

Religions in Italy 2013

– PierLuigi Zoccatelli –

Paper presented at the 2013 International Conference *Changing Religious Movements in a Changing World*, organised by CESNUR, Dalarna University, International Society for the Study of New Religions, The Nordic Network for the Study of New Religiosity (Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden, 21-24 June 2013)

See also the PowerPoint presentation at

http://www.cesnur.org/2013/plz_falun_slides_2013.pdf

The most ambitious and perhaps greatest contribution CESNUR has made to researchers in the field of religious science was the compiling of an encyclopedia of religions in Italy (Introvigne, Zoccatelli *et alii* 2001; Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2006), consisting of over one thousand pages. In April 2013, an updated, expanded, and thoroughly revised third edition has been published, consisting of 1,240 pages (Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2013).

In this short presentation, I will try to sum up the main results of our survey, with special reference to statistics which may provide, especially to scholars unfamiliar with the Italian social context, an overview of the religious and spiritual pluralism existing in Italy today. Considering the time and space I have been granted for this report, I must necessarily omit a series of methodological and analytical considerations, even though they are important. For more detailed information in that regard, I direct my listeners to the introduction to our research project, available online on the CESNUR website, although only in Italian (Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2009-2013).

One myth that our research will help dispel regards the so-called “invasion of cults.” There exist indeed many religious movements which are to some degree “alternative.” J. Gordon Melton—whose eighth edition of his encyclopedia of american religions (Melton 2009) devotes over 2,300 entries to movements present in the United States having a substantial number of followers—refuses to draw a clear-cut line between “old religions” and “new” ones, or to use the ambiguous and imprecise term, “cult” which easily lends itself to evaluative and discriminatory connotations.

In a country like Italy where religious pluralism is a recent phenomenon, “new” religions are plentiful, but the number of followers taking part in these movements remains limited. Naturally, the statistics depend on just where we draw the line between “historical” religions and “new religious movements.” In Latin America and in a few African and Asian countries, for example, enormous variations in the statistical data regarding the “new religious movements” are possible depending on whether or not we include Pentecostal protestant or evangelicals—including the different branches of Plymouth Brethren and other non-Pentecostal Free Churches—in this category.

If we wish to use the category “new religious movements” in the sense that it is most commonly used, i.e. *excluding* protestant Pentecostal or independent fundamentalist groups, our research would seem to confirm that these movements involve less than 1% of Italians. Many groups, which may be important from a cultural or typological point of view, have such a small number of followers that we should not speak of “an invasion of cults,” but rather an “invasion of denominations.” The question of religious minorities is a separate issue and in Italy refers to religions different from Catholicism.

In our 2013 encyclopedia, we counted 836 religious and spiritual minorities overall which operate in Italy in an organized fashion. In the first edition of our Encyclopedia, published in 2001, we had counted 658.

Our 2013 research disproves an often repeated notion which ceased to be true after the nineteen eighties: that religious minorities in Italy represent *overall* only one percent of the population. Although the statistics are quite complex, our study revealed that the number of Italian citizens clearly manifesting a non-Catholic religious identity is equal to 1,417,000 units. If we include in that count immigrants who do not have Italian citizenship, we have a total of 4,635,400. These numbers regard primarily Moslems and secondly, Orthodox Christians immigrating from Eastern Europe, who make up a sizable amount, as well as Hindus, Buddhists, followers of the Sikh and Radhasoami religions, a notable Pentecostal and Baptist presence from China, Korea, the Philippines, and Africa, and followers of the Coptic Church immigrating from different African countries.

According to the most recent demographical studies published in 2012 by the National Institute of Statistics, the Italian resident population is 60,820,764 of whom 4,859,000 are foreigners, equal to 8.0% of the total population, (a higher percentage than European Union average of 6.6%). If we consider only Italian citizens, including naturalized ones, with a yearly average close to 50,000 individuals who acquired Italian citizenship over the period 2005-2012, we have a percentage of 2.5% of the total resident population professing non-Catholic religious identity, or more than twice the often cited one percent.

If we consider all residents within the Italian territory, the percentage of religious minorities increases to 7.6%. We present this data without drawing any general consequences which would be beyond the scope of this present study, well aware of the fact that the documenting of pluralism is in itself a “political” gesture. This 2.5% of Italian citizens belonging to religious minorities can be broken down as follows.

Religious minorities among Italian citizens (CESNUR estimate 2013)

Jewish	36,000	2.5%
Fringe and dissident Catholics	25,000	1.8%
Eastern Orthodox	110,000	7.8%
Protestants	435,000	30.7%
Jehovah’s Witnesses (and similar movements)	415,000	29.3%
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (and similar movements)	25,000	1.8%
Other groups of Christian origin	5,000	0.4%
Islam	115,000	8.1%
Bahá’í and other movements originating from Islam	4,000	0.3%
Hinduists and Neo-Hinduists	26,000	1.8%
Buddhists	135,000	9.5%
Osho movements and similar groups	4,000	0.3%
Sikh, Radhasoami and derivations	6,000	0.4%
Other groups of Eastern origin	2,000	0.1%
Japanese New Religions	3,000	0.2%
Esotericism and “Ancient Wisdom”	15,000	1.1%
Human Potential movements	30,000	2.1%
Organized New Age and Next Age movements	20,000	1.4%
Other	6,000	0.4%
Total	1,417,000	100.0%

Many of the figures given below require further explanation.

With regards to people of the Jewish faith, the number of members of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities has been adjusted to include a small number of groups of Jewish origin that do not recognize this union.

With regards to “fringe and dissident Catholics,” we refer here to the members of those movements which are not in complete communion with the Catholic Church or which exist in objectively marginal situations, not just self-proclaimed schismatic groups. This is usually a submerged world, but by no means an insignificant one, on which our encyclopedia has ambitiously tried to shed a new light. An estimated 25,000 persons are involved in these movements with 10,000 alone belonging to the Associazione La Missione - Luigia Paparelli. This is a conservative estimate. It must be pointed out that many of these people subjectively consider themselves as Catholics.

The figure about Eastern Orthodox Christians refers to those of them who are Italian citizens. The actual number of Eastern Orthodox Christians living in Italy is more than one million, but the vast majority of them are not Italian citizens. They are part of immigration into Italy from Eastern Europe, mostly from Romania. In fact, there are 997,000 Romanians in Italy, 20.5% of all immigrants.

Regarding Protestants, our findings are shown in the table below. The table includes in the total figure of Pentecostals both members of Pentecostal denominations active in Italy from several decades, such as the Assemblies of God or the Apostolic Churches, and those members of ethnic Pentecostal churches from Latin America, Africa, and Asia who have

acquired Italian citizenship. Most members of ethnic Pentecostal churches in Italy, however, are not Italian citizens.

Distribution of Protestant Italian citizens (CESNUR estimate 2013)

“Historical” Protestantism	65,000	14.9%
Restoration Movement	5,000	1.1%
Brethren Assemblies	21,000	4.8%
Free Churches and other Evangelical independent Churches (non-Pentecostal)	9,000	2.1%
Pentecostal churches	313,000	72.0%
Seventh-day Adventists	20,000	4.6%
Other	2,000	0.5%
Total	435,000	100.0%

For definitions, we refer to the various sections of our research. The data shows that the Pentecostal movement is the largest group within Italian Protestantism, consisting of 150,000 followers of the Assemblies of God in Italy, and 163,000 belonging to other groups. The slightly lower figure often cited does not include the more discrete and little known Pentecostal world of the “Zaccardians” and “Petrellians,” and does not consider Pentecostal movements originating in Latin America, which today have many members among Italian citizens.

As for the data regarding “historical” churches: the Waldensians, Lutherans, Calvinists, Baptists, and Methodists, these figures need to be reevaluated in light of current statistics, while for the Seventh-day Adventists we have indicated a total number of members thought to be “active.”

Our research has also addressed the difficulties of calculating the number of Jehovah's Witnesses, who make up the second largest group operating in Italy with a unified organization, second only to the Catholic Church. To take into account only Jehovah's Witnesses publishers—the term they use for members actively involved in preaching—would be reductive. We have calculated a slightly inferior figure compared to the number of participants in their annual Memorial of Christ's death, the commemoration of the Lord's Evening Meal, in which friends, neighbors, family members, and the public may also take part. We have also taken into consideration the presence of smaller groups apart from the Jehovah's Witnesses which derive from the same current of Biblical Students.

In calculating the number of Mormons, we considered not only the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but also members belonging to similar communities pertaining to the same genealogical branch.

The other groups of Christian origin include members of various heterogeneous movements, from Christian Science to The Family and Universal Life (German: Universelles Leben). These groups are all of very small dimensions but with significant exceptions, such as the New Apostolic Church, which has more than 2,000 followers.

The number of Moslems who are Italian citizens is estimated to be around 115,000, a figure which will be subject rapid variation in the future due to the rapid access of Moslem immigrants to Italian citizenship. At present, this estimate is reasonable but may be overly generous, in part because few "ethnic" Moslems have acquired citizenship, even though one must consider Moslems coming from ex colonies of Italy and in part because the

number of converts to Islam, discussed in a specific chapter of our research, is generally overestimated.

Here we must also cite the followers of Bahá'í, who are distinct from Moslems though originating from the Islamic context, to whom must be added even smaller groups.

In our discussion of Hinduism, we have added the followers of several Neo-Hindu movements active in Italy, even though it is hard to draw the line between the two categories. These are very numerous and are by no means insignificant. The larger groups have over 2,000 members each, such as the Sathya Sai Baba Organization and the lesser known Friends of Amma (the devotees of Sri Mata Amritanandamayi). In the section on Hinduism, we have chosen not to include some groups, for example the followers of Osho Rajneesh, a master, however one considers his relationship to the Jainism in which he was born, who was by no means “Hindu.”

The statistics concerning Buddhists (135,000) include the 61,000 belonging to groups represented by the Italian Buddhist Union, practicing Theravada, Zen, and Vajrayana. However, not all Buddhists belong to the Italian Buddhist Union, such as the 63,000 members of Soka Gakkai, and 11,000 Buddhists of other traditions (the Nichiren area itself is not only Soka Gakkai). The increase of members in this area, and particularly those of Soka Gakkai is the most significant development in this beginning of the XXI century, if we exclude phenomena deriving from immigration.

Concerning Sikhs, Radhasoami, and “derivations,” we have included numerous small groups inspired by the Sikh master Baba Bedi XVI, although the final result in terms of Italian citizens is quite small.

The other “groups of Eastern origin” include a few Zoroastrians, Chinese and Indochinese when it is possible to observe the presence of a true religious practice and not simply the use of oriental techniques for therapeutic ends or of other nature.

Regarding the new Japanese religions (3,000 followers) interpreted as a formation of recent non Buddhist, Japanese origin, half (1,500 followers) of these derive from Sûkyô Mahikari, although other denominations are present.

Various chapters are devoted to movements which occupy the vast area which American specialists call “Ancient Wisdom,” a convenient denomination to identify realities in the world of research into the archaic traditions of esotericism and sometimes occultism to which may be added movements inspired by Spiritualism or flying saucers. The 15,000 followers overall are quite few, compared to the proliferation of denominations, among which only a few, such as the Theosophical Society, the Anthroposophical Society, AMORC (Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis), the Lectorium Rosicrucianum, and a few gnostic groups inspired by the Colombian esoteric spiritual leader Samael Aun Weor, and perhaps in the future the Carlos Castaneda’s Tensegrity Groups or the Raelian Movement, exceed, reach or, considering the growth rate, may even aspire to reach 1,000 members. The overall figure is as follows:

Esotericism and “Ancient Wisdom” (CESNUR estimate 2013)

Neo-Paganism, Neo-Shamanism, Wicca	3,000	20.0%
Rosicrucianism	2,000	13.3%
Martinism, Kremmerzians, Ceremonial Magic	900	6.0%
Neo-Templars	800	5.3%
Theosophical movements and derivations	3,000	20.0%
Universal Brotherhoods	700	4.7%
Organized Spiritualism	1,000	6.7%
UFO movements	1,000	6.7%
Gnostic churches and movements	1,500	10.0%
Organized Satanism	300	2.0%
Other	800	5.3%
Total	15,000	100.0%

To this estimate could be added the 35,000 members of various Masonic lodges, not without esoteric interest, which we have chosen to consider in a separate section for reasons explained in detail in an appendix dedicated to this subject in the encyclopedia.

Readers will note our insistence on *organized* Spiritualism and Satanism, to indicate that our data include only members of formally constituted organizations or groups, and certainly not all those individuals, particularly the numerous young people, who dedicate themselves to *do-it-yourself* Spiritualism or Satanism, without confusing the two realities which are in no way analogous and are only mentioned together here because they tend to have very young, spontaneous practitioners alongside those who belong to organizations.

With regards to the Human Potential, New Age, and Next Age movements, things are tenuous, because these movements do not have members in the same way that a particular Church may have members, but only participants, “clients” and “receivers” of various activities. Certainly many people participate occasionally in courses, seminars, conferences in this area. Whereas previous editions of our encyclopedia had proposed a much higher figure referring to regular and continuative participants, nowadays in line with more recent foreign researches, we feel we must limit this figure only to those who experience their participation in these groups as a true and proper religious or spiritual identity, an alternative to all others. We estimate the actual members of such religious minorities, as distinct from simple and far more numerous sympathizers, to be 30,000 in the area of the Human Potential movement, many of whom frequent the Church of Scientology, as well as other groups such as the Paris Energy Method, of Italian origin, which should not be underestimated, and the 20,000 in the area of the New Age, Next Age, Aquarian and post New Age, among which we must cite Damanhur, even if the New Age due to its very nature thrives thanks to the fluid participation of occasional participants, from which statistics are obtained.

Far more uncertain, and the source of endless, politically conditioned debate are the statistics regarding religious minorities in the territory if we also take into consideration not only Italian citizens but also immigrants who are not citizens. This data would presuppose that we have access to accurate statistics concerning illegal immigration, which is estimated by different sources to be between 500,000 and 1,000,000, but which is notoriously hard to calculate with any certainty.

In recent years the data furnished by the annual Caritas-Migrantes report has emerged as a reference point in this debate. These figures are based on a methodology which takes as its starting point the number of resident foreigners, the integration of “anagraphical suffering” which have been resolved, and includes the foreigners who in the course of the year have come *ex novo* from abroad or were born in Italy, as well as other categories of migrants, new autonomous workers, family reunifications, and visitors. Thus according to the Caritas-Migrantes report, the number of immigrants in Italy in 2012 was 5,011,307, with a percentage of 8.2%. (Caritas-Migrantes 2012, 192).

The Caritas-Migrantes data is a major point of reference for anyone interested in immigration in Italy, but with regards to religion, departs from the idea that foreigners present in Italy keep to the religion of their country of origin. This hypothesis is based on manuals and data which, particularly in terms of Christian denominations, often do not clarify if the subjects are active members or only “baptized” or “nominal” and in many cases underestimate the area of “believing without belonging.” In fact, the Caritas-Migrantes report took into account that the data furnished by governments is often unreliable even when not manipulated for political reasons and has decided to emphasize non-governmental statistical data. (Caritas-Migrantes 2011, 202-203). However, it is confirmed that the basic choice is to stress the data regarding countries of origin within an overview where belonging to a religious faith is understood as “the upbringing received within a specific community and the consequent reference to its traditions, apart from relative participation in religious rites or an intimate attitude towards the divine.” (Caritas-Migrantes 2011, 202). This is a legitimate approach, which will furnish valuable data, but is different from our own which provides different statistics.

The Caritas-Migrantes estimate is shown in the following table.

Immigrants religious affiliations (Caritas-Migrantes estimate 2012)

Eastern Orthodox	1,482,648	29.6%
Catholics	960,359	19.2%
Protestants	222,960	4.4%
Other Christians	36,107	0.7%
Islam	1,650,902	32.9%
Jewish	7,300	0.1%
Hinduists	131,254	2.6%
Buddhists	97,362	1.9%
Other Eastern religions	69,215	1.4%
Atheists and agnostics	215,135	4.3%
“Traditional” religions	50,498	1.0%
Other	87,567	1.9%
Total	5,011,307	100.0%

On the basis of our different calculations, which depart from direct contact and the revelation of organized forms of immigrants’ religion which in turn take into account a myriad of smaller realities, for example some African Pentecostal churches which only operate at a local level, difficult to identify one by one, we believe we may hypothesize this alternative scheme which does not include Catholics, which attempts to include clandestine aliens but has mere speculative value.

Immigrants main religious minorities in Italy (CESNUR estimate 2013)

Islam	1,360,000	42.3%
Eastern Orthodox	1,294,700	40.2%
Protestants	212,200	6.6%
Hinduists	114,200	3.5%
Buddhists	103,400	3.2%
Sikh and Radhasoami	60,000	1.9%
Other groups of Eastern and African origin	43,500	1.4%
Jehovah's Witnesses	17,400	0.5%
Jewish	7,600	0.2%
Other	5,400	0.2%
Total	3,218,400	100.0%

The discrepancy compared to the Caritas-Migrantes figures derives from the fact that we are attempting to count different things. For Caritas-Migrantes we are dealing with a religious heritage or a constellation of beliefs imported from the country of origin. Our criteria, instead, intends to take into account the actual relationship with an organized form of religion conducted with periodicity. We estimate the total number of immigrants “in contact”—which means different things in different religions—with a religion other than Catholicism to be 3,218,400.

From this figure emerges in any case a striking advance of Eastern Orthodox Christians, a large concentration of Islam, which is the second religion present on the territory after Catholicism, and yet which cannot be linked to a single organization or exponent, which is also true of the Eastern Orthodox Christians. In this second meaning, the second largest

religious group juridically constituted in Italy are the Jehovah's Witnesses (about 415,000 followers) followed by the Assemblies of God in Italy (150,000 members.)

References

Caritas-Migrantes. 2011. *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2011. XXI Rapporto sull'immigrazione*. Idos, Roma.

Caritas-Migrantes. 2012. *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2012. XXII Rapporto sull'immigrazione*. Idos, Roma.

Introvigne, Massimo - PierLuigi Zoccatelli - Nelly Ippolito Macrina - Verónica Roldán. 2001. *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia*. Elledici, Leumann (Torino) 2001.

Introvigne, Massimo - PierLuigi Zoccatelli (eds.). 2006. *Le religioni in Italia*. Elledici, Leumann (Torino) - Velar, Gorle (Bergamo).

Introvigne, Massimo - PierLuigi Zoccatelli (eds.). 2009-2013. *Le religioni in Italia*. Available on the CESNUR website at the page <www.cesnur.com>.

Introvigne, Massimo - PierLuigi Zoccatelli (eds.). 2013. *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia*. Elledici, Torino.

Melton, J. Gordon. 2009. *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions*. Gale, Detroit.