Religious Belonging and (Forced) Migration: a Study on Migrant Coptic Minors in Italy

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1 The Effects of Forced Migration on Children

In recent years, a growing number of migrant children have been seeking psychological assistance or mental health treatment in European Union countries. Many of these minors, of different origins and cultural backgrounds, are victims of persecution, ethnic conflict, war or political troubles, and come to Western Europe in search of a better future. However, the condition of migrant is often burdensome, especially in the case of forced migration, and the combined effects of these experiences can lead to problematic consequences for the mental health of boys and girls, bringing additional complexity to their psychological wellbeing and having negative effects on parent-child interaction (Wiese, Burhorst, 2007).

The literature on the consequences of forced migration for children's health can be summarized in two groups: studies focusing on the immediate effects of forced migration and studies examining long-term effects (Avogo, Agadjanian, 2010). As far as the very short term is concerned, the research significantly demonstrates the disadvantage of children of displaced populations compared to the host population. Thus, a study of mortality rates from 37 conflict zones (Guha-Sapir, Gijssbert, 2004) showed the increase in vulnerabilities among children, especially under the age of five. In the longer term, the results of research on the effects of forced migration on children's mental health are less conclusive, but the high probability of a disadvantaged development seems evident. The results of the long-term impact of forced migration are also documented for their consequences on children's health (Saarela, Elo, 2016; Pavli, Maltezou, 2017; Santavirta, 2017).

Among the factors that induce stress in the persecution, there are some – such as wounds and death threats – that directly affect the child, and others that are more indirect, such as the disintegration of the family and the separation or loss of the parents (Terr, 1988; Yurtbay *et al.*, 2003). The enormous impact of violence – seen or directly experienced – seriously deteriorates the child development. However, according to many child psychologists (i.e. Jensen,

Shaw, 1993; Garmezy, Rutter, 1985), the cognitive abilities of the children, who are still immature, and therefore very flexible and easily malleable, as well as their ability to develop adaptive strategies for self-protection, frequently cover the impact of violence to a certain extent. For example, research report that the children's reactions to stress and behavioral changes were less severe than expected (Masten *et al.*, 1990).

The degree of influence of terrorist attacks and similar violent events on children depends on many factors (Wiese, 2010). The level of expectation of such episodes in the society where the child lives in, the range and time of the violence, the preparation of the society for the attack expected (or not expected), the value of the judgments and of the attitudes of society towards terrorists are considered among these factors. Almost certainly, the personality of the children, their levels of cognitive development, the broad circumstances they live in, the changes that these events cause in their lives and their ages are decisive factors, too. Garmezy and Rutter (1985) highlight that the qualities of the accident that causes stress must be fussily examined: physical and emotional deprivation, hunger, physical injury, loss of loved relatives and friends, as well as being taken away from the dangerous area.

Adolescents, whose physical integrity is very important, tend to perceive wars and terrorist attacks as threats against their bodies. It is generally accepted that those who have previously suffered serious losses within their families or among their friends are much more harshly affected by violence and persecution (Pynoos, Nader, 1990; Wiese 2010).

Furthermore, it has been suggested that not only people directly exposed to traumatic events are affected by long-term damage to mental well-being, but also their significant others, such as their offspring (Dekel, Goldblatt, 2008; Jelinek *et al.*, 2013). The process by which the symptoms associated with trauma are transferred from one person to another is named "*secondary traumatization*" (Rosenheck, Nathan, 1985). Considering a meta-analysis by Bakermans-Kranenburg *et al.* (2003), in non-clinical populations such a transgenerational transmission is unlikely, meanwhile an increased risk to develop mental disorders, particularly PTSD, has been detected in the offspring of individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (from now on PTSD) (Roberts *et al.*, 2012; Yehuda, Bierer, 2008; Shrira *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the processing of biased information is implicated in the adult offspring of parents with PTSD (Suozzia, Motta, 2004; Wittekind *et al.*, 2010).

Since World War II, there has been a growing awareness of children's psychological vulnerability in persecution and in the discriminatory context. Studies on stress reactions related to war in children (Freud, Burlingham, 1973), which identified the mother-child relationship as a protective shield for the

psychological well-being of preschool children, and which found out that the separation between mother and child in preschool age has negative effects, have been of great importance.

More recent studies, however, have shown that intimacy to a responsible mother does not fully protect the preschool child from the traumatic effect of the persecution. Studies on children exposed to government persecution have highlighted an improved prevalence of behavioral disorders in the form of social withdrawal, sleep disorders, clinging and over-dependent behavior, chronic fear, depressive moods (Allodi, 1980; Lustig *et al.*, 2004), regressive symptoms, such as separation and stranger anxiety, repeated bed-wetting, tetchiness, loss of learned abilities (Arroyo, Eth, 1985; Thomas *et al.*, 2004), psychic indifference (Dodge, Raundalen, 1987; Craig *et al.*, 2009), and behavior problems such as struggling and insubordination (Baker, 1990; Fazel *et al.*, 2012). Even refugee children, previously exposed to persecution, have been described as showing symptoms such as difficulty in concentrating, sleep disturbances, anxiety, addiction, and depressed mood (Hjern *et al.*, 1991; Schottelkorb *et al.*, 2012).

Since 1980, when PTSD was included as a diagnosis in DSM-III,¹ knowledge of psychological reactions in children exposed to violence and in hazardous backgrounds has been growing significantly. There has been a number of studies on post-traumatic stress reactions in children following violent incidents and disasters, such as witnessed acts of personal violence in countries where minority groups are persecuted (Eth, Pynoos, 1985; Schwarz, Kowalski, 1991). A shared trait of most of these studies is the uniqueness of the traumatic event, whose circumstances are known to researchers by journalists, adult eyewitnesses or police reports. When families flee from war and persecution and move to another country, they are the only sources of information on the traumatic stress they suffered.

Most studies about the reactions of preschool children to danger and ferocity are based on interviews with the parents of children, and sometimes with their teachers, and the results show that parents and teachers tend to underestimate the post-traumatic problems of the children (Almqvist, Brandell-Forsberg, 1995). Furthermore, children can try to protect their parents from knowing the full extent of the traumatic event (Yule, 1991). It is known that traumatized children do not tell what happened until they are asked the right question, and usually do not do it in front of their parents (Eth, Pynoos, 1994). However, there is evidence that even very young children are able to talk about

1 The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders is the taxonomic and diagnostic tool, published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), worldwide considered the primary authority for psychiatric diagnoses.

traumatic experiences or to dramatize “malignant memories” in the right conditions, for example in play therapy (Eth, Pynoos, 1994; Terr, 1988).

Studies on refugee children were generally based on samples in which the age differences were wide, or on samples restricted to more mature kids, who are easier to talk to. This makes it difficult to compare different developmental ages, in particular in light of the results that post-traumatic stress reactions take different forms depending on the age of the child (Eth, 1990; Eth, Pynoos, 1985).

2 Egyptian Christianity and Discrimination

As for our study, the background of the Coptic boys and girls we interviewed is Egypt, a country that has several ethnic and religious groups with a dominant Islamic religion and a majority of Sunni Muslims. Among the Christian population, Coptic Orthodox Christians are the largest group, while other ethnic and religious groups include Iranian Jews, Buddhist and Bahais (Pew Research Center, 2010) (see also Chapters 5 and 6).

The history of Egyptian Christianity precedes that of Islam, as we saw earlier (Chapter 6). However, due to the seventh century Islamic conquest, Egypt became Islamized and Arabized; many Coptic Christians converted to Islam to sidestep religious persecution and extra taxes under Islamic law, and Arabic gradually replaced Coptic language with the implementation of state norms at the beginning of the eighth century, which meant a ban on Coptic language (Swanson, 2010). After the long history of Islamization, the Egyptians who remained Christians today proudly consider themselves “true” Egyptians of Pharaonic origin (Cragg, 1992). And religion is a fundamental social marker for Coptic Christians.

Christianity is deeply rooted in the history of the Coptic families; thus, religious conversion and interfaith marriages are infrequent in order to preserve the Coptic identity. While religious symbols are a means of identity expression for the Copts, the cultural development that distinguishes them from Egyptian Muslims has also built Coptic ethnic group (Rowe, 2017). For example, veils are associated with Muslim women and silver rings are associated with married Muslim men, while Christian women wear crucifix necklaces and married Christian men wear gold rings. Only Coptic Orthodox Christians often have cross tattoos on their right wrists. In addition to these visible indicators, the names mainly differentiate the Copts from the Muslims. Although there are some names for both Christians and Muslims, many Copts are likely to appoint their children with biblical figures, Coptic saints and martyrs. Furthermore,

although both Egyptian Christians and Muslims use the same language – Egyptian Arabic–, Coptic Christians have developed several specific expressions for their religious faith.

Sometimes these religious signs become reasons for discrimination, perpetuating a religious hierarchy that privileges Muslims over Christians in Egypt. For example, the Copts are not only significantly underrepresented in politics and the media –only a few Copts currently occupy positions of political, military and educational leadership (Bayat, Herrera, 2010; TIMEP, 2018)– but they have also limited employment opportunities and promotions, compared to the Muslim majority. This underrepresentation of the Copts has gradually progressed through discriminatory policies and state-sponsored violence against them, led by radical Islamists in all areas of Egyptian society (McCallum, 2012; Bosmat, 2017) (see also Chapter 10).

Experiences like terrorist attacks, but also indirect violence, discrimination and micro-aggression generate collective emotions within an ethnic group. The collective emotions contribute to the “ethnic affinity”, while creating symbolic boundaries along ethnic lines. Emotions are therefore not only social, but also political and collective, and further strengthen the sense of belonging to a minority group, such as the Coptic Christians (Ha, 2017).

Studies on religious minorities in Egypt have paid attention, so far, mainly to two topics with a clear focus on the Coptic Orthodox Church: State-Church relations and revival movements of the Church’s identity. This second issue concerns the politics of the revival of the identity of the Coptic Church. For example, McCallum (2007) explores the political function of the Patriarch (the Head of the Church) to reinforce the Coptic identity during national crisis and others focus on the Coptic formation of identity within the Egyptian political structures (Ibrahim, 2015; Rowe, 2007; Sedra, 1999²). Current studies indicate more unlike issues such as the conceptualization of citizenship based on religious identity (Pizzo, 2015); the double-edged consequences of new media on the Coptic issues (Elsässer, 2010) and the importance of religious dialogue in the understanding of Muslim-Christian relations (Hansen, 2015).

While most studies on Coptic Christians have provided historical analysis and identity formation within the Coptic Orthodox Church, they have paid much less attention to common Coptic lay people and their daily lives. Therefore, the focus on the Coptic laymen in place of the Coptic Orthodox Church as the main actor in the Coptic community is very important to fill the gap in the current literature.

2 The interesting study of Sedra (1999) highlights a “class cleavages” in national identity among Copts.

3 The Present Study

The study aimed to investigate –using a qualitative methodology– factors and processes promoting or hindering the integration process of Coptic minors migrated to Italy with their parents. The main aims were to identify the acculturative challenges faced by these minors, the role played by Churches in sustaining heritage identity and faith across generations, by paying special attention to the significance of the persecution of Christians and martyrdom.

We adopted a salutogenic perspective (Antonovsky, 1987) that focuses on the resources of individuals and families, as well as on the resources of the social context, rather than focusing on the unavoidable critical issues, typical of the migration process.

The main strategy to reach our goals was to encourage the young Copts of the sample to tell their stories and standpoints, and to ponder about their past experience and their lives in Italy. In order to do this, 4 focus groups have been carried out, with Coptic minors, living in Milan, some of them Orthodox and other Catholics. 18 minors have been involved, 12 females and 6 males, aged 12 to 18. Almost all the Coptic teenagers who participated in the focus groups were born in Egypt and arrived in Italy as children, except one. Most of them attended primary schools in Milan, almost all of them –except one– the lower secondary schools. All the minors interviewed for the present study regularly attend Coptic churches located in the Milan area.

The focus groups have been audiotaped and entirely transcribed. Afterwards, using the methodology of the content analysis, the text has been segmented into codes created by the researchers; thenceforth the codes have been reassembled, thus leading the researchers to work on the meaning attribution (the code-and-retrieval logic). The analysis was computer-aided, by means of the software ATLAS.ti (Muhr, 2004) and based on the principles based on the grounded theory: we started from the participants' accounts and debates, and from the meanings they constructed during the interactions, trying to avoid selecting information and data on the basis of pre-existing categories.

The required criteria for the selection of participants were the following: *a)* being part of a family with Coptic belonging only (no bi-cultural families); *b)* living in Italy for at least two years; *c)* speaking fluently the Italian language.

Coptic minors have been contacted through multiple channels, such as local Coptic associations, Coptic communities, and the Archdioceses of Milan and third-sector associations.

Coptic minors' experience and adaptation to the Italian context have been investigated considering some main topics: the (forced) migration process, that is a reason why families leave their home country, with special attention

to the migratory mandate; the difficult phases of family separation and reunification; the efforts to keep ties and create new relationships; stereotypes and prejudices, which have a great influence on the relations between Italians and Egyptians, and which can negatively affect the contact between the two social groups and their cultures and traditions. For each topic, we tried to highlight critical issues and resources.

The research work focused on the (forced) migration caused by religious persecution, seen through the eyes of the offspring of migrant families: preadolescents and adolescents, mostly arrived in Italy very young, some born in Italy, children of Coptic Orthodox and Coptic Catholics Christians, forced to leave their country of origin due to harassment, persecution, and violence suffered as Christians. The perspective of the minor sons and daughters was adopted to gather what they know, what they lived, what they were told about the persecutions their families had suffered.

The set-up of the work, the methodology and the tools used have had the purpose of favoring the rise of memories, thoughts and issues, in a climate of protection and trust, and guaranteeing total respect for privacy. All the minors seemed to be very motivated in debating and showed very high involvement. The data and the elements detected allowed to collect stories, directly experienced or “inherited” by their parents. We have chosen to deal with some issues, such as the persecution experienced and remembered, with the tools of verbal narration and without the use of mediums – such as writing – in front of which minors often show resistance. All the boys and the girls have freely brought memories, data, images, feelings and emotions, declaring themselves happy to participate in the research, and above all happy to have the chance to speak about their condition. In fact, they stated that no one had ever been interested in their history of religious persecution before, no one ever asked them what they had lived and seen.

4 The Results

After the content analysis of the transcriptions of the focus groups, five words came out as the most important for the participants: *violence, fear, freedom, religious freedom, future*. These words were the most frequent and the most meaningful among those used by the interviewees to describe themselves, to tell about the violence suffered by them or their parents, and to tell about the freedom found escaping from Egypt. The results are presented according to the outcomes of the content analysis and according to the elements already described (§2). The words will be commented in three different groups: two word

pairs (violence-fear and freedom-religious freedom) and one single word (future). The reason is that, in the narratives, the two pairs of words were strictly interconnected and very often verbalized together.

4.1 *Violence and Fear*

Violence and fear are two different words –and concepts– repeatedly encountered in the narrative that the Coptic boys and girls have proposed in a sort of link of meaning and experience. The first one –*violence*– is harsh and focused on contacting the outside environment; the second one –*fear*– is emotional and focused on the inside world. In the stories narrated by the Coptic minors, the two concepts are strictly connected, linked to each other, interdependent and consequential.

Violence is perceived as a form of abuse of power and control, which manifests itself through physical and social dimensions. The use of the term in the collected narratives mainly concerns physical violence, understood as actions aimed at hurting or frightening. In this sense, the Coptic minors reported the episodes that characterized their brief life in the country of origin –Egypt– as experiences of great violence against Christians and women. A violence expressed through public and private aggressions, consumed at home, but also on the streets, in public places. A violence with the purpose of intimidating and frightening, and, for this reason, necessarily manifest, visible, and close to the everyday life.

My mom, dad and grandparents were going to church in Egypt and a few minutes before they arrived, the church exploded; they were waiting for a taxi that arrived 5 minutes late and those minutes saved their lives. It was 2012 and it was one of the many attacks against Christians.³ I also witnessed an act of extreme violence against Christian children. We were playing football in our parish center, in Cairo. Suddenly, some men on motorbikes came in, they were driving very fast; they shot randomly and killed three children; then they left. (...). I also remember Christian boys, at school, playing football. They broke a window and the teacher forced them to collect the glass with their bare hands, hurting their hands so badly ... (M., 12 years old, Male)

(*Whispering*) When I was in Egypt, two little girls, twin sisters ... they were my friends ... one day they were sent to blow themselves up: one did

3 He is describing the attack against the church of Holy Mary of Zeitoun, a place of worship and visit for the apparitions of Saint Mary.

it, but the other one didn't have the courage. I don't know what happened to her after that (A., 13 years old, Female)

A quarrel between two people, in Egypt, ended in a firefight that struck two innocent men who were chatting in the street: the bullets entered our house and we witnessed the scene. The people of the house helped the man who had been shot to escape because the dead persons were Christian and the killer Muslim. The law imposes the death penalty if a Muslim kills another Muslim or if a Christian kills a Muslim, but not if a Muslim kills a Christian; nothing happens to him ... (F., 14 years old, Female)

Besides, the violence they experienced has also a psychological dimension, which grows up in the continuous lack of respect, in the offenses that humble the dignity of Christians, in a relentless devaluation that aims to bend Christians by humiliating, disqualifying and intimidating them overtly.

The young Copts interviewed reported several episodes of adults chastened in public because of their Christian faith, hampered in their professional career because they were identified by a Christian name. They also reported episodes of children humiliated and denigrated by peers –or older children– in school courtyards.

In Egypt, Christians cannot have a job in the police, in the army, as judges and often die during military service. The media call it “misfortune” –e.g. while cleaning a weapon, while doing something in very difficult situations–, but these are not reliable stories! The truth is that they send Christians to carry out very dangerous actions, which put their lives at risk as if they had no value ... (G., 16 years old, Female).

Religious violence and the following persecutions strike the spiritual life of Christians by not allowing them to practice their religious duties or by imposing conversion to the Islam.

(...) In Egypt, when girls are 16, they take them away, they take them somewhere else –even with violence– and they try to convert them to Islam until they turn 18 (...). They do it with girls but also with women living in the country ... and then they say they became Muslim ... (D., 16 years old, Male)

I saw the same things! I come from Alexandria of Egypt. Over there, the girls were kidnapped in order to convert them. In other places in Egypt it is not so common. (...) Only girls, no women. At 16 and before they turn

18... because then they have an identity card and the religious choice is considered complete and official. It is scary, always ... (S., 14 years old, Male)

All the Coptic teenagers reported strongly discriminatory acts and behaviors acted in public schools in Egypt by Muslim adults and pupils. Acts of physical violence of groups of Muslim children against single Christian child in the courtyards, but also assaults approved by adults and even by teachers, who very often “turned away”.

When I attended school in Egypt, at the age of 6, a classmate was asked –from the group of peers in the schoolyard– which religion he was practicing. As soon as he said “I am a Christian”, the other classmates began to throw stones against him with violence. The adults that were in the schoolyard intervened after a long time, but that delay was intentional and punitive ... the Christian child suffered serious injuries. In Egypt, I had to suffer violence too, in primary school; violence perpetrated by the teacher, who put me in the middle of the class so that the other classmates could insult me because of my Christian faith ... I remember the pain and the sense of powerlessness, the tears ... (G., 16 years old, Female)

There was a ritual practiced at school. If you are a Christian in Egypt, at school, you have to say: “I am a bad person”... in front of everyone ... You feel terrible ... I felt offended and abashed ... it's not fair ... (M., 18 years old, Male)

I remember that the bus driver often mistreated Christian girls by grabbing their hair, for no other reason but their Christian belief. (A., 12 years old, Female)

Many Coptic minors reported violent practices such as abduction, torture and murder in Egypt, in Cairo as well as in Alexandria: 16-year-old girls kidnapped by Islamic extremists and forced to convert to Islam before their 18th birthday; Christians killed by firearms while walking in the streets –with the murderer never being stopped–; children threatened, mocked and beaten in the classrooms and courtyards of Islamic public schools.

Nevertheless, if in the collective image of Islamic extremism, what attracts and seduces adults and children is a sort of “aesthetic of violence” and if the identity of the groups finds an effectual way of expression in violence, when it comes to the persecutions of the Coptic Christians, the Islamic violence aims

to generate distress and fear. This fear, however, instead of intimidating and questioning their faith, straightens the awareness that being a “true Christian” also means bearing discrimination and violence, without losing faith. Being a good Copt Christian is part of their identity, since it is what parents have passed on to them and it is a very important value that is considered as a priority. Many of the interviewed teenagers reported phrases stated by their parents throughout their lives (if they ask you if you are Christian, you answer “yes” and defend your faith until you die). The relationship between violent and discriminatory acts and the fact of being Christian is grounded on real facts – situations they memorized because they experienced them directly or because of the constant reminder from their parents: burnt churches, children killed with firearms while playing in the church square, cars and buses blown up.

The relationship between violence, death and faith and the practice of the Christian faith appears in its terrifying consequentiality: being Christians in Egypt, bearing a Christian name, and professing the Christian faith leads to the risk of death, to the certainty of being a target of denigration, persecution and violence.

The parents of Coptic children have transmitted religious values to their offspring, who have made them their own, as distinctive elements of their identity. Most parents have told and continue to tell their children about the persecution of Christians by Muslims, often showing them photos and videos of the acts of violence that continue to be perpetrated in Egypt. Daughters and sons are very conscious of the reality of being Christian in Egypt: they talked about it as if it were part of their everyday life. They contrast the beauty of Christian faith to these narratives of violence: several times, they talk about Christianity as a tolerant and peaceful religion; they say that their behavior must always be respectful and tolerant because they are Christians and Christians do not discriminate, do not misbehave, and do not lie. These are values that these minors re-propose with strength: tolerance, respect for others, acceptance, brotherhood, sincerity and righteousness.

Fear is a second facade of the Janus-faced concept emerged by the analysis, directly linked to violence. We have considered fear in its psychological meaning, as an emotional response of an adaptive system, an active defense mechanism against the dangers to people’s survival. In this sense, the function of fear is both individual and social but, in the minors’ narratives, fear was mainly used in connection with personal experience, as the consequence of threats, persecutions and violence, and in situations of danger or in the case of possible interaction with people who were truly dangerous. They express a fear that comes from direct experiences –the narration of violence experienced directly by children and remembered with the same emotional intensity that has left

the inheritance of fear— and experiences frequently narrated by parents, rooted through videos and photos and kept alive as they are continuous and condition stimuli.

Fear, for these minors, occurred at different times in their lives, triggered by the perception of a threatening and potentially harmful presence for their survival. A threat certainly aimed at the expression of religious freedom, but also at their own lives. For most of the interviewed teenagers, the response to fear is to claim a denied right, the right to live free from fear.

In the narratives of some Coptic minors who came to Milan around the age of 4, fear takes on the anxious tones of an alarming conundrum: the memories of burned churches or of killed children are mixed with the stories told by parents, with what they see on television and with the images that come from Egypt.

I have never liked living in Egypt; when I was in Egypt, I wished to go away, to America or Europe. I was afraid. (...) In Egyptian public schools, Muslims have far more rights than Christians. I was lucky enough to go to a Franciscan school in Egypt, but when my parents started thinking about coming to Milan, they sent me to a public school to save money for travel and a new life in Europe. In Egypt, Muslims pupils did not want to be with their Christians peers, so Christian children were isolated, even by professors, treated badly, threatened. I have always lived with fear in Egypt ... (S., 14 years old, Male)

For many Coptic teenagers, fear had the outlines of anxiety, with negative predictions about all the events that are perceived as dangerous or only potentially dangerous. In the tones of the voice, in the modalities chosen to speak, and in the very words of the minors, it was clear that the feeling that the persecutions suffered in Egypt by their parents and their relatives are shaping up their existence and their projects for the future. None of them, in fact, plans to go back to Egypt one day.

In Egypt, girls can never go out alone; they cannot leave their heads and arms uncovered. If they do, boys and adults males pull their hair violently or use a sort of electric baton to shake their arms. I was always afraid! (P., 17 years old, Female)

The stories of the Coptic boys and girls expressed a fear that, in many moments, seemed tied to traumatic events, reactivated as the narration proceeded. Because of the violence they witnessed, their accounts were emotionally intense: Christian children abused and killed in front of them, and people

beaten in the street before their eyes, only because they were Christians. In general, the fear is perceivable in almost all the interviewed teenagers, thus producing a negative image of the life in Egypt.

However, it must be noted that the fear brought by these minors is the result of a sort of “parental contagion”. That is anxiety and fears for the relatives still living in Egypt and in constant contact with these teenagers, along with the fears that those living in Italy pass on to their offspring, thus generating or amplifying their anxieties and fears both by imitation and by sharing the same environment, which is particularly demanding and distressing.

The arrival in Milan was difficult at the beginning, but now we are free and I'm fine. Now I know that I can trust people here in Milan. At the beginning, I couldn't, because when in Egypt some called me: “Come here a second!”. I was scared that he could kidnap me ... Even in kindergarten, Islamic children managed to beat Christian children. I was always afraid! (M., 12 years old, Male)

Yet, this intense fear does not stop them from acting as Christians, as newspaper documented over the years. In the aftermath of the double Islamic attack on 9 April 2017, for example, an article by a major national newspaper titled: “The Copts do not seem to know the fear. Armored churches between metal detectors and soldiers: this is how we live in the Coptic community after the long wave of fundamentalist attacks. But fear has not emptied the churches” (ANSA Magazine, 2017).

The interviewed Coptic teenagers have reported stories of Coptic Christians, victims of terrorist attacks, who died invoking the name of Christ, in preventing terrorists from accessing churches. They talked passionately about having learned from their parents and from their own faith that being a Christian is a value that goes beyond life, which must be defended from everything and everyone. They said they were ready to die for the faith and proud to be Christians.

We learned from an early age. Our parents have always told us: “If they kidnap you and try to convert you, you have to say no until death. Rather die”. We learn this from an early age. (G., 16 years old, Female)

4.2 *Freedom and Religious Freedom*

The questions that explored whether and how the religious factor represents a constraint or a resource for the interviewed minors revealed good levels of

integration, openly declared by boys and girls that “feel Italian and Milanese”, while maintaining a constant and significant link with the country of origin. The profile that emerges –with a minimum variance– describes them as boys and girls who, above all, feel “free” in Italy, free to join peers, Italians or Egyptians, classmates, but also friends from the parish. For the Coptic teenagers interviewed, the religious practice is also lived through the attendance of Catholic youth centers and churches in Milan, where they have no difficulty in adapting to the Ambrosian rite (the rite of the Milan Archdioceses). In particular, almost all the Coptic minors interviewed attend the Coptic Church – Orthodox or Catholic– at least once a week (often even twice a week) and, in addition, the Catholic Churches in Milan.

A constant religious commitment brings together Coptic boys and girls, as it is considered a value transmitted by parents and internalized, reached by a careful and constant practice. The religious practice links and allows to know and meet peers of the same ethnic origin. If attending school opens up opportunities for integration and freedom, it is in religious practice that they all rediscover the values of their own origins. The two things seem to fit perfectly into almost all the experiences reported in the focus groups.

(...) The others must know that you are a Christian, and you must prove it with facts. You must prove it in practice. You don't have to ruin Christianity's reputation for what you do. On the contrary ... you have to improve it. All of us must be like this. Our values have been passed on to us by our parents thanks to what they do and say. They are our guide and our freedom. (P., 17 years old, Female)

Our mother always tells us that if there is the possibility of going to church we must go there. My mother says I shouldn't be afraid to talk about our religion. That we should let it be known, talk about it (A., 13 years old, Female)

They are teenagers who recognize that they have more opportunities in Italy than in Egypt and recognize the sacrifices made by parents to offer them a future of freedom, as well as the chance to practice their religion. Some of them, the majority, have managed to go along the difficult path of integration by sharing and living the two worlds that are part of their identity: Egypt and Italy.

Being in Milan is much better than being in the city where I was born, in my home country, because the school in Italy welcomes everyone,

regardless of the religion they have ... In Egypt, Christians are separated from others, ridiculed, abused. In Milan, there is space to play safe, free – which there was not in Egypt ... (M., 12 years old, Male)

Being able to live in a State where you are free to practice your religion, to dress in many different ways, to be yourself ... this is what freedom is to me. Like in Milan. In Egypt, we could not do anything. Anything ... (F., 13 years old, Female)

For all Coptic minors, the values transmitted by the family, and by the parents in particular, are very important as they have become a primary part of their identity and are also taken into consideration in relationships with adults and peers. In Italy, they feel “free”: free of being Christians and of being able to practice their religion, free to proclaim themselves to be Christians without any fear of discrimination or violence. They also feel they can be free to live their lives by connecting the present to the past, which means being Egyptian and Italian at the same time. Being able to say what they think, dress like their Italian peers, and have the same opportunities as Italians have without being discriminated is recognized as the result of a sacrifice made by their parents, who –in most cases– deprived themselves of that higher socio-economic status they had in Egypt and which was not possible to achieve in Italy.

I know my parents made great sacrifices to take us to Italy, giving up their social position in Egypt and accepting to have jobs in Italy they didn't like, just to make me and my brother feel comfortable and give us a better future. In Egypt, we were not free. I was trained to protect myself in case I was kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam. Our parents told us that we should oppose to that, that we should continue to say that we are Christians and that we want to remain Christian. We lived in a constant state of anxiety, with the fear of going out and being kidnapped. We learned from an early age that, if they kidnap you and try to convert you, you have to say no, until you die. You'd rather die ... we learned this from an early age ... (G., 16 years old, Female)

The issue of the persecutions suffered in Egypt is part of the chapter on religious freedom. The boys and girls who participated in the focus groups believe that values are fundamental and essential. And among these values, there certainly are the religious values, transmitted by the family through the generations, along with the narration of the denied liberties in the home country. All the Coptic teenagers interviewed know their family history and the

persecutions lived by their parents when they were in Egypt, and consider those persecutions as inhuman and unacceptable. They think that their parents have made a choice for them, which is important, as much as it is painful, and tiring, in order to offer them a better future. They call themselves “lucky” for having had the opportunity to live in Italy, which they consider as a country in which they can really be free.

We Christians make no difference between Christians and Muslims: we make friends with everyone and our parents educate us in this. I had Muslim friends in Egypt. Not everyone is like that, but the majority are. They know that there is a difference between religions, but ... people are people ... We can be together, play and do things together, and then everyone goes back to his/her religion. On the contrary, in public schools in Egypt, everyone is forced to study the Koran. Pupils must recite some parts by memory. If they do not know those parts and do not recite them, they do not pass the exam and they just flunk out ... (D., 20 years old, Male)

The values our parents have taught us are to be honest, to respect others and to treat everyone well, to help without expecting compensation. Do everything possible. Try to stick to religion. When my mom has to teach me something, she tells me: you are Christian, you cannot tell lies (M., 13 years old, Female)

Almost all the Coptic teenagers tell stories of discrimination, intimidation, aggression and violence perpetrated by Muslim children, teenagers and adults against Christians. Some of them attended private Catholic schools in Egypt: very expensive institutions into which parents have enrolled them in order to protect them and allow them to exercise their religious freedom despite Islamic pressures and violence. In private schools, the students actually felt protected and had the opportunity to study in a context that is described as positive and respectful. However, friends, neighbors, relatives and other children in their neighborhood, who could not afford the high cost of private schools, continued to go to public schools, in a climate of terror and overwhelmed by constant humiliation and harassment.

In Egyptian public schools, Muslims had far more rights than Christians. I was lucky enough to go to a Franciscan school in Egypt. My parents made many sacrifices to find the money they needed to send me and my sisters to a private school. (S., 14 years old, male)

The narratives about school describe institutions in which children and young people, instead of finding a room for growth and education, found teachers ready to taunt them, to ridicule them by isolating them publicly, humiliating them precisely because of the Christian name they had or because they were defenders of their religion. Touching and delicate stories, which are surprising mainly because of the depth and the maturity showed in the opinions and beliefs of these teenagers. Freedom for Coptic minors is made up of the possibility of having behaviors that are not admitted in Egypt, but which belong to the set of what “a good Christian should do”, in line with rigorous values. Freedom, for them, is the possibility to go to school and stay with classmates; to go out on Saturdays; to go shopping or to a football match; to go to Mass and to church whenever they feel like it.

In Egypt, we were used to spend a lot of time indoors. We couldn't go out. In Italy, I feel free, I feel really free. It was painful, however, to abandon a piece of the family in Egypt. Because one of the most important values, for us, is family. (L., 17 years old, Male)

To me, it is very easy to live in Milan. People welcomed us, (...) and the language was not a problem: we learnt it in three months. We are very comfortable here and we only have to be good people and good Christians. We are free, now. (F., 14 years old, Female)

All teenagers go to Mass on Sundays either with family or with friends. They do not seem to perceive great discrepancies between the practice of the Orthodox rite and the Catholic one; certainly, they attend their own church and their own ritual, but they also attend other churches, even with a local rite, different from the Copt one.

I do not see any striking differences between the Ambrosian rite and ours. Few things are different: the language and Palm Sunday, which is much more beautiful here. The ritual is beautiful both in the Arabic and in the Italian language. (V., 15 years old, Male)

Some Coptic teenagers reported a problem they experienced in Italy: they said that their schoolmates in high school, but also some professors, label them as “Muslims” in a negative way, or even call them “Islamic extremists”, since they are Egyptians. The minors participating in the focus group interpreted this misjudgment as a lack of knowledge, as a consequence of the Italians' ignorance about the very existence of Christians in Egypt. It is a not discussed topic,

unlike Islamic extremism, and therefore it is not known. Narratives of Muslim–Coptic unity have played an important role in the collective imagination of the nations, and these narratives have effects that are distinct from that of formal legislation. Although these narratives are often advocated and supported by the State, they are not reducible to the actions of state officials. Rather, they rely on popular rhetoric, repeated and performed as part of the imaginary of a modern plural Egypt. The perpetuation of this national unity performance has led to the “invisibility” of the Copts in the contemporary political landscape, with minority rights being subjugated to national needs (Ibrahim, 2015) (see also Chapter 6).

4.3 *Future*

“Future” is a word emerged many times from the narratives of the Coptic teenagers and –in most cases– it is strictly connected with the idea of freedom, which is what pushed them and their families to migrate to Italy.

My parents came to Italy to live better together, to have a quieter life and to give us more opportunities for our future; also, to let us have a peaceful life in which we can do what we want to do. I am well aware of my parents’ sacrifices and I know what they had to give up on for my future ... (G., 16 years old, Female)

For Coptic minors, the future is a possibility determined by freedom and by the sacrifices made by their parents. The qualitative level of the narratives –for the breadth and richness of the vocabulary and for the wide use of a hypotactic syntax– expresses a maturity that is usually more present in young adults than in teenagers: the minors who participated in the focus groups are preadolescents and adolescents who know very well the moods and the emotions that accompanied the choice of their parents, but also of their grandparents, their uncles, their cousins and the relatives they left behind in Egypt. Their future is the consequence of the freedom they have today to study in Milan, which tomorrow will allow them to find the job they want, without any discriminations or abuse of power. Almost all the interviewed minors want their studying or working future to be in Milan, the city that welcomed them in Italy, or somewhere else in the world, but without forgetting to maintain solid roots in Milan. Milan seems to have become the “secure base” from which to start and to which go back in the journey of life.

My father wanted to find something better than what we had in Egypt and he was afraid for us. (...) He wanted to offer our lives a new possibility. He saw the future in Egypt and understood that there was

nothing for us. He was afraid for us, who were alone in Egypt. (L., 17 years old, Male)

The Coptic boys and girls, who project their future mainly in Italy, as we saw before, are strongly focused on the “doing”, on achieving something that can lead them to a profession. The future is linked to freedom in a very decisive way, as if the experience of having been deprived of their own freedom and of the possibility to think of a future in their home country had led them to the idea that living in a nation allowing you to be free already means to have a future ahead of you. Most of them attend technical or professional institutes. They have concrete goals in the short term, such as passing school exams and gain a diploma. Their goals are so pragmatic that none of them even envisages attending university. Their aims seem to be a job, a home, and a future in Milan.

Being in Milan is much better than being in the city where I was born. (...) It is in a free country where you can imagine living your life. (C., 17 years old, Male)

The future can be built on today's integration process, on the ability to keep together, and in balance, both the identity of the country of origin and the new one, acquired thanks to the migration to Milan. In fact, Coptic teenagers continue to maintain constant relationships with their community of belonging, which many visit continuously, going back to Egypt on a yearly basis. All the interviewed minors claim to have a constant relationship with the country of origin; most of them go there every year, others every two or three years. From their narratives, in fact, we can see that there is a “double bond”, one with the host country, Italy –to which they feel they belong and in which they dream to live their future– and one with the home country, to which they are still emotionally tied and which they continue to visit, valuing family ties with relatives left behind (grandparents, uncles, cousins), to whom all the boys and girls claim a strong attachment.

As far as I'm concerned, it has been very useful to come to Milan: here I studied and I started working, but I miss family and friends and sometimes I have to visit them. I have to endure two more years, and then I want to go to Egypt to see them. But I wouldn't go back to living there. No, I really wouldn't ... (M., 18 years old, Male)

They are clearly aware that freedom is fundamental to even think of a possible future. They have learned by their parents that the choice to go to Milan has involved many sacrifices, but at the same time, it has allowed them to live in a

country where they can be themselves, and where they can freely practice their religion, dress as they wish, and make the choices they think are best suited to them.

I felt good coming to Milan, I felt the peace, which was very different from Egypt; the cleaner air and a sense of security. (...) I was constantly being afraid, in Egypt. I would not go back to live in Egypt ever again; now, I feel very good here in Milan ... (S., 14 years old, Male)

My father in Egypt had a shop and my mother was an accountant. They arrived in Italy separately: first, my father and then my mother and I reached him when I was 3 and a half years old. In Egypt, I attended a Christian private kindergarten. My father found it hard to recognize us, since he was seeing us after a very long time. My parents made massive efforts in Italy at the beginning. But they did it for us and today we are grateful to them, because in Egypt a Christian can only die. Here, on the contrary, we have a future. (F., 14 years old, Female)

While they really appreciate the variety of values and cultural proposals of Milan, they do not renounce the values and the distinctive elements of their culture: they listen to Egyptian music, along with the Italian ones; they all speak the Arabic and the Italian language with no difficulties; they have eating habits that mix food and traditions of both countries; they follow different habits and rituals linked to the Coptic tradition; they profess and practice the values of their home country. They have ways of dressing that are identical to those of all the adolescents in Milan and –an element of primary importance– they have a pigmentation and a physiognomy that does not make them particularly different from their autochthonous peers.

A girl wanting to explain how important it was for her parents to pass on their native language to their children, in order to preserve it besides the Italian language, said:

When I came home from kindergarten and I spoke Italian, my parents pretended not to understand me: so I had to learn Arabic too ... (smile)... but now I like it! (A., 12 years old, Female)

5 Final Remarks

The purpose of the present study was to investigate factors and processes promoting or hindering the integration process of Coptic minors, migrated to Italy

along with their parents. More specifically, the main aims were to identify the acculturative challenges faced by these minors, the role played by religion in sustaining heritage identity and faith across generations, paying special attention to the significance of the persecution of Christians and martyrdom. By adopting a salutogenic perspective, which focuses on the resources of individuals and families, we wanted to help Copt boys and girls to report their opinions, and to reflect on their past experience and their lives in Italy.

As already highlighted in the previous paragraph, the focus group participants revealed a strong ethnic-religious identity, differently from their autochthonous peers, as also highlighted by several studies on Copts (Brinkerhoff, 2016; Henderson, 2015; Ibrahim, 2010; Smith, 2005).

The thoughts and the feelings expressed by the young Copts during the focus group seem to be an endorsement of the effectiveness of efforts made by their parents and by the religious leaders in order to pass heritage values and practices to second-generation Diaspora.

Even if they are still adolescents –and adolescence is notoriously a tumultuous age– they clearly have a deep sense of belonging to their religious traditions and their community.

In the focus group, it became evident that religious identity is strongly connected to the home country, even though they had left it when they were very young and have little memories of that time. Nevertheless, the teachings of their parents and the frequent visits to Egypt have managed to make the link become stronger and deep-rooted. Many migrant groups are worried that their cultural tradition will not survive in the following generations living in the Diaspora – a feeling that has developed most intensely in faith-based or faith-centered Diasporas, such as the Coptic Diaspora. An important member of the Coptic Diaspora in the USA, after having lived fifty years in the US, wrote: “One of the serious challenges has been the age-old tension facing immigrant communities: maintaining a strong communal identity while dealing with the pressures of “compromise” associated with assimilating into a new society. An associated challenge is keeping most –if not all– second and third generations within the church” (Saad, 2010: 220). As for our sample, up to now this challenge has been faced successfully, through a wise strategy of narratives and personal relationships with the family left behind in Egypt. These Coptic teenagers were very proud of the legacy of their history and their culture, along with the awareness of the “hard time” that Christians in Egypt have to endure. They have a clear picture of what it means to be living in Egypt as a Christian, also because –besides the narratives of their parents–, most of them witnessed cruel terroristic actions and institutional discriminatory behaviors in the home country. During the focus group, they spent a lot of time describing the acts of violence against them as Christian children in Egypt, the pressure of the

discriminatory laws on their parents, and the fear characterizing the everyday life at school and in the streets. It is surprising to see as these young Copts talk about violence and terroristic actions with equilibrium, not showing evident signs of PTSD or of the traumatic background due to having witnessed people being stabbed or dying. Further research should focus on a follow-up study, maybe in 10 years, to see what would happen to these second-generation offspring entering the adult life.

According to the remarks on the ethics of hospitality presented in Chapter 2, the experiences of the Coptic minors we met in the focus groups uphold the key role of religion in the host country, as well as the importance of a “*cross-cultural institutional folder*” in order to maintain strong roots and develop new sprouts.

As far as one of our main aims is concerned –the role played by religion and the Church in sustaining heritage identity and faith across generations– we can observe, from the narratives of the participants in our focus groups, that the Coptic Church turns out to be, as Brinkerhoff writes, “a transnational arena, linking the single Christian to churches and to the Mother Church in Egypt” (p. 483). In this way, the link across generations is assured. The Coptic Church tries to provide facilitative mechanisms to keep in touch with the home country, for example through philanthropy, helping Christian families in Egypt (Ebaugh, Chafetz, 2002). The Church’s fostering of philanthropy betokens a positive link between the later generations in Diaspora –not willing to go back to their home country, as clearly stated by the interviewed teenagers– and the Egyptian society. Early studies about such phenomenon showed that this experience likely lead to such participation in adulthood (Perks, Haan, 2011). Another observation that can be made out of the analysis of our focus group is that the role of the Coptic Church implies a dimension of cross-culturalism, because it stresses the Coptic identity and its legacy and –at the same time– it promotes the adaptation to the way of living in Diaspora, outside of Egypt, including the fact of being proud of one’s non-Egyptian citizenship. According to some scholars, this attitude of the Coptic Church shows that selective acculturation processes do not automatically hinder ascendant mobility, and that acculturation itself does not have to imply a loss of the heritage culture and of the religious values and practices associated with it.

The Coptic Diaspora is probably one of the few that supports selective acculturation. The Coptic Church gives the impression of underlining the great importance of keeping Egyptian and Coptic identity alive in Diaspora and that –to do so– suppleness and adaptation is fundamental to many host societies, which are very different in terms of values, practices and customs.

Given the potential bias in our sample, we cannot know the extent to which these strategies for transnationalism and selective acculturation influence Diaspora members who are not active in the Coptic Church, but it is possible to say that very few Coptic Egyptians living abroad have no link to the Church, being the Copt identity so in-deep rooted, as we saw in our focus groups. Acculturation with upward mobility does not require substitution of one culture for another. This study highlights some issues and, at the same time, raises several questions. The human capital legacy of the Coptic second generation is noteworthy and liable not only to help its upward mobility but also to support an insight in exploring and enacting the Coptic identity. Sharp and fuzzy borders may change according to life events and to subjective dynamics. In a faith-based migrant community, does religion play a mediating role in the network mechanisms that can facilitate acculturation? More generally, how important are institutional structures, such as those provided by the Coptic Church, in facilitating transnationalism and selective acculturation? What other types of structure might proffer similar advantages?

Certainly, these remarks would need to be re-examined after a long period of time, through third and fourth generations, to evaluate whether or not this cross-cultural approach, adopted by the Coptic Church, works.

Further research can begin to answer some of these questions. Keeping cultural legacy –while reaching upward mobility– is possible, and this process can be eagerly supported. Preserving roots and not “selling off” one’s legacy are aims that are as crucial as socio-economic achievements. The issue is how to pull all of them together.