

Francesca Scrinzi, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, University of Glasgow, UK

Personal website: <http://www.mwpweb.eu/FrancescaScrinzi/>

## **MIGRANTCHRISTIANITY**

### **Migration, religion and work in comparative perspective.**

#### **Evangelical ‘ethnic churches’ in Southern Europe**

##### Project report

This project was funded by a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship of the European Commission, European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies/Global Governance Programme, project n. 652925 (2015-2018). Further information on the project as well as the academic publications arising from it can be requested by contacting [Francesca.Scrinzi@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Francesca.Scrinzi@glasgow.ac.uk)

To quote this report: Francesca Scrinzi (2018), *MIGRANTCHRISTIANITY – Migration, religion and work in comparative perspective. Evangelical ‘ethnic churches’ in Southern Europe*, European Commission Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship, European University Institute, 2015-2018, project n. 652925, final report.

### **What did MIGRANTCHRISTIANITY investigate?**

MIGRANTCHRISTIANITY investigated how Protestant<sup>1</sup> migrant women and men from Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America make use of a minority religion in negotiating their social and economic integration in Southern Europe.

---

<sup>1</sup> Most of the migrant research participants in this project self-identified as Evangelicals and many of them belonged to Evangelical churches in their home countries. Some Ghanaian participants belonged to Methodist churches in their home country. Scholars studying Evangelicalism may use different categories (Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Protestant, etcetera): this is due to the fragmented and locally-organised nature of these churches. Further, these churches are defined by different histories and institutional arrangements in each country. Here I will use the distinction proposed by the Pew Research Center (Washington), between mainline Protestant historical churches (originating from the Reform) on the one hand, and Evangelical churches, on the other. The latter have more recent origins; they are characterized by an emphasis on the personal experience of conversion and the encounter with God – the ‘born-again’ experience – as well as by religious activism aimed at converting others. Evangelicalism includes some Pentecostal churches, which emphasise the blessings of the Holy Spirit, such as ‘speaking in tongues’ and healing practices. Evangelical churches may thus also be Pentecostal, but not all Pentecostal churches are Evangelical.

In Italy and Spain, mainline Protestant churches are challenged by the spectacular expansion of the Evangelical and Pentecostal ‘reverse mission’ coming from the Global South. As the native membership is shrinking, immigration provides an opportunity for membership growth. However the relationship between the native mainline Protestant leaderships and migrant believers is fraught with suspicion and fear that the migrants’ ‘unorthodox’ rituals (for instance, practices such as healing practices and speaking in tongues, which in the wider society tend to be perceived as strange or even racialised as ‘witchcraft’) might undermine the public legitimacy of a minority faith such as Italian/Spanish Protestantism. In addition to expressing specific needs in terms of liturgy, the migrant believers hold theological positions which may significantly differ from those of mainline Italian/Spanish Protestants. European mainline Protestant churches and faith organisations are actively engaged in exchanging ‘best practices’ and debating how native churches can integrate migrant believers of different origins, accommodating their spiritual needs and their diverse liturgical and theological expectations. In Italy and Spain, the mainline Protestant congregations have implemented programmes aiming at integrating migrant believers into their congregations, increasing their leadership and developing ‘intercultural’ religious practices. However tensions have arisen around the access of migrant church members to leadership, the inclusion of migrants’ liturgies and the adoption of bilingual services. For instance, in some churches a parallel migrant leadership structure has emerged to accommodate the migrants’ claims, undermining the local established leadership organisation (Naso et al., 2014). The native minority churches are thus divided between their mission of being inclusive and open to cultural diversity, and the fear of losing their theological identity.

In addition to questioning mainline Protestant communities, in Italy and Spain the migration-driven expansion of Evangelicalism challenges the Catholic majority religion as well as dominant views of migrant religion as ‘Islam only’: Christian migrants are still largely ‘invisible’ in scholarly and public debates on migration and religion in Europe. These Christian racialised Others also provide a mirror in which the dominant European narrative on secularisation can be examined. By associating secularisation with modernisation and the privatisation of religion, and by overlooking the implicit religious norms which still inform definitions and arrangements of the public sphere in European societies, this ‘secularist’ self-representation of Europe makes it difficult to negotiate migrant religions in public life (Casanova 2005). Further, migrant Christians from the global South question Eurocentric understandings of Christianity, thus encouraging native churches to continue in their

endeavour of coming to terms with their history: the expansion of historical Christianity has been largely associated with colonialism.

The research focused on Italy and Spain, tackling two broad questions:

- 1) the role of religion and religious organisations in migrants' integration and marginalisation;
- 2) how migration is reconfiguring European societies through the production of new understandings of Christianity, more specifically in Catholic countries, where Protestantism is eager to access public recognition.

More particularly, the project considered:

- how migrants develop strategies of integration through their participation in native mainline Protestant churches, and how such strategies are shaped by ethnicity, class, gender and age/generation;
- how native historical Protestant churches act as 'brokers' of integration, in relation to employment but also with reference to a wider social positioning of the migrants as 'minority Christians';
- the ambivalent attitude of the native churches vis-à-vis Christian migrants and processes of racialisation within the congregations;
- how migrant believers, often coming from more religious countries, negotiate 'secularised' European societies.

### **MIGRANTCHRISTIANITY research design and methodology**

A triple comparative approach involving a cross-national comparison (Italy/Spain), a comparison between different migrant groups (Ecuadorians, Peruvians and Ghanaians) and a focus on four different cities (two in each country), was used. MIGRANTCHRISTIANITY involved comparative qualitative fieldwork: this included, first, life histories of Ecuadorian, Peruvian and Ghanaian church members belonging to mainline Protestant churches in Italy and Spain, and semi-structured interviews with pastors, lay religious leaders and representatives of Protestant organisations. Second, observations were conducted during worship, prayer meetings, the activities of the church youth groups and of the women's groups, informal social activities such as meals, parties etc. Finally, documentary data were

collected, such as documents and leaflets on the issue of migration and multiculturalism produced by the churches studied and by the Italian/Spanish Protestant organisations.

### **What are the MIGRANTCHRISTIANITY main findings?**

The main findings of the project are summarised below:

- religious participation is **empowering** in different ways: migrant believers use religion and religious networks to negotiate settlement in immigration contexts and to resist racialisation, but they also engage in transnational religious (as well as socio-economic and political) practices and networks; migrants do not simply reproduce identities and practices from their churches in the home countries, but renegotiate them, forging new meanings and experiences of Protestantism in the immigration context or in the diaspora;
- **age/generation** significantly shapes church participation among migrants and their attitude vis-à-vis their inclusion into established native churches: while the older migrants remain more attached to the style and liturgy of their churches of origin, ‘second-generation’ migrants are drawn to the model of ‘intercultural’ churches promoted by the native leadership, and actively support these changes; older migrants are attached to forms of evangelism which appear ‘old fashioned’ to both the ‘second generations’ and the native leadership; ‘second generation’ migrants are less religious than their parents, resembling the Italian/Spanish youth; at the same time, they tend to take a distance from their Italian/Spanish peers, blaming their excessive secularisation and shallow spirituality;
- **gender** shapes religious participation while, at the same time, traditional models of femininity/masculinity are negotiated and challenged through religious practices; in some churches, patriarchal norms and an unequal gendered division of work coexist with practices that are empowering for migrant women and with models of Evangelical ‘domesticated’ (Brusco 1995) migrant masculinities; in the migratory context there is some plasticity of gendered conservative religious norms (for instance, on issues of divorce and living together outside marriage); migrants use religion to negotiate the transnational families they live in and the challenges which these raise in terms of gender norms and the changing practices and understandings of motherhood/fatherhood;
- Ecuadorian, Peruvian and Ghanaian migrants have distinctive experiences of religion which are influenced by their specific **socio-economic conditions** in Europe. While Latin Americans are more established, African migrants tend to have a more unstable juridical

status and more precarious jobs. Ghanaian migrants attempt to move to Northern European countries in the hope of improving their economic conditions, especially in the context of the recession. Further, Ghanaians are the target of stronger and overt racism while Ecuadorians and Peruvians are racialised but generally perceived as ‘culturally closer’ to Europeans. This is particularly the case in Spain, where Latin Americans benefit from their linguistic skills, the Hispano-American legacy and bilateral agreements favouring naturalisation. In the churches studied by the project, the Ecuadorians and Peruvians invest in building ‘intercultural’ churches in the immigration context whereas the Ghanaians tend to engage in transnational religious linkages of the African diaspora;

- in both countries, **issues of sexuality** tend to activate divisions within the Protestant communities between migrant and native believers, but also among native churches. In Italy, the mainline Protestants have been historically engaged in struggles for civil rights and the secular principles of democratic participation: here, tensions have divided the native leadership, displaying liberal positions on homosexuality, and part of the migrant membership. In Spain, the legalisation of same-sex marriage and the recent right-wing conservative ‘anti-gender’ movement have mobilised part of the native Protestant community which has sought the support of some migrant Evangelical churches.

Further, the MIGRANTCHRISTIANITY project has shed light on the tensions experienced by the historical native churches in accommodating migrant members in their congregations, allowing clarification of the issues at stake. The data show the **positive role which religious institutions can play in the process of integration, but point also to its limitations.**

In particular, the data show that migrant and native members involved in the programmes establishing ‘intercultural’ churches may have partly **divergent agendas**: for the native leadership, being unaware of this can lead to misunderstandings and possibly to conflicts in the congregations. The analysis focused on one major difference between the migrants’ religious experiences, compared with their Italian/Spanish fellow church members: unlike the native Protestants, **evangelism** was of paramount importance for the Ghanaian and, to a lesser extent, for the Ecuadorian and Peruvian believers. The migrant informants tended to criticise the native believers for being ‘quite happy’ with small numbers of church members: they were used to large church memberships and intense religious participation. The following line is exemplary of the views expressed by many informants: ‘God is using international migration to bring about evangelisation on this Earth’. Another migrant

interviewee claimed that, just like Abraham, he was asked by God to leave his land and cross the ocean to reach Europe and spread the Gospel there. In the informants' narratives, migration overlaps with the mission of evangelisation: migration is a call for the individual to take part in the global divine plan to transform European societies. The migrants criticise the advanced secularisation of the Europeans and see the immigration contexts as a 'spiritual desert'.

The call for evangelism can be one of the motives leading mainline Protestant migrants to join native 'intercultural' churches. Indeed, in Europe, where not all native historical churches are endowed to accommodate them, many mainline Protestant migrants end up joining Pentecostal migrant churches led by co-ethnics, where services are held in their mother tongue, or even Catholic 'ethnic parishes'. Migration has in fact a 'converting power' (Koning 2011): this refers to shifts in religious belonging and to denominational displacement occurring as a result of international migration. The presence of many Pentecostal Africans in the immigration country is seen by the African mainline Protestants as great opportunity for mission. The involvement of some informants – Methodist Ghanaians – in the 'intercultural' activities promoted by the native leadership in one Italian church can then be understood, at least partly, as a reaction to their seeing many African Methodists 'lost by migration' (Koning 2011) to Pentecostal migrant churches, and as a way to bring their co-ethnics back to their own denomination and to counter evangelism by Pentecostal African churches. Thus the data suggest that, at least **to some extent, migrant and native church members were driven by different objectives**: for the native leadership – and a small number of migrant church leaders and members – the main objective was to respond to the challenge of Christian migration by promoting 'intercultural' churches; in contrast, for many Ghanaians, evangelism was the overarching objective of religious practice which took primacy over building 'intercultural' communities in the immigration country. Similar dynamics have been observed in other countries (Garbin 2013, Stevens 2004, Währisch-Oblau 2009).

This suggests that **we need to understand the migrants' religious claims in a wider and transnational perspective**, where the mission of 'gaining souls' is paramount. Some native members criticised the decisions of their fellow migrant church members, claiming that they wanted to maintain their 'African traditions' without integrating into the Italian society. In their view this emerged for instance in the migrants' requests for Bible study meetings to be held in their native language, and for African art work to be displayed in church. However, rather than as an attempt to reproduce 'ethnic identities', these should be seen as strategies of the migrants to attract other Africans to their church. In addition, according to the informants,

the main role of the migrant leadership organisation was to prevent African members from ‘dropping out’ and stop attending the mainline Protestant church, where they felt that they did not ‘fit in’: the parallel migrant leadership organisation aimed at encouraging them to attend church through visiting them at home. The migrants’ agenda thus was centrally focused on evangelism in the context of the African diaspora. Rather than reproducing some kind of ‘ethnic religious identity’ or the Methodist practices of the home country, their priority was to evangelise other Africans scattered throughout the globe, and to put Southern Europe onto the map of a transnational mission. Moreover, the migrants’ agenda of evangelism should be located in the context of the expansion of Pentecostalism in the migrants’ home countries: new Pentecostal churches have emerged in Western Africa since the 1990s, attracting especially the middle-class urban younger generations and proving to be a dangerous competitor for mainline Protestant African churches.

This echoes existing theories of social change in churches affected by immigration. Sociologists of religion have identified different factors that can explain a greater or lesser degree of ethnic inclusiveness in the churches and the ways in which the churches evolve over time as a result of immigration. Among other factors, one must consider how the religious cultures of both the home and host countries shape the congregations (Stevens 2004). As also shown by other studies, the understandings of religion which are distinctive of the migrants’ home countries, as well as the migrants’ religious transnational ties, infuse their religious practices in their new country and define the extent to which native churches are able to incorporate them in the immigration context (Levitt 1998).

In the interviews, the centrality of evangelism in the Protestant migrants’ religious lives also emerges in relation to a potentially controversial issue: **Islam and the Christian-Muslim encounter**. This may be a divisive issue for the congregations because of the mainstreaming of Islamophobic stereotypes and fears around the integration of Muslims, which increasingly affect European church-goers (Immerzeel 2013). The native mainline Protestant leaderships are in active dialogue with Muslim communities in Europe. The project found that, in both countries, some migrant church members expressed fear, concern, or even (in some cases) hostility towards Islam. Echoing studies focusing on other countries (Garbin 2013), the data show that the Christian migrants’ anxiety revolved around the expansion of Islam in both Europe and Africa. The study found that these sentiments were mainly linked to the emphasis migrant Protestants placed on evangelism. These Christian migrants see Islam as a powerful competitor easily making its way into the European ‘spiritual desert’, sometimes blaming the

Europeans for putting up a very weak spiritual resistance to what they perceived as an aggressive expansion. For example, some informants criticised the attempts to ban crucifixes from Italian public schools<sup>2</sup>: they claimed that ‘Italy is a Christian country’ and that these attempts demonstrated a dangerous and submissive attitude of the Italians vis-à-vis the Muslims.

At the same time, however, some informants expressed admiration and a sense of commonality with the Muslim migrants. In particular, in their view the Muslims valued the importance of transmitting their values and religion to the younger generations – an area in which they felt the Europeans should learn from the migrants. In the interviews some migrants shared experiences of exchange and friendship with Muslim migrants, for instance in the workplace: these were seen as positive models of religiosity, compared with the secularisation dominant in Europe. Muslims were seen as religious and generally interested in talking about their faith, unlike the Europeans. Further, some informants were vocal in criticising the liberal positions of some mainline Protestant churches on homosexuality; they regretted the lack of unity among Christians (both Protestants and Catholics) on this issue, stating instead that they shared the Muslims’ views in this respect.

Further research would be needed to understand whether these anti-Muslim anxieties are due to the influence of North-American conservative Evangelicalism, to tense relations between Christians and Muslims in the migrants’ home countries, or to the growing influence of anti-immigration discourses in European societies. Related to this, it would also be important to assess to the extent of anti-Muslim sentiments among the native members of the Protestant communities: it should be noted that MIGRANTCHRISTIANITY did not collect systematic data on Italian/Spanish church members but only on migrant members.

In conclusion, the project exposed some **challenges** which should be significant for the future of Protestant communities and faith organisations in Europe.

**Mission** is key in the migrants’ agenda. The data indicated that some of the tensions which have arisen in ‘intercultural’ churches can be explained through the divergent agendas of the native leadership and migrant membership. In order to lay the ground for constructive ‘intercultural’ dialogue, and to assess the migrants’ claims, it is necessary to **locate their religious agency in the wider transnational perspective of the so-called global ‘reverse mission’** (Ugba 2009). Moreover, in their attempt to evangelise Europe, the migrant

---

<sup>2</sup> These caused great controversy in the first decade of the 2000s.

Christians encourage native Protestants to think differently about mission. The migrants' assertive style of evangelism conflicts with European/Eurocentric norms of religious expression: unlike that of the migrants, the native historical churches' approach to mission appears compatible with our 'modern' secularised societies. Thus international migration questions dominant understandings and practices of Protestantism and (more broadly) Christianity in Europe, and pushes historical native churches to come to terms with implicit Eurocentric assumptions underpinning their material and symbolic organisation. Some have noted that the migrants' claims with regard to evangelism should be seen by the native historical churches as a resource for rethinking their role in European secularised contexts, for assessing different approaches to evangelism, and for accommodating greater cultural diversity within the congregations (Koning 2011, Dupré et al. 2004).

**Second**, and related to this, MIGRANTCHRISTIANITY suggested that the relevance of mission in the Christian migrants' agenda is key in understanding their approach to Islam and to inter-faith dialogue. Thus finding new terrains of 'intercultural' dialogue around mission is mandatory to involving migrant believers in inter-faith activities. Indeed, the issues of **Islam and anti-Muslim hostility** are central to the post-2015 context of migration in Europe. Historical Protestant churches and faith and inter-faith organisations are not only engaged in facilitating migrants' integration into Christian congregations but also into the wider society: they are at the frontline in terms of solidarity towards the migrants, irrespective of their religious belonging; they take public positions against xenophobic/Islamophobic actors; and are active in inter-faith dialogue with established Muslim communities. Migration thus cross-cuts various issues of debate within the studied Protestant communities: while gender and sexuality seem to have been tackled by these communities more often, inter-faith dialogue may be an emerging field of debate. Future endeavours around inter-faith dialogue are likely to involve negotiations around secular democratic principles and religious pluralism, which are central to the history and identity of some mainline Protestant churches in Europe but less so for many migrant believers.

This may be even more challenging because of the current context: while religious practice and membership decline, Europeans increasingly self-identify as 'Christians' and culturalised notions of Christianity and secularism are widely mobilised by radical right political parties. These processes, combined with growing migrant religious diversity, recent terrorist attacks, and the so-called 'refugee crisis', have provided these otherwise secular parties with the discursive opportunities to mobilise ideas of religion and secularism to support their anti-

Muslim agenda. Islam is presented as incompatible with liberal rights (secularism, separation of church/state, religious freedom), which are in turn seen as a legacy of the 'Western Judeo-Christian tradition' (Betz 2013). In their mission of establishing 'intercultural integrated churches' and supporting migrants' integration into the wider society as well as their own congregations, native historical churches will need to consider these issues.

## References

- Betz, Hans-Georg (2013) 'Mosques, minarets, burqas and other essential threats: The populist right's campaign against Islam in Western Europe', in Ruth Wodak et al. (eds) *Right-wing populism in Europe: Politics and discourse*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 71-88.
- Brusco, Elisabeth (1995) *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Casanova, José (2005) 'Immigration and the New Religious Pluralism. A EU-US Comparison', Paper Presented at the Conference *The New Religious Pluralism and Democracy*, Georgetown University, April 21-22.
- Dupré, Annemarie, Thorsten Leisser, and Patrizia Tortora (2004) *Essere Chiesa Insieme/Uniting in Diversity. Conference Proceedings*, Ciampino-Sassone, 26-28 March, FCEI and CCEM.
- Garbin, David (2013) The Visibility and Invisibility of Migrant Faith in the City: Diaspora Religion and the Politics of Emplacement of Afro-Christian Churches, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39(5): 677-696.
- Koning, Danielle (2011) 'Treasures in Tension: Immigrant Churches and Opportunities for Mission', *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 7(2): 12-22.
- Immerzeel, Tim, Eva Jaspers, and Marcel Lubbers (2013) 'Religion as catalyst or restraint of radical right voting?' *West European Politics* 36(5): 946-968.
- Levitt, Peggy (1998) 'Local-level global religion: The case of U.S.-Dominican migration', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37: 74-89.
- Naso, Paolo, Alessia Passarelli, Tamara Pispisa (2014) *Fratelli e sorelle di Jerry Masslo. L'immigrazione evangelica in Italia*, Torino: Claudiana.
- Stevens, David W. (2004) 'Spreading the Word: Religious Beliefs and the Evolution of Immigrant Congregations', *Sociology of Religion* 65(2): 121-138.
- Ugba, Abel (2009) *Shades of Belonging: African Pentecostals in Twenty-First Century Ireland*. Trenton, NJ: African World Press & Eritrea: Asmara.

Währisch-Oblau, Claudia (2009) *The Missionary Self-Perception of Pentecostal/Charismatic Church Leaders from the Global South in Europe*, Leiden: Brill.

August 2018