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**Migration and Religion: Interactions and their Influence on Integration**


# Migration and Religion: Interactions and their Influence on Integration

*This analysis is part of the Strategy Notebook: Global Demographic Outlook: Impact of Migration and Demographic Trends in the 21st Century*

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## *Abstract:*

*Religion is present, in one way or another, throughout the entire migration process: from decision-making to departure, including the journey itself. This religious dimension of migration once again occupies a priority place in the discourse on the integration of immigrants into host societies. However, this integration does not always develop in the same way, depending on both the religion of the migrant and that of the host country.*
*This chapter will address the interactions between religion and migration in two (almost antagonistic) scenarios:*

- *E-1) Migrants of Christian tradition/religion living in countries with Muslim tradition/religion: Sub-Saharan Africa => Maghreb*
- *E-2) Migrants of Muslim tradition/religion living in countries with Judeo-Christian tradition/religion: Maghreb => European Union (EU).*

*To conclude, we will address the role of religions in the integration of immigrants.*

## *Keywords:*

*Religion, Migration, Integration, European Union, Maghreb.*

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"*Religion permeates the entire migration experience, from decision-making to departure, through the journey from their communities of origin to the host country.*"

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## Introduction

The religious dimension in the study of migration, after having been relegated to oblivion, is once again taking centre stage in the discourse on the integration of immigrants into host societies. This chapter will emphasise the interactions between migration and religion[1] , analysing them in two contrasting scenarios:

- E-1) Migrants of Christian tradition/religion living in countries of Muslim tradition/religion: Sub-Saharan Africa => Maghreb
- E-2) Migrants of Muslim tradition/religion living in countries of Judeo-Christian tradition/religion: Maghreb => European Union (EU).

The chapter is divided into four sections. After a brief description of the religious composition of migrants, the first scenario is addressed: "Christian migrants (*Sub-Saharan Africa*) in Muslim host countries (North Africa: Maghreb)", in , which will discuss the conditions of Christian religiosity among sub-Saharan migrants in Muslim countries in North Africa (cases of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia).

The third section, entitled "Muslim migrants in the European Union," discusses the conditions of migrants of Muslim tradition/religion in European Union (EU) countries with Christian tradition/religion (cases of Denmark and Italy).

Finally, a fourth section, entitled "Influence of Religion on the Acceptance and Integration of Migrants", focuses on observing whether religion acts or can act as a catalyst in the process of migrant integration, noting the relevance of the relationships developed in

[1] NB: For this study, a broad approach has been taken when assigning religiosity to migrants. In fact, they have been considered *cultural Muslims* or *cultural Christians*, based on the traditions and majority culture of their country of origin.

religious spaces with the integration of migrants and, therefore, with social peace in host countries, an issue that is among the main concerns of European citizens[2] .

## The religious composition of migrants worldwide

Migration has grown steadily in recent decades. Today, more than 280 million people, or 3.6% of the world's population , are international migrants living outside their country of origin (International Organisation for Migration, 2024).

In 2020 (the last year for which global figures are available) and according to an analysis by the Pew Research Centre (2024), it was estimated that Christians, who make up 30% of the world's population, represent 47% of all international migrants, the largest migrant group. They are followed by Muslims with 29%, then Hindus (5%), Buddhists (4%) and Jews (1%). Interestingly, this religious composition of international migrants has remained relatively stable since 1990 (Kramer and Tong, 2024).

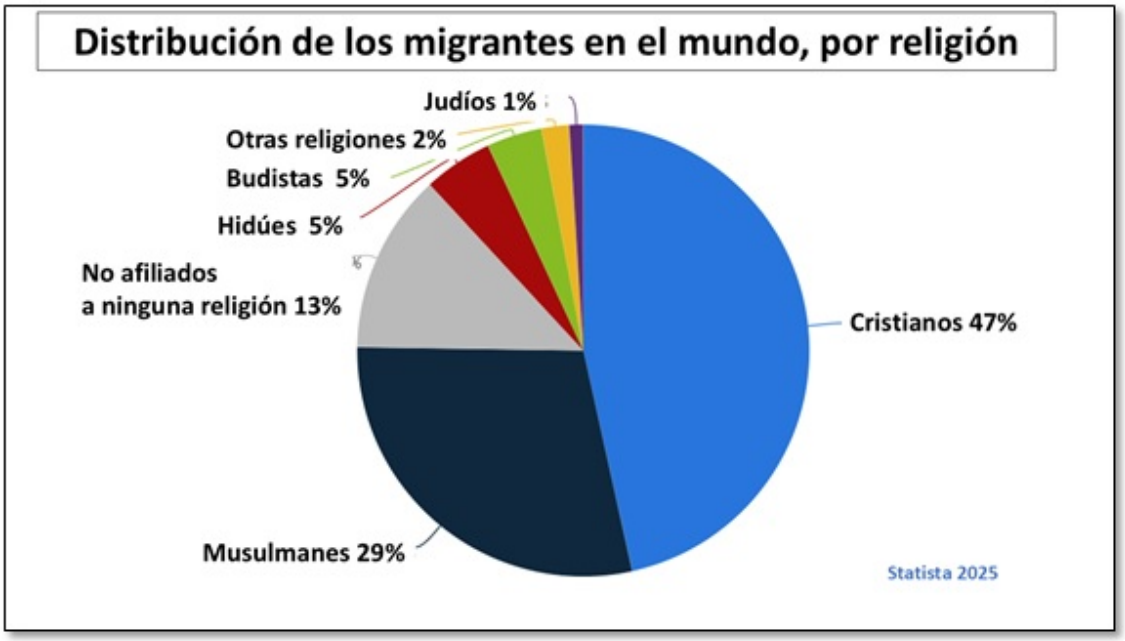


Figure 1 Distribution of migrants worldwide, by religion. Source: *Statista. Own elaboration*

[2] According to Eurobarometer (autumn 2024), immigration is a concern for 28% of Europeans. The figure for Spain (34%) is higher than the European average and represents an increase of thirteen points compared to the previous Eurobarometer (June 2024). [Consultation: 2025]. Available at: https://efe.com/espana/2024-12-11/eurobarometro-preocupaciones-espanoles-vivienda-inmigracion/

Currently, the "transnational character" of the Catholic Church and the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches helps immigrants find continuity between different territories, reconnecting them in their new host society (Capone, 2010). Today, we find migratory flows that provide "ethnic" religions with identity resources beyond the borders of the original group, influencing and even modifying (sometimes profoundly) the religious landscapes of host countries.

It is in Anglo-Saxon literature that we find a qualitative leap, moving from the analysis of migratory phenomena in terms of assimilation to an analysis that emphasises the links between here and there, which occurs in a surprising way by staging a 'circulatory territory', to use the term immortalised by Alain Tarrius (Tarrius, 2000: 124), in which migrants develop a sense of belonging to two worlds at the same time, both their country of origin and their host country (Capone, 2010). In general terms, migrants tend to move to regions where their religion is common among the native population. This may be due to religious similarities within regions (many migrants move to nearby countries), as well as the appeal of moving to a religiously familiar community.

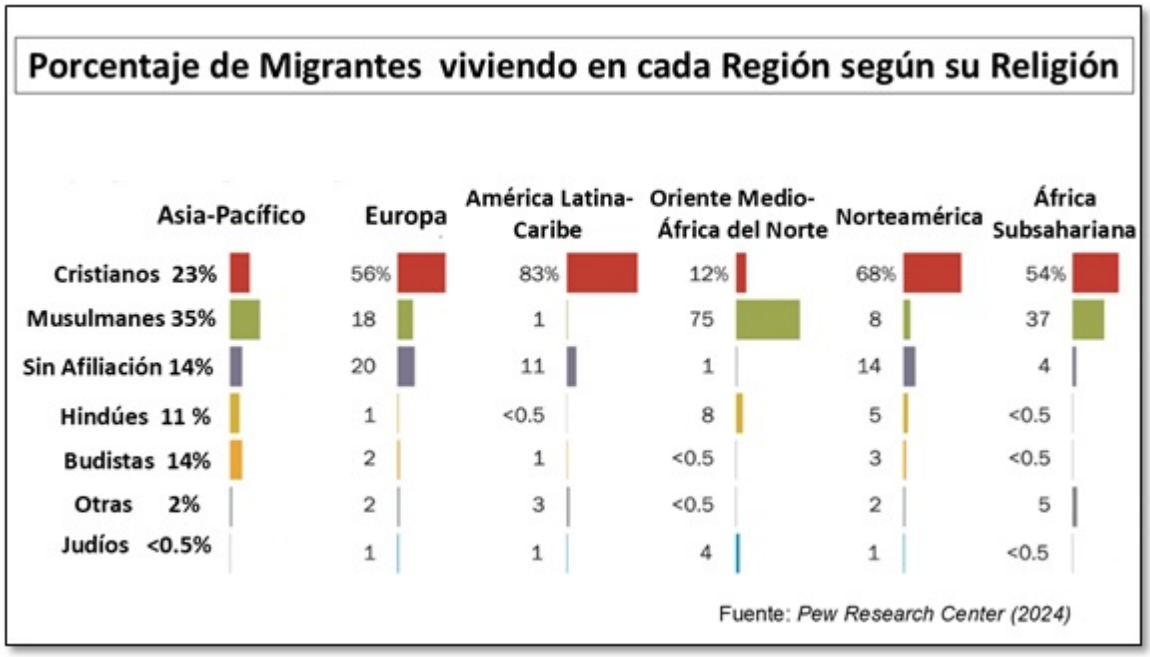


Figure 2 Percentage of Migrants Living in Each Region by Religion. Source: *Pew Research Centre (2024) . Own elaboration.*

For example, Christians constitute the majority of immigrants living in Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa, all of which are regions with large Christian populations. Muslims are by far the largest group of migrants in the Middle East and North Africa region (Kramer and Tong, 2024).

### *Christian migration*

Christian migration covers a more diverse geography than that of other religions. North America is the largest recipient of Christian migration, mainly from Latin America. The second largest recipient of Christian migration is Europe, mainly from Latin America, Asia-Pacific and sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite high migration figures, Christian migration is not expected to change regional religious affiliation percentages between 2020 and 2050, given the balance between immigration and emigration (The Lausanne Movement, 2024).

### *Muslim migration*

Its main characteristics are:

- It mainly takes place between the predominantly Islamic regions of the Middle East and North Africa, which receive 75%, and the Asia-Pacific region (35%).
- They travel shorter distances (on average) than migrants from other major religious groups, remaining closer to their countries of origin. For example, large numbers of Muslims from Syria have sought refuge in neighbouring countries (Turkey and Lebanon).
- As for the other regions[3] :
    - 18% of Muslim immigrants live in Europe.
    - 37% live in sub-Saharan Africa.

[3] NB: Despite the existence of 57 Muslim-majority nations, 22 of which are Arab, many Islamic immigrants have chosen to settle in Western countries rather than those that reflect their customs and beliefs.

- Only 8% of all Muslim migrants now reside in North America, and an even smaller percentage live in Latin America and the Caribbean (Kramer and Tong, 2024).

Europe is a notable exception, as it receives large numbers of Muslim migrants (The Lausanne Movement, 2024).

**Scenario 1: Christian migrants (Sub-Saharan Africa) in a Muslim host country (North Africa: Maghreb)**

> "The Qur'an establishes an alliance between hospitable Muslims and prohibits such an alliance with infidel countries. It also declares that the Muslim community has an obligation to help those who seek help outside of it."
>
> (verse 8:72)

Over the last few decades, migration in Africa has experienced an unprecedented increase on a continental scale, with an ever-growing number of international migrants moving both within and outside the region, heralding a new phase in the history of the African diaspora (Adogame, 2013).

In 2020, IOM figures indicated that approximately 21 million Africans were living in another African country, a significant increase from 2015, when it was estimated that around 18 million Africans were living outside their home country but within the region. The number of Africans living in different regions also grew during the same period, from around 17 million in 2015 to more than 19.5 million in 2020 (IOM, 2024).

Almost 90% of international migrants in sub-Saharan Africa came from another country in the same region where they resided (UNDESA, 2019: § 6). These internal movements in Africa are one of the most notable features of migration in the region. IOM data show that they are particularly pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa (IOM, 2024).

This complex phenomenon is the result of a multitude of socio-economic, political and environmental factors, often caused by armed conflict, which has led many Africans who undergo complicated immigration processes to take their religious and cultural identity traits with them. In fact, their stay in new *geocultural* contexts has encouraged them to identify, organise and rebuild their religion both for themselves and for their host societies. The last three decades have witnessed a rapid proliferation of African Christian communities (Adogame, 2013).

### *Algeria*

The authorities have not amended Law 08-11 of 25 June 2008[4] , which explicitly prohibits collective expulsions, nor have they adopted new legislation to implement the Geneva Convention on Refugees (UNHCR, 1967) and its Optional Protocol (UNHCR, 1951). Instead, they have continued with mass expulsions of immigrants[5] .

With regard to religious issues, *Ordonnance* No. 06-03 of 28 February 2006[6] continues to be applied, restricting religions other than Sunni Islam. Based on this regulation, at least two churches have been closed in 2023, bringing the total number of churches closed since 2018 to 31 (Amnesty International, 2024).

The Algerian Constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from behaving in a manner that infringes on Islamic morality. The law grants all persons the right to practise their religion if they respect public order and the rules. "Offending or insulting" any religion is a criminal offence, and blasphemy is punishable, but apostasy is not. In fact, religious conversion is not prohibited, even from Islam, although proselytising among Muslims by non-Muslims is a criminal offence. The law provides for a maximum penalty of one million dinars (about seven thousand euros) and five years' imprisonment for anyone who "incites, restricts or uses means of seduction

[4] *Law 08-11 of 25 June 2008 on the conditions of entry, stay and movement of foreigners in Algeria*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: https://www.interieur.gov.dz/index.php/fr/le-ministere/le-minist%C3%A8re/textes-legislatifs-et-reglementaires/59-les-etrangers-et-les-conventions-consulaires/500-loi-08-11-du-25-juin-2008-relative-aux-conditions-d%E2%80%99entr%C3%A9e,-de-s%C3%A9jour-et-de-circulation-des-%C3%A9trangers-en-alg%C3%A9rie.html

[5] Algeria summarily expelled at least 18,302 migrants, mostly from West Africa, according to Amnesty International's "Report 2023/24". [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/es/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/north-africa/algeria/report-algeria/

[6] *Ordonnance n.° 06-03 du 28 février 2006 fixant les conditions et règles d'exercice des cultes autres que musulmans*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: https://www.joradp.dz/ftp/jo-francais/2006/f2006012.pdf

with the intention of converting a Muslim to another religion"; or through educational establishments. The printing, storage or distribution of physical documents or audiovisual materials with the intention of "shaking the faith" of a Muslim is also illegal and subject to the same penalties. The law specifies the manner and conditions under which religious services, Islamic or otherwise, must be conducted. The law states that religious gatherings, for worship or other purposes, are subject to regulation, and the government may shut down any religious service (except for daily prayers) that takes place in private homes or outdoor settings without official approval.

Non-Muslims face social pressure, including threats and intolerance, for practising a different faith. Some local media outlets occasionally criticised *Ahmadi* Islam and Shia Islam as "sects" or "deviations" from Islam or as "foreigners" and demonstrated bias against those groups (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Christian groups include Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, members of the Église protestante d'Algérie (EPA), Lutherans, members of the Reformed Church, Anglicans, and approximately 1,000 Egyptian Coptic Christians. Unofficial estimates by religious leaders of the number of Christians range from 20,000 to 200,000. According to government officials and religious leaders, foreign residents make up the majority of the Christian population. The Christian population includes students and immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Christian leaders say that citizens who are Christians belong predominantly to Protestant groups. Christians reside mainly in Algiers and in the northern provinces (Bejaia, Tizi Ouzou, Annaba, Ouargla, and Oran).

Non-Islamic religious services must take place only in buildings registered by the state for the exclusive purpose of religious practice and be administered by a registered religious association, open to the public and marked as such on the outside. Applications for permission to hold special non-Islamic religious events must be submitted to *the wali* (governor) at least five days before the event, and the event must take place in buildings accessible to the public. Applications must include information on the three main organisers of the event, its purpose, and the expected number of attendees (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

The Algerian state maintains a more radical alignment with Sunni Islam and an intolerance towards other religions, particularly Protestantism and Judaism, for which Algeria has not reopened synagogues; also towards the *Baha'is*[7] , who are banned.

***Morocco***

Morocco, at the crossroads between Africa and Europe, is at the centre of global migration flows. Its strategic geographical location makes it a country of emigration, transit and immigration. In 2020, Morocco ranked 18th among the world's 20 largest migrant-sending countries, with an official total of 3.25 million emigrants. This represented 8.1% of its total population (International Organisation for Migration-IOM, 2024).

According to a report by the Ministry of the Interior, Morocco prevented 78,685 irregular immigrants from entering European Union countries in 2024, an increase of 4.6% compared to the previous year. It is specified that 58% of migrants come from West Africa, 12% from North Africa and 9% from East and Central Africa (Khettou, 2025).

Over the last decade, Morocco has gone from being a transit point to becoming an immigration destination where, as elsewhere, migrations are reviving and reshaping the religious offerings of large cities, whether they are transit points or settlement areas, giving rise to new religious dynamics and reactivating old ones. The explanation may lie in the fact that when it is not religious institutions or religious NGOs that welcome newcomers, it is the newcomers themselves who create their own spaces for prayer, relying on existing transnational religious networks or building their own places of worship.

It should be remembered that the issue of freedom of worship is recognised in the Moroccan Constitution, but is strictly regulated in practice. Morocco officially recognises the Muslim and Jewish religions and tolerates the practice of Christianity by foreigners, although it remains vigilant against any form of proselytism or unregulated religious activity. King Mohammed VI, as Commander of the Faithful, has repeatedly stated this, including in his message on the occasion of Pope Francis' visit to Rabat in 2019.

[7] A monotheistic Abrahamic religion whose followers follow the teachings of the Persian religious leader Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís come from more than 2,100 ethnic, racial and tribal groups and, in 2020, numbered more than eight million worldwide, with the majority in India.

The rise of Christianity: 'informal churches'

Since the late 1990s, the increase in the number of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, and in particular from the Christian regions of Central Africa, linked to the strengthening of European migration policies in the post-Schengen period, has revitalised the official Protestant and Catholic churches, which have filled up again, while other Protestants (Evangelicals, Pentecostals and Charismatics) developed parallel places of worship on the outskirts, better known as "informal churches", "immigrant churches" or even "transit churches".

In addition to the official churches, there are about thirty "house churches" in Rabat, not counting those in Casablanca, which are even more numerous. Fragile charismatic churches are born or disappear, while others become transnational with the departure of their pastors to Europe. The number of their followers decreases periodically, especially in spring and summer, when migrants attempt the adventure to Europe. These informal churches, however, provide the spiritual and material support necessary in a daily life where waiting, without work or money, is the main activity . There, it is possible to pray, find work, comfort or training, and rebuild a social life that, without papers, is often lacking (Bava, 2021).

Whether they have resident status or are simply in transit, they often gather in domestic churches that also function as support networks, as these communities are concerned with everything from schooling for their children.

In the Moroccan context—which is not secular—the intersection between religion and migration is relevant because the debate on religious freedom and cultural diversity shapes the public sphere. Migration could reinforce this issue by calling into question the political and religious foundations on which the Moroccan state is based. Rachid Benlabbah (Institut des Etudes Africaines - Université Mohammed V- Rabat) argues that migration, religion, religious freedom and individual rights are intertwined and correlated (Benlabbah, 2023).

As a result of the increasingly permanent settlement of men and women from sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, the Christian religious landscape in Morocco has changed. Migration has built this new latent Christianity since independence, which is diversifying

and enriching itself with Christianity arriving from the south, through minorities. This Christianity is more diverse and geographically dispersed in the outlying districts, in contrast to the "historic churches" (located in city centres), and favours the religious openness of Moroccan society (Bava, 2019).

In Morocco, this situation has given rise to a unique Christian religious landscape, closely linked to the realities of migration, both in the organisation of worship and in the theological journey of religious leaders and the faithful. The faithful are now younger (80% are under 30), multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-denominational. These forms of Christianity imported by migrants were perceived by the leaders of the historic Christian churches both as a "blessing", because they re-established Christianity in Morocco, and as a "risk" because, if they were too proselytising or charismatic, they could destabilise the Christian environment, already weakened after the expulsion of missionaries in 2010 (Benlabbah, 2023).

## Ecumenism

For Protestants grouped together in the Evangelical Church of Morocco (EEAM), which has existed for over a century, African migration is seen as the beginning of a new history, giving new meaning to the very existence of the Church in Morocco. Driven by this stimulating situation, in which many Protestant denominations compete, they have had to deepen their theological reflection in order to offer a more contextualised theology, adapted to the situations encountered by the faithful, sometimes giving rise to a "theology of migration" that draws on both the journeys of exile of biblical figures and migration policies and the stories of migrants. The new religious project of this Church consists of re-establishing Christianity in Morocco, also relying on Catholics, in a vision of a decidedly more African Christianity.

To achieve this, it was necessary to train religious leaders within a new Ecumenical Institute created by the Protestant and Catholic Churches in 2012, the Al Mowafaqa Ecumenical

Institute of Theology[8] , which since 2016 has been providing training for leaders of domestic churches (Bava, 2021).

"Informal churches": Social debate

This influx of Christians into a Muslim country raises the question of the political management of multi-faithism, as well as its inevitable counterpart, religious freedom and proselytism. These questions arise periodically in social debates, as has recently been the case in Morocco, where the political management of multi-faithism has begun to be seriously considered.

Indeed, the Islamist parliamentary group of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) submitted (6 April 2025) written questions to the Moroccan ministers of the Interior and Islamic Affairs on what it calls the "proliferation of informal churches" in Casablanca, expressing concern about the increase in the number of unregistered Christian places of worship, particularly in working-class neighbourhoods. According to them, several underground spaces and other discreet premises are currently being used to accommodate Christian communities outside the legal framework. They speak of a growing phenomenon which, according to them, is worrying to some members of the public because it "deprives citizens of a sense of spiritual security". They also call for concrete measures by the state to "curb this phenomenon", which they consider worrying for national religious cohesion (Balkis, 2025).

***Tunisia***

Until the 2000s, in both Tunisia and Morocco, Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant, was the result of a territorial network developed during the protectorate. Since independence, the number of believers has been declining and places of worship have gradually emptied.

[8] See: https://www.almowafaqa.com/. [Accessed: 2025].

It was in the 1990s, with the increase in the number of students and migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, that the churches began to fill up again. On the one hand, the 'historic' churches – Catholic and Protestant – present in urban centres (i.e. established since the 19TH century) increased their number of followers and religious services. On the other hand, Pentecostal and charismatic churches, known as 'informal' churches, appeared and developed in the outlying districts.

Tunisia, even more so than Morocco, continues to be considered a country of emigration rather than immigration. According to Tunisia's *National Institute of Statistics* (INS), the number of foreigners from African countries (excluding those from the Maghreb) increased significantly from 7,200 in 2014 to 21,466 in 2021 (INS, 2022).

Unlike in Morocco, the presence of sub-Saharan Africans is not seen as an opportunity to strengthen political ties with Africa. The Tunisian state's pre concern is rather to secure its borders (with Libya to the south and Algeria to the west), which it considers to be transit points that could jeopardise internal security, threatened either by jihadist fighters or by migrants in search of a Maghreb or European *El Dorado*.

In Tunisia, African migration consists mainly of students, mostly men, with very different administrative statuses and financial situations. Those who remain after completing their studies may find themselves in situations of profound precariousness. In addition to the two main categories of students and former students, there are illegal immigrants and sub-Saharan workers from Libya who sought refuge in neighbouring countries after the fall of Colonel Gaddafi in 2011.

At the other end of the social scale are sub-Saharan expatriates, embodied by the figure of the international civil servant working at the African Development Bank (ADB), whose headquarters were located in Tunis between 2003 and 2014, following the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire. Most of them are Christians, originally from Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon. Many of these privileged immigrants were committed to weekly religious practice, and adjustments were quickly made in urban churches to accommodate the new faithful.

In a very informative article on sub-Saharan immigrants in Tunisia, Mustapha Nasraoui highlights an unfavourable regime for the employment of foreigners, who are often undocumented, and difficult working conditions. And although he mentions the

psychological difficulties linked to the lack of family and community support, the author does not address the use of religion as a counterbalance to a difficult daily life (Nasraoui, 2017). Nevertheless, churches are filled every week with people seeking support and comfort.

Unlike Morocco, where profound institutional changes have taken place, mainly through the creation of a Theological Institute for Christian ecumenical training, as seen above, provisions in Tunisia remain more prosaic. This was done to compensate for imbalances in attendance and a lack of religious personnel. As early as 2004, priests and pastors asked their hierarchies to send additional personnel.

This increase in the number of worshippers and clergy led to a greater supply of religious services, which soon ran up against a lack of space. For historical reasons, places dedicated to Catholic worship are more numerous and more spacious than Protestant buildings. Furthermore, given that the Protestant community is larger today, some churches offer several services on the same day, at different times, rent function rooms or even move their services to Catholic buildings made available for the occasion. But the problem of numbers was quickly compounded by that of liturgical style, because some Catholics and Protestants no longer felt at home in the Masses and services as they were now celebrated.

Unlike what we see in Morocco, Protestant pastors in Tunisia did not attempt to unite the discourses of the historic churches and the house churches. Within house churches, a form of Protestantism close to evangelical Pentecostalism is developing, whose religious discourse focuses in part on waiting, patience, and the strength of the weak, but also on the vigorous spread of the word of God and the fight against depravity and false religions. The values defended there are those of an expanding religion, destined to spread, whose cornerstones are proselytism and the dissemination of the good news. In this context, the faithful, who often define themselves as 'soldiers of Jesus', must spread the good word and encourage conversion, even though they find themselves, let us remember, in a country (as in Algeria and Morocco, but to a lesser extent) where proselytism is prohibited and punished. These Pentecostal churches are attended exclusively by sub-Saharan faithful, with the exception of a few Tunisian converts. In contrast to these discourses, African immigrants who decide to gather for Sunday worship in the church in the centre of Tunis (in the Reformed Church or the Church of Saint-Georges) or in one of the historic

churches in the northern suburbs of the city do so in a context of relative social and national diversity, as a quarter of the faithful are European or American.

In Tunisia, Pentecostal house churches are so few in number that traditional Protestant pastors (whether European or sub-Saharan) are trying to distance themselves from them. The aim is to keep them physically and symbolically at a distance, pointing more or less directly to them as responsible for the conversions of several hundred Tunisian Muslims. Thus, by labelling these churches as "charismatic" and criticising them for not having incorporated the ban on proselytism (common in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia), the historic Protestant Church distances itself from a theology that, according to it, is too far removed from its own.

In fact, if there were accusations of proselytism, they would no longer be directed against the Protestant Church as a whole, but against specific migrant churches, from which the historic Church wants to distance itself. Beyond the style of worship, it is therefore the relationship with proselytism that constitutes the insurmountable difference.

**Scenario 2: Muslim migrants (North Africa: Maghreb) in a Christian host country (European Union)**

In 2023, there were approximately 385,000 irregular migrants in the European Union, while more than 3.7 million people used legal migration channels (European Parliament, 2025).

As of 1 January 2024, 44.7 million people born outside the European Union (EU) were residing in one of the EU countries, representing almost 10% of the EU population. This is an increase of 2.3 million compared to the previous year. Turkish and Moroccan citizens constitute the largest groups of third-country nationals living in the EU (Eurostat, 2025).


Figure 3: Non-EU citizens: main nationalities. Source: *Eurostat (2024). Own elaboration.*

The religious involvement of immigrants and their descendants has the potential to reshape the religious landscape of Europe. Migrants arrive with religious affiliations that often differ from those historically dominant in their destination countries. Furthermore, people of migrant origin may also display greater religiosity in their particular religion, not only in the first but potentially also in the second generation. They may therefore contribute to slowing down the overall processes of secularisation of religious expression (Guveli and Platt, 2003).

### *European initiatives on migration*

In the European Parliament survey (Eurobarometer July 2024)[9] on the challenges and priorities of the EU, 33% of respondents considered irregular migration to be the most urgent problem that the EU should address. Forty-one per cent considered it to be the second biggest challenge for the EU, behind the war in Ukraine and ahead of terrorism and security.

[9] See: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3232. [Accessed: 2025].

Aware of the significance of migration, various European supranational organisations have launched initiatives to try to better understand this demographic phenomenon. Some of these are outlined below.

- Eurostat: The EU Statistical Office has launched the interactive publication "Migration and asylum in Europe-2023", which places EU-wide statistics in the context of issues such as population diversity, protection and asylum, irregular migration and return, and migrants' skills. It allows users to compare data on non-EU citizens, citizens of other EU countries and nationals of the reporting country, and to explore statistics at EU level. The data covers all main areas and topics of integration[10] .
- European Website on Integration (EWSI): The European Website on Integration is an initiative of the European Commission and is under the responsibility of the Directorate-General for Home Affairs and Migration. This website is the only source at EU level that provides up-to-date information and good practices on the integration of migrants to policy makers and practitioners[11] .
- EURISLAM: is a European comparative research project that analyses how the incorporation of Islam in European Member States is influenced by national traditions of identity, citizenship and Church-State relations. EURISLAM studies how these traditions have affected interactions between Muslim immigrants, their descendants and the host society. Fieldwork is currently being carried out in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom[12] .

  With the aim of improving social relations, EURISLAM has drawn up a series of policy recommendations to promote integration:

  - Greater support from states.
  - The importance of civil, professional and other organisations in facilitating integration.

[10] See: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/migration-2023
[11] See: https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/index.php/home_en
[12] See: https://arquivo.pt/wayback/20160314101022/http://www.eurislam.eu/page=site.home

- A change in the way the media deals with the issue, moving away from the tendency to focus exclusively on negative events.

The recommendations also seek to promote the development of policies that foster the socio-cultural integration of European Muslims, emphasising aspects such as education, the situation of immigrants in the labour market and a better distribution of social capital.

- IMISCOE (International Migration Research Network): is the largest interdisciplinary network of academics in the field of migration. Currently, the research network is composed of 68 research institutes from different countries[13] and disciplines, such as sociology, political science, anthropology, economics, law, demography, public administration, geography and history[14] .

***Denmark***

Until 2015, the number of immigrants increased steadily, then declined until 2020, when the trend reversed, rising to a record 121,000 in 2022, after which it began to decline.

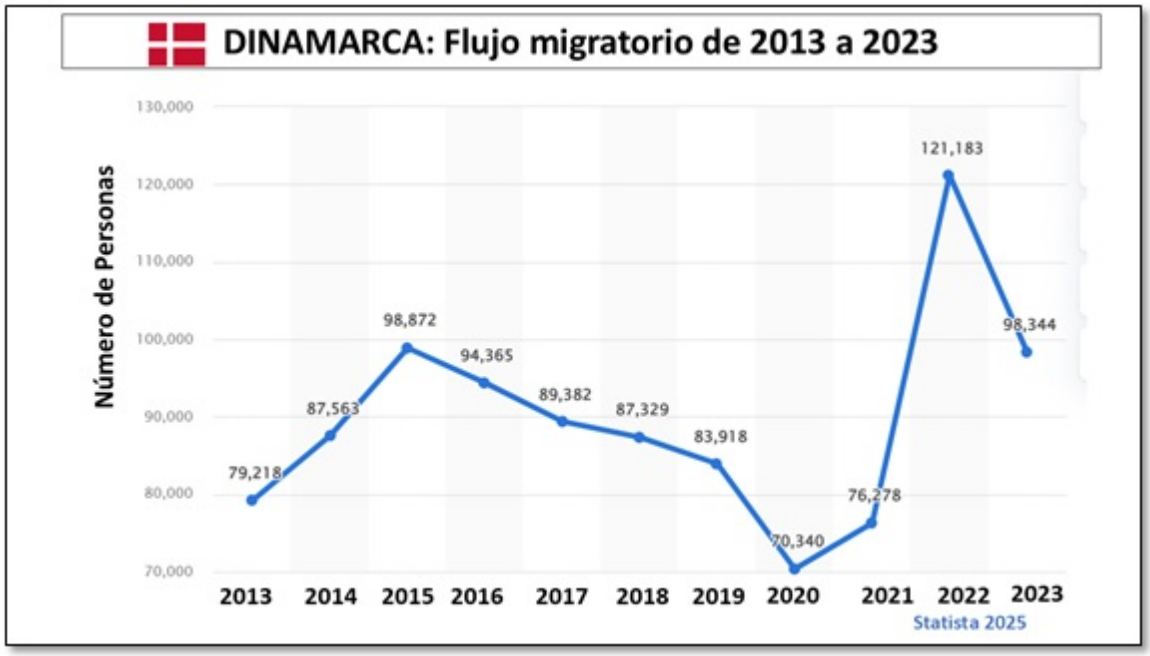


Figure 4: Denmark: Migration flow from 2013 to 2013. Source: Statista (2025). Own elaboration.

[13] In Spain: University of Deusto, University of La Coruña, Pompeu Fabra University, Pontifical University of Comillas, University of Gerona. See: https://www.imiscoe.org/about-imiscoe/members [Accessed: 2025]
[14] See: https://www.imiscoe.org/about-imiscoe/mission [Accessed: 2025]

This decline in immigration figures in the period 2015-2020 is partly explained by the tightening of immigration policies. One example of this is that immigrants must work 37 hours per week in order to access certain social benefits, and the law (L226, passed on 3 June 2021) that allows asylum seekers to be sent to countries outside the EU while their applications are being processed.

Despite this trend, forecasts predict that the number of immigrants will increase, reaching 725,000 by 2029. This is because a large number of immigrants come from other EU countries, such as Poland and Germany. In 2024, nearly 50,000 Danish residents were of Polish origin, followed by nearly 32,000 Ukrainian refugees (STATISTA, 2025).

## Religion

The Danish Muslim population was estimated at 256,000 in 2020. Both Shia and Sunni Islam are represented in the approximately 170 mosques that exist in Denmark. In addition, there are national differences, as there are Arab, Pakistani, Turkish, Somali and European (Bosnian and Albanian) congregations.

Since the 1970s, several Muslim religious communities have been established in Denmark. They were established by immigrant labourers from Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey. Their meeting rooms were in private homes or dilapidated factory buildings, but these communities received support from their countries of origin through their embassies, and more formal buildings emerged, such as the Islamic Cultural Centre in Copenhagen, founded in 1976.


Since 2015, the Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen has been specifically aimed at women, with the intention of amplifying the voices of female imams in Scandinavian communities and beyond.

- Its mission is based on creating spaces for women in religious leadership roles, a commitment that goes beyond mere symbolism. Here, women not only lead Islamic ceremonies, but also guide souls towards spiritual enlightenment.
- It includes an Islamic Academy, where the principles of the Quran are taught and interpreted in light of their original and inclusive sources. Friday prayers are exclusively for women. However, after Friday prayers, its doors remain open to all, regardless of faith.

The Mariam Mosque is more than just a place of worship: it is a pioneering institution that strives to integrate the essence of equality into the structure of religious leadership.

More information is available at: https://www.mariammoskeen.com/. [Accessed: 2025]

The Qur'an has been translated into Danish, and Danish is also the language of worship in many mosques, based on the ideal that the mosque should welcome all those who do not necessarily speak or understand Arabic. There has been a desire to make Islam a more natural part of everyday Danish life and the religious landscape. For political reasons, attempts have been made in recent years to impose Danish as the language of

worship in Muslim congregations, and it is not permitted to call to prayer from minarets (LEX Danmarks Nationalleksikon, 2025).

These Muslim communities have made demands on the welfare state in order to receive adequate, reasonable and legal care. For example, Muslim patients in hospitals have the right to speak to an imam as part of the hospital chaplaincy scheme, as they do in prisons. They have also established a large number of free religious schools in all major cities. In large cities, Muslim celebrations are held with significant institutional support in public spaces. Shiite Muslims organise the *Ashura* parade in Nørrebro (a neighbourhood in Copenhagen), but the *Eid* festival (end of Ramadan), which was previously celebrated together with the Islamic Faith Community, now takes place in a more decentralised manner in cities. This has sparked a debate in Danish society about whether schools should be allowed to take time off or simply lighten the workload for students around this holiday (LEX Danmarks Nationalleksikon, 2025).

***Italy***

With its central position in the Mediterranean, Italy receives the largest number of immigrants arriving in Europe from North Africa by sea.

Between 2014 and 2024, the number of migrants entering the country peaked in 2016 with 181,000 people, while in 2019 only 11,400 people were rescued from the sea. In fact, between 2018 and 2019, stricter migration policies were enacted by the right-wing populist government (Statista, 2025).

After the peak recorded in 2016, the number of migrants arriving by sea gradually decreased each year. In 2024, around 66,000 immigrants arrived in the country, 60% less than in 2023. Among the most frequent countries of origin declared by arrivals in 2024, Bangladesh (13,800) and Syria (12,500) ranked first (Statista, 2025).

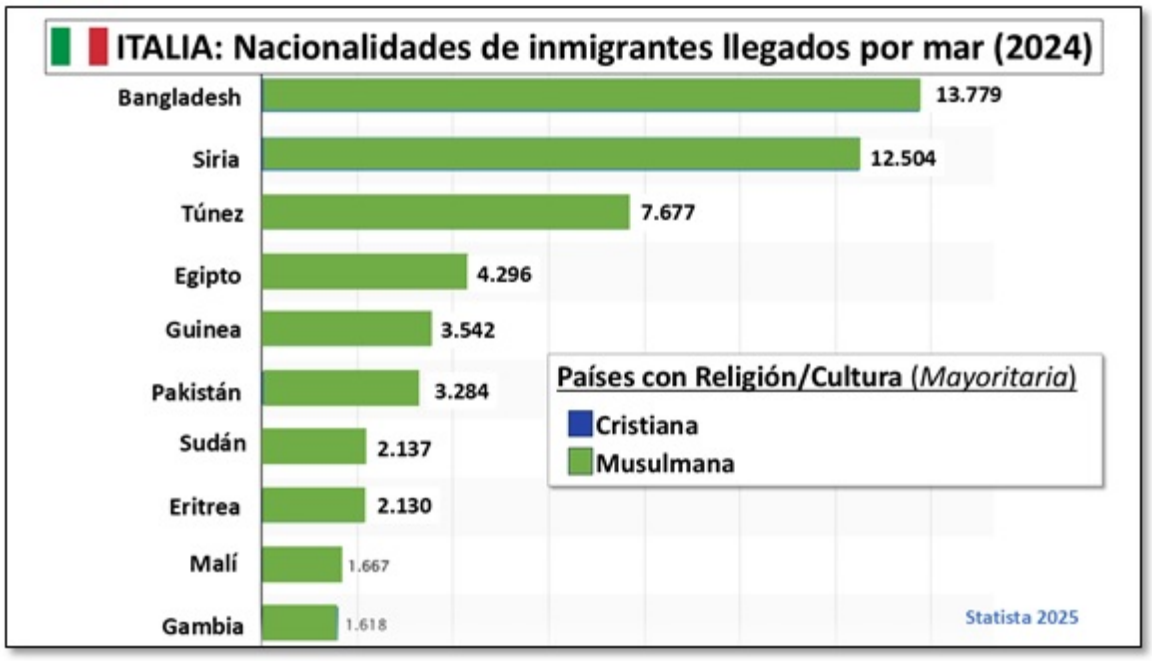


Figure 5: Italy: Nationalities of immigrants arriving by sea (2024). Source: *Statista (2025). Own elaboration.*

The government has recently adopted new policies, collaborating with North African countries to reduce departures and with Albania to process asylum applications externally.

Over the years, the number of applications for international protection in Italy has increased, and more and more people have been granted refugee status in the country (11,315 asylum applications accepted in 2023, mostly Afghans, Nigerians and Pakistanis). In addition, the proportion of residence permits issued on humanitarian grounds reached 32% in 2023, compared to only 16% in 2019.

## Religion

Islam is the most common religion among foreigners throughout the country. In 2023, around 1.52 million Muslims (mostly Sunnis) lived in Italy (417,000 Moroccans). The second most widespread religion among immigrants living in Italy is Orthodox Christianity, due to the large Romanian community residing in the country. (STATISTA, 2025).

The Constitution states that all citizens are equal before the law, regardless of their religion, and are free to profess their beliefs in any form, individually or with others, and

to promote and celebrate rites in public or in private, provided they are not offensive to public morality. According to the Constitution, each religious community has the right to establish its own institutions in accordance with its own statutes, provided these do not conflict with the law.

The Constitution states that all religious groups are equally free. Relations between the State and the Catholic Church are governed by a concordat between the government and the Holy See, while relations between the State and non-Catholic groups, as regards state support, must first submit their application to the Prime Minister's Office. The government and representatives of the group then negotiate a draft agreement, which must be approved by the Council of Ministers. The Prime Minister then signs and submits the agreement to Parliament for final approval. The law grants religious groups tax-exempt status and the right to recognition as legal persons once they have completed the registration process with the Ministry of the Interior. The agreement also allows a religious group to receive funds collected by the state through a voluntary 0.8% of personal income tax earmarked on taxpayers' returns ( ). Taxpayers can specify which eligible religious group they would like to direct these funds to (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

The groups that currently have an agreement are:

- Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches
- Seventh-day Adventists
- Assemblies of God
- Jews
- Baptists
- Lutherans
- Church of Jesus Christ
- Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Constantinople
- Italian Apostolic Church
- Buddhist Union
- Soka Gakkai Buddhists

- Hindus
- Anglican Church

National legislation does not restrict the use of external religious symbols, but some local authorities impose restrictions. Regional laws in Liguria, Veneto, and Lombardy prohibit the use of burqas and *niqabs* in public buildings and institutions, including hospitals (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Regional governments and Muslim religious authorities recognised eight mosques, respectively, in Colle Val d'Elsa, Albenga, Milan, Rome, Ravenna, Forli, Palermo and Catania. In addition, local governments continued to recognise many other premises as Islamic places of worship, although some Muslim authorities do not consider them to be full mosques because they lack key architectural features such as minarets or domes.

It is estimated that in 2019 there were between 800 and 1,200 unofficial and informal places of worship for Muslims (the most recent figure). According to press reports, the authorities allowed most of them to operate but did not officially recognise them as places of worship (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

## Influence of religion on the integration of immigrants

### *Concepts*

At its meeting on 5 November 2004, the European Council adopted the following definition of integration: "A continuous, two-way process involving both legally resident third-country nationals and the host society"[15] .

However, participants at the conference "Migration and Religion in a Globalised World" (Rabat, 5 and 6 December 2005) organised by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) declined to define the concept of "successful integration", although they confirmed that "well-integrated" migrants were often found among those who participated not only in religious organisations but also in community activities. As a result of the growing cultural and religious diversity of countries, this necessarily implies the existence of a climate of cultural and religious tolerance that is fundamental to social cohesion (IOM, 2006).

[15] See: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14292-2004-INIT/es/pdf. [Accessed: 2025].

Integration: IOM definition

"A two-way process of mutual accommodation between migrants and the societies in which they live, whereby migrants become part of the social, economic, cultural and political life of the host community. This entails a series of joint responsibilities for migrants and communities, and includes other related notions such as inclusion and social cohesion."

*Note*: Integration does not necessarily imply permanent residence. However, it does involve consideration of the rights and obligations of migrants and societies in transit and destination countries; access to different types of services and the labour market; and recognition and respect for the essential set of values that strengthen the ties between migrants and host communities in pursuit of a common purpose.

International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Glossary of Terms. (2019).

Integration: Definition by the EU Commission

"Integration is a social process in which responsibility lies not with one particular group but with many: migrants, host communities, public authorities and institutions, social and economic partners, civil society organisations, churches, religious communities and other philosophical communities, and the private sector. Empowering both migrants and host communities to actively

> participate in the integration process is essential to achieving sustainable and successful integration."
>
> EU Commission (2020). Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027.

The World Bank, in its report *Inclusion Matters: The Foundation for Shared Prosperity* (The World Bank, 2013), proposes two definitions of social inclusion:

- The process of improving conditions for individuals and groups to participate in society.
- The process of improving the capacity, opportunities and dignity of people disadvantaged by their identity to participate in society.

The European Commission, in its Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, broadens the concept and states that "*it also consists of combating unconscious bias and changing mindsets and the way each person perceives others and approaches the unknown*."

Religious beliefs and practices can be an important resource in the integration process of migrants. However, the form and direction in which these resources are used can vary significantly, even among groups of immigrants from the same country of origin, settled in the same region, and professing the same religion at the start of their migration (Odgers, 2013).

Charles Hirschman (2004), in his analysis of the role of religion in the incorporation of immigrants, brings together historical and contemporary evidence from three areas of immigrant adaptation in which religion has a major influence. He identifies these areas as the three Rs of immigrant religion: refuge, respect and resources.


Figure 6: Areas of adaptation with the greatest influence of religion. Source: Charles Hirschman (2004) "The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States" Statista (2025). Own elaboration.

On the other hand, the predominant religion of the majority groups can have both a positive and negative effect on tolerance and acceptance of immigrants, depending on the extent of religiosity and whether or not immigrants share the same religious affiliation.

The religion of immigrants can also have a positive and negative effect on their integration, providing a social network and a reference system, but it can also facilitate extremism, depending on conflicts of values with the majority group and acceptance by the majority group (Vishkin, A and Ben-Nun. P., 2022).

### *Identity function*

When people migrate to a new environment, they bring with them their national, ethnic and religious identities. Research on immigrants in Western contexts has shown that, among these identities, religious identity gains primacy due to its more universal nature and its ability to be transplanted into different contexts. Furthermore, immigrants from

minority religions may become more religious over time, especially when their primary social contacts are with family members (Vishkin, A and Ben-nun, P., 2022).

Practising migrants are aware that they will meet other people who are often in the same situation as them and speak the same language or dialect. In these cases, religion fulfils an identity function that is often the gateway to socialisation, a sense of belonging and interaction with others.

Religious social behaviour, such as regular participation in communal prayer, has been shown to be a source of intolerance towards external groups, such as predicting support for suicide attacks targeting external religious groups (Vishkin, A and Ben-nun, P., 2022).

Religiousness varies according to origin and religion

Religion plays a cultural and social role in immigrant communities that has been partially lost in the majority population. However, religiosity varies in intensity according to origin and is strongest among Muslims and Jews: approximately 75% of these groups say that religion plays an important role in their lives.

The children of immigrant parents, especially Muslims, show stronger religiosity and markedly lower rates of religious disaffiliation than the majority population, particularly if they are Catholic, but also the children of "mixed" couples. In fact, religious mixing in couples (one religious parent and one atheist, for example, or parents of two different religions) leads to a decline in religious transmission (Simón and Tiber, 2013).

## Conclusions

Researching and studying the interactions between migration and religion could help to better understand the migration situation and elucidate the ways in which migrants adapt to different sociocultural environments.

- Europe, the exception.

  Both Christian (the majority, at 47%) and Muslim (29%) migration follow the general trend of moving to countries with the same religion/culture/tradition, except in the case of Muslim migration to Europe. The EU receives a large number of Muslim migrants

and the Muslim population is expected to grow by approximately 63% between 2020 and 2050. Compared to the expected 6% decline in the European population, the impact of Islamic migration in Europe will be significant in the short/medium term.

- Parallel but different scenarios: an increase in Christian worshippers and places of worship in North African countries and in Muslim worshippers in European countries.

  The first decades of this century are witnessing a rapid proliferation of African Christian communities in Muslim countries in the Maghreb and of Muslims in the European Union, the social and political consequences of which are difficult to predict as we are still in the early stages.

  As we have seen, Muslims in the EU have more rights and support than Christians in North African countries. Here it would seem necessary to apply the "diplomatic principle of reciprocity".

- The reality of migration has prompted certain developments and changes in the majority religions, such as:

  - The Al Mowafaqa Ecumenical Institute of Theology, created by the Protestant and Catholic Churches in 2012 in Rabat (Morocco).
  - The Mariam Mosque, a mosque for women only in Copenhagen (Denmark).

- Political management of multi-faithism.

  The massive migratory flows of believers from religions/cultures different from those of the host country clearly raise the question of the political management of multi-faithism, as well as its inevitable trade-offs (religious freedom, proselytism, change in social norms/behaviours, etc.).

  It is only now that the importance of the religious factor in the identity construction of immigrant groups has been recognised that this issue has been incorporated into political agendas, especially at the local level. Both European societies and, more recently, societies in the Maghreb countries have begun to seriously consider the political management of multi-faithism.

  In order to carry out this management correctly, detailed studies with a large component of fieldwork are necessary, on which to base satisfactory but proportionate

and legally viable responses to their demands (places of worship, cemeteries, religious assistance in hospitals, prisons, armed forces, etc.).

Finally, it should be noted that the challenge lies in identifying policies and legal principles that can adequately respond to the religious diversity generated by immigration without necessarily relying exclusively on the secular roots (Christian or otherwise) of the host societies' systems.

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