only relevant to the specific minorities, but Catholic religion is seen as holding a universal cultural value, which in turns can become problematic not only for minority religions but also for an increasing non-religious minority.

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Project Coordinator: Professor Anna Triandafyllidou

Contact: anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu

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