

## Article

# Religious Presences and Places in the City of Rome in the Contemporary Age

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## Abstract

Recent research has redefined the relationship between religion and urban spaces, recognizing religion as a key factor in shaping both the material and immaterial fabric of cities. Moving beyond the notion of secularization, recent studies reveal how diverse religious traditions actively contribute to urban identity, cultural heritage, and public life. This article presents findings from the CHANGES survey conducted in Rome, which gathered data on individual well-being, cultural consumption, linguistic practices, and religious participation. Our contribution focuses on a specific section of the survey, addressing religious self-identification, religious diversity, the attendance of places of worship, and the relationship between religion and well-being in the city. The results highlight a complex mosaic of religious affiliations—where, despite Catholicism’s predominance, minority faiths play an increasingly significant role, as well as meanings associated with places of worship, and reveal subtle associations between religiosity and resilience. These insights emphasize the need for interdisciplinary approaches in urban cultural policy to enhance and promote a pluralistic heritage.

**Keywords:** religious diversity; religious heritage; Rome; urban religion; interdisciplinarity



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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the relationship between religions and urban settings has experienced notable changes in historiography and methodology, recognizing religion as a key factor in shaping and influencing urban areas. This shift has redefined the very concept of urban space, attributing to religion a crucial role in its organization, perception, and development. One of the first seminal academic reflections on the religion–city relationship is represented by Harvey Cox’s *The Secular City* (Cox 1965), which introduced the notion of a secularized urban context wherein religion appeared to hold an institutional role. Subsequent studies have demonstrated that historical and new religions and spiritualities continue to exert significant influence in contemporary cities.

This historiographical and methodological pivot emphasizes that religions, far from being relegated to the private sphere, are dynamic actors in urban spaces. They shape urban identities, influence structural dynamics, and contribute to cultural fruition and to the creation of shared cultural heritage (Tsvolas 2014; Niglio 2022). An interdisciplinary approach that integrates religious history, sociology, and urban studies allows for a nuanced understanding of this relationship, providing new insights into contemporary cities as

arenas of interaction between faith, culture, and urbanization. Furthermore, the perspective of well-being and resilience, recently recalled in the analysis of the positive effects of cultural participation for individuals and communities (REF), can integrate the study of the interplay between urban religious diversity and cultural heritage and fruition. The participation in religious cults and festivals has been identified as able to foster personal distress and social integration (Grossi et al. 2013).

It is key, in this regard, to disclose the mechanism implied in the exclusion and inclusion of specific groups—as migrants and religious minorities—from cultural participation. At the same time, the investigation of the specific forms of resilience these groups display in their urban trajectories and lives enables the consideration of agency in social and religious paths.

In this framework, the authors contributed to the research program Cultural Heritage Active Innovation for a Next-Gen Sustainable Society (CHANGES)<sup>2</sup> an interdepartmental teaching project that focuses on integrating advanced technologies and scientific approaches to enhance the sustainability and resilience of Tangible Cultural Heritage (TCH). Its main objective is to develop infrastructures that address in depth the impact of anthropogenic, natural, and climatic factors on TCH, promoting integrated conservation strategies that consider the interconnection between cultural, social, and economic aspects. Additionally, the program emphasizes the promotion of participatory governance models that actively involve both public and private entities, as well as local communities, to ensure sustainable and inclusive management of cultural heritage. By investigating the cultural engagement and well-being of youth and adults in the city of Rome, CHANGES has provided valuable data for exploring the relationship between citizens and cultural heritage with a focus on well-being and resilience. The survey addressed a diverse sample by age, gender, and educational attainment across the 15 municipal areas of the city and captured significant aspects of urban life. The objective is to enhance the cultural and linguistic resources of the capital, paying particular attention to the specific needs of different groups. In doing so, it is hoped that the research will help guide more effective cultural and social policies for the Roman community.

In dialogue with recent studies that have elucidated orientations and practices concerning religion in various urban contexts, and particularly with the interdisciplinary framework concerning religious spatiality (Giorda 2024), this article discusses the main findings captured by one of the three sections of the CHANGES survey, namely the one dedicated to religious affiliations, places, and the relationship between religion and well-being. This work offers a detailed and methodologically grounded examination of the case of Rome, which remains notably underexplored in the current literature on urban religion. It constitutes the first in-depth and systematic study with a survey devoted to the analysis of religious diversity, practices, and spatial configurations within an Italian urban context. Rome represents a particularly significant case due to its historical layering, plural religious presence, and complex urban morphology. By focusing on this city, the study contributes not only to filling a gap in scholarship on contemporary religious topographies in Italy but also opens up and permits broader comparative future discussions on how religious life shapes and is shaped by urban environments. Rome's peculiarity stems from its pervasive global image as the center of Catholic Christianity, headquarters of international bodies, and its symbolic centrality to Western cultural heritage (Thomassen and Vereni 2014; Fabretti and Vereni 2016). Rome also exemplifies urban informality as a dynamic process where norms, power, and values are constantly negotiated. It has evolved as a "self-made city," shaped more by private initiatives, with agglomerations expanded after WWII due to migration from Italy's poorest regions and economic pressures, than centralized and coherent urban planning (Cellamare 2014; Marinaro and Solimene 2020).

The aim of this article is to discuss the significance of the original dataset regarding the role of the religious dimension in the context of cultural participation at the urban level. This exploration can, first and foremost, allow for an examination of the forms of religiosity and of Catholicism in the city of Rome, within a framework applicable to Italy—as well as many other countries—where secularization coexists with increasing religious diversification, largely due to migration flows and the influences of globalization, but also with the growing search for spiritual experiences outside institutional affiliations (Palmisano and Pannofino 2021). Secondly, this study allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between the city and the religious dimension by investigating representations and usage practices related to religious places. The objective is to understand not only the role these places play in the daily lives of religious communities but also if and how they contribute to the construction and preservation of collective history and memory, for transmitting cultural heritage and strengthening community identities through practices. Finally, it aims to explore the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity of the territories within the urban area in this regard. This enables a deeper understanding of the connective tissue that characterizes cities and allows us to question common assumptions relating to their understanding.

This article presents a theoretical framework. Section 1 provides a brief methodological consideration of the CHANGES survey. In Section 3, an overview of the forms of religiosity and religious affiliations within the surveyed sample is offered. Section 4 focuses on the findings related to religious places. In this regard, the sample provides valuable insights into the activities taking place in these spaces, both strictly religious and broader cultural and social events, as well as their physical characteristics and the representations associated with them, their relationship with the building and keeping of a collective memory. Section 5, on the other hand, reflects on the results derived from the intersection of several variables related to religiosity and religious practice with those referring to well-being and resilience, to which a specific section of the questionnaire was reserved. Finally, the Conclusions highlight how the data, though partial, provide some meaningful answers to the ambitions of the study, revealing a certain plurality of forms of religiosity alongside the persistence of Catholicism as the majority religion. Moreover, they underscore the diversification of meanings and uses associated with places of worship by those who practice religion. In this regard, CHANGES and this article present an original and unpublished dataset on cultural and religious engagement in Rome, paving the way for further research inquiries.

## 2. Investigating Religious Diversity, Cultural Heritage, and Well-Being in the Urban Space

In the last decades, many contributions have expanded the investigation of the multiple ways in which religious plurality and secular forms of life coexist and are spatially shown in the urban scenario. The work *Topographies of Faith* (Becci et al. 2013) has expanded and even overturned this debate, illustrating how urban spaces serve as sites of interaction between diverse religious traditions, with religious practices contributing to urban identity formation. In 2020, Jörg Rüpke introduced the concept of “urban religion” to describe the role of religion in ancient Rome (Rüpke 2020). From this perspective, religion transcended mere belief systems, instead representing a set of practices integrated into daily life, collective imaginaries, economic systems, and public celebrations. This approach underscores the deep entanglement of religion with both the material and immaterial fabric of the city, influencing its architectures and infrastructures, as well as lifestyles and narratives (Russo and Saggiaro 2018).

With the epistemological shift represented by the “Spatial Turn” (Knott 2010), other epistemological transformations have led to new ways of engaging with space: the “Visual Turn” (Brighenti 2010) and the “Material Turn” (Federici et al. 2024) have introduced interdis-

disciplinary visual criteria, emphasizing the interconnection between material and immaterial and tangible and intangible dimensions of spaces. These new perspectives have redefined the very concept of religious space, no longer seen solely as a physical, enclosed location but as a fluid and dynamic reality where experiences, representations, and meanings intersect. Within this theoretical framework, religious places are no longer interpreted exclusively as spaces for devotion but emerge as key centers of social and cultural participation. They symbolize the coexistence of tradition and innovation, preservation and transformation, and play a fundamental role in the construction of religious cultural heritage. As we affirmed in the introduction, according to [Tsivolas \(2014\)](#), European religious heritage consists of a multiplicity of sacred elements belonging to various religious traditions, which hold social, cultural, and religious value worthy of protection and enhancement. In many cases, historical churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples are not only frequented for prayer but also serve as venues for cultural events, exhibitions, interfaith dialogues, and social assistance activities.

The reconsideration of the different religious places as valuable components of religious cultural heritage and of individuals' and communities' cultural participation in the city opens to the investigation of their possible effects on well-being and resilience

In recent years, increasing attention has been devoted to exploring whether religious practices, including rituals, prayer, and events, can contribute to both individual and organizational resilience ([Howard et al. 2023](#); [Lucchetti et al. 2021](#)). [Cohen and Johnson \(2016\)](#) highlight that religious practices like intrinsic religiosity and community involvement are positively linked to well-being, although the strength of these effects varies across different religious groups and cultural contexts. The relationship between religiosity and well-being is influenced by both individual-level and contextual factors. At the individual level, intrinsic religiosity, characterized by a deep personal commitment, often correlates with higher life satisfaction, while extrinsic religiosity and orientations such as fundamentalism, quest, and SBNR (spiritual but not religious) can variably impact well-being). Meanwhile, broader contextual factors such as cultural norms (individualistic vs. collectivistic), socioeconomic status, social support, and regional differences together form a multifaceted framework that determines the overall effect of religion on quality of life. Cross-cultural evidence shows this boost is strongest among the socially isolated, poorer, or rural populations, while members of minority faiths may report lower well-being unless they engage frequently in communal observance ([Howard et al. 2023](#); [Lucchetti et al. 2021](#)). Overall, social, economic, and cultural context, and especially the depth of communal participation, shape how spirituality and religion translate into happiness and life satisfaction.

The case of Rome represents a significant observatory for developing such enquiries. As several studies have shown, although deeply rooted in its Catholic–Christian tradition, Rome also hosts a diverse and multifaceted religious landscape. This diversity is evident on a broad scale through significant places of worship, both architecturally and politically, whose visibility and connections extend beyond Italy ([Fabretti and Vereni 2016](#); [Fabretti et al. 2019](#)). However, less visible forms of religious diversity, particularly in terms of daily practices, are situated “on the margins” of the city and are observable only on a smaller, hyperlocal level. It has been suggested ([Fabretti and Vereni 2016](#)) that, paradoxically, the pluralization of Rome emerges not despite but because of its predominantly Catholic heritage and the shaping influence of this religion on the city. Rome's well-established reputation as a “religious city,” shaped by its deep Catholic roots, acts as a magnet for diverse religious groups, drawing them to the city. Simultaneously, the prominence of religious elements in the city's identity prompts newcomers, arriving as part of global movements, to frame their demands within religious language. It should be considered, in this regard, that Rome represents a major hub for foreign residents. Overall, the presence of foreign residents in Rome appears highly

variable across the urban territory, without a specific concentration in particular quadrants of the city. Instead, based on geographic origin and occupational category, they seem to reside both in affluent areas and in the historic and outermost peripheries (Lelo et al. 2021). While the value of religious spaces in Rome as components of the city's religious cultural heritage has been recently suggested, indicating the need to promote in particular minority communities' tangible and intangible set of goods (Federici and Giorda 2025), the study of the interplay between religious participation and well-being or resilience in the eternal city has been completely disregarded till now. The CHANGES survey offers a first set of data that is worth analyzing in order to disclose peculiarities of the case.

### 3. The CHANGES Survey: Methodological Notes

The CHANGES survey<sup>3</sup> targeted individuals over the age of 14 using the city's services (such as museums, theatres, cinemas, libraries) on a continuous and regular basis. These individuals were identified as "city users," including both residents and domiciled individuals who stay in the city for at least three nights per week for study and/or work purposes. The territory of the city of Rome was defined based on the 155 urban areas established by the municipality in 1977, which were reorganized in 2013 into 15 districts (*municipi*).

With a target population of 2,718,000 individuals, a theoretical sample was designed to include 5000 completed interviews. Given the sample size, the survey was conducted through online self-administration of a structured questionnaire, an approach that inherently carries the risk of underrepresenting individuals less familiar with internet use, typically older adults. The 5000 interviews were conducted between 7 May 2024 and 16 May 2024.

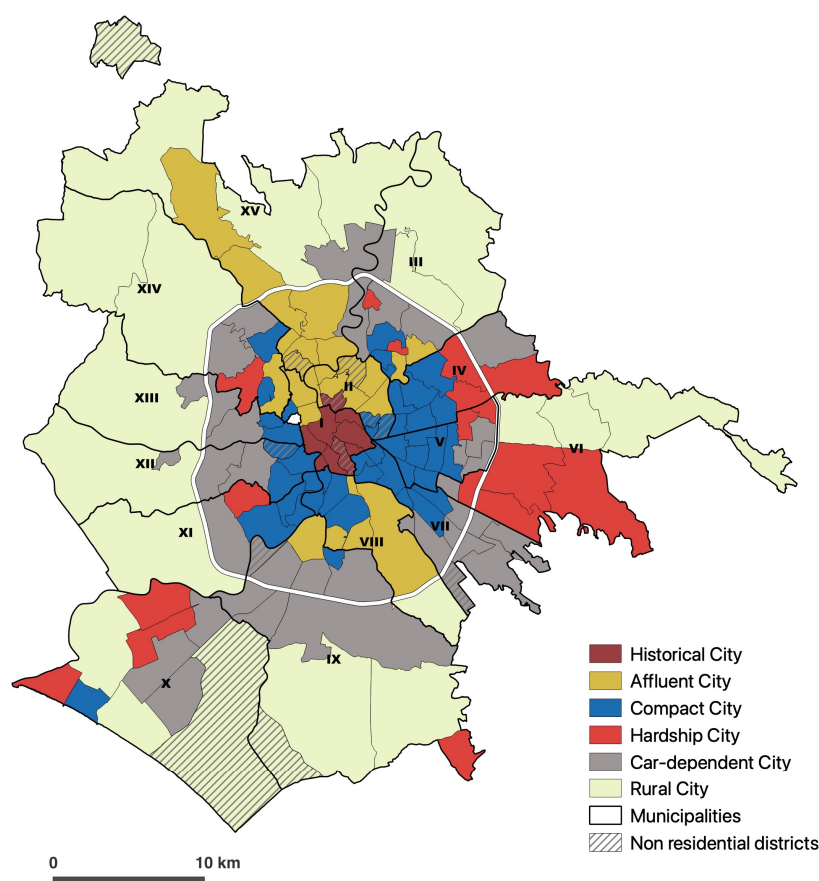
The final sample closely matched the theoretical design, with only minor discrepancies in certain characteristics. Ultimately, through post-stratification weighting (raking system), the observed sample was adjusted to ensure representativeness in terms of the proportion of residents versus domiciled individuals, the share of university graduates among residents, gender distribution of residents, age groups among residents, population distribution across the 15 districts (*municipi*), and the intersection of these last three variables (gender, age, and district) for the resident population.

The sample is over-represented in the middle age groups (45–54 years and 35–44 years), which make up almost half of the respondents. On the other hand, the younger age group (15–17 years, only 0.5%) and the older age group (65+ years, 7.7%) are under-represented. With respect to gender, the sample is rather balanced, with 54% of respondents being male and 46% female. Considering the educational qualification, almost half of the sample (48%) holds a university degree.

Regarding territorial classification, the 155 urban areas were reaggregated by integrating the 15 districts (*municipi*) with additional criteria. A particularly useful reaggregation, referenced in this article in the Figure 1, follows the concept of "The Seven Romes" (Lelo et al. 2021).

Excluding the seventh category, "la città invisibile" (the city of the invisible ones, which, by definition, cannot be captured in a survey), six distinct areas were identified, each with a sufficient number of cases, even for the smallest grouping: "la città storica", comprising about 3% of the population in a central area, which is equivalent to about 1% of the municipal area, including historic wards and early post-unification neighborhoods; "la città ricca", including the northern areas, EUR, and Appia Antica, in which nearly 16% of Rome's population lives; "la città compatta", corresponding to the semi-central crown around the historic city, inhabited mainly by the middle class, densely built up during the twentieth century, and especially after World War II (it encompasses more than one-third of Rome's inhabitants in an area that represents only 8% of the municipal territory); "la città del disagio", which houses 16% of the population in public housing or squatter township

neighborhoods further out from the historic suburbs (however, we remark on the fact that this label is not without issues, as it associates the residents of this area with a condition of hardship that is not necessarily common nor necessarily perceived as such by them); “la città dell’automobile”, which includes the scattered and discontinuous settlements located around the *Grande Raccordo Anulare* highway ring, and along the road routes to the sea; and “la città campagna”, which comprises only 6% of Rome’s population while developing over a huge, sparsely urbanized area; it covers more than half of the territory and extending from the outermost part of many municipalities to the municipal boundaries.



Lelo K., Monni S., Tomassi F., Le sette Rome © 2021, Donzelli, Roma

**Figure 1.** The “Seven Romes”.

The questionnaire used in the survey was composed of four sections. The first section analyzes individual well-being and resilience, exploring life satisfaction and the ability to cope with difficulties. The second investigates cultural consumption habits, with a focus on museums, exhibitions, musical events, and other artistic activities. The third section concentrates on the linguistic dimension, highlighting multilingualism and the importance of the mother tongue. Finally, the fourth section examines the religious sphere by exploring various forms of worship practices and their social impact. The data—provided in a completely anonymous form—portray a detailed picture of the relationship between citizens and cultural heritage. As mentioned, this article will focus exclusively on the data collected from the section of the questionnaire dedicated to religion. This section, composed of eight items, examined religiosity, participation in worship and community activities, and the perceptions and uses of places of worship, with particular attention to religious diversity. The results derived from intersections with socio-demographic variables are considered, as well as those related to the section of the questionnaire dedicated to assessing the well-being and resilience of the individuals surveyed.

#### 4. Religion and Religious Diversity in Rome

Although it represents a field of research that requires more systematic exploration, the reconstruction of religious diversity in Rome (Russo and Saggiaro 2018) is emerging through the work of several Italian scholars who integrate social, historical, and anthropological sciences. This spans from the history of Protestant communities and churches established in the capital during the Risorgimento (Giorda and Omenetto 2025) to the ongoing mapping and ethnographic studies on the diversification of Rome's religious landscape in terms of communities and places of worship (Naso 2004; Maciotti 2013; Russo and Saggiaro 2018). These studies have delved into the urban fabric, exploring the city's most multicultural suburbs while also bringing attention back to the symbolic centers of religious diversity, such as the historical Synagogue or the Grand Mosque (Giorda 2024). The predominant use of qualitative research methods has, however, limited the collection of broader data on religion and the various religious presences in the Eternal City. A survey conducted in the early 1990s, as part of a larger study on Italy (Cesareo et al. 1995), captured the inclination towards religion of a representative sample of individuals in Rome, showing the prevalence of a form of religious affiliation that appears personally significant, yet does not translate into active participation in worship services or parish-organized activities (Cipriani 1997). However, the survey focuses on Catholic religiosity, in a time when the pluralization of religious affiliations, later largely reinforced by migration flows, was still in its early stages in Italy.

More than thirty years later, the CHANGES survey provides, in the first place, a limited but valuable integration to the literature concerning religious diversity in Rome. This paragraph summarizes some of the results regarding religiosity and the religious affiliation of the respondents.

The reference to religion is a prominent characteristic of the sample analyzed in the CHANGES survey, involving 66.5% of respondents in varying ways. Specifically, 48% identify as religious but non-practicing, while those who combine belief and practice constitute 18.5% of the sample. Conversely, 31% of respondents do not consider themselves religious, and 3% preferred not to answer. This picture closely aligns with the national context (IPSOS 2023), where 70% of the population identifies as religious, with a significant majority being non-practicing (51%) compared to practicing believers (19%), while 28% declare themselves non-religious.

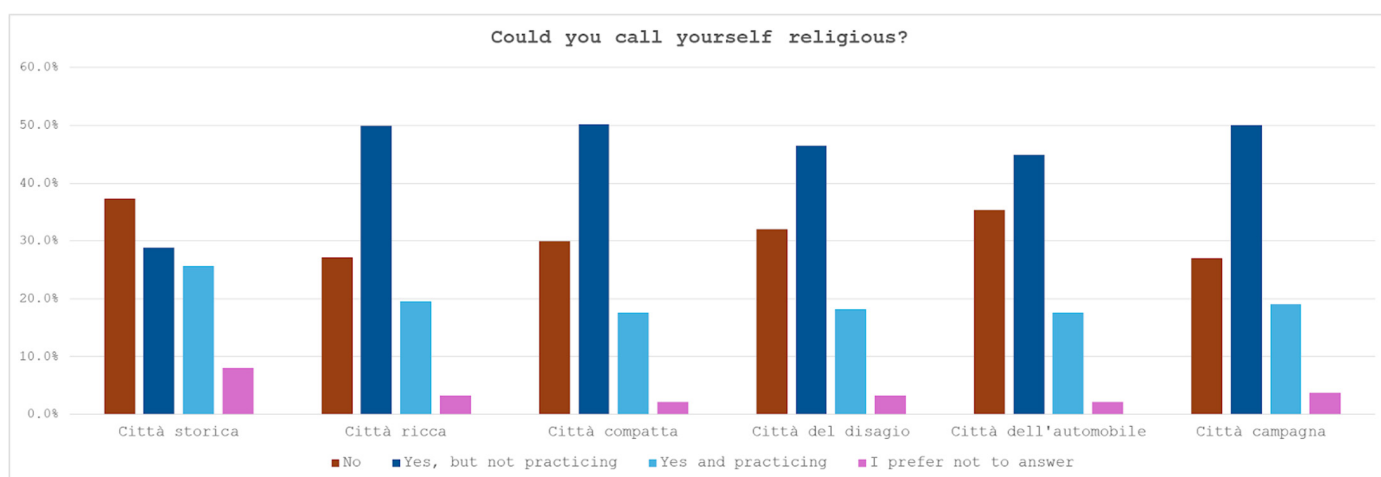
Overall, in the CHANGES survey, these positions are associated with the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, particularly age and gender. Younger age groups tend to be more inclined toward non-religiosity, while women are significantly more engaged in religious aspects (70%) compared to men (63%). However, this gender gap appears narrow, possibly confirming the trend in which women—traditionally seen as guardians of religiosity—are increasingly participating in the process of secularization (Giorgi and Palmisano 2024).

Educational attainment does not seem to be a significant differentiating factor, although a higher percentage of respondents with lower education levels (below secondary education) are found among the non-religious (34.5% compared to the sample average of 31%). Also, the zone of residence does not appear to be strongly associated with religiosity, except for the area defined in the study as the historic city ("città storica"). Among residents in this area, a higher-than-average proportion identify as non-religious (37%). Furthermore, residents of the historic center are less represented among those who identify as religious but non-practicing (29% compared to the sample average of 49%). They are also overrepresented among those who preferred not to answer the question.

Moving forward to take a closer look at the segment of the sample that recognizes religion as a significant dimension of their identity. Practiced religiosity is evenly distributed

across the different age groups considered in the survey. However, in the case of religiosity without practice, the values are significantly higher among individuals over the age of 34. Thus, adherence to forms of religiosity detached from participation in collective rituals and cults is more pronounced in adulthood. Regarding gender differences, no variation is observed between men and women in terms of practiced religiosity. However, in the case of non-practicing religiosity, there is a slight divergence: 51% of women fall into this category, compared to 44% of men.

While educational attainment and profession do not significantly differentiate religiosity, territorial factors are associated with noteworthy distinctions (Figure 2). Religious practice is more concentrated in the historic city, whereas belief without practice is more prevalent in the area defined as “città compatta”, with reference to historical and high-density suburbs. Non-religiosity, on the other hand, is more common in both the historic city and the zones near the *Grande Raccordo Anulare* highway ring road (“città dell’automobile”). It is worth noting that religious practice is higher than average among non-residents (i.e., those who are domiciled rather than permanent residents). This may suggest a greater presence of migrant citizens within this group, an interpretation supported by an analysis of linguistic background.

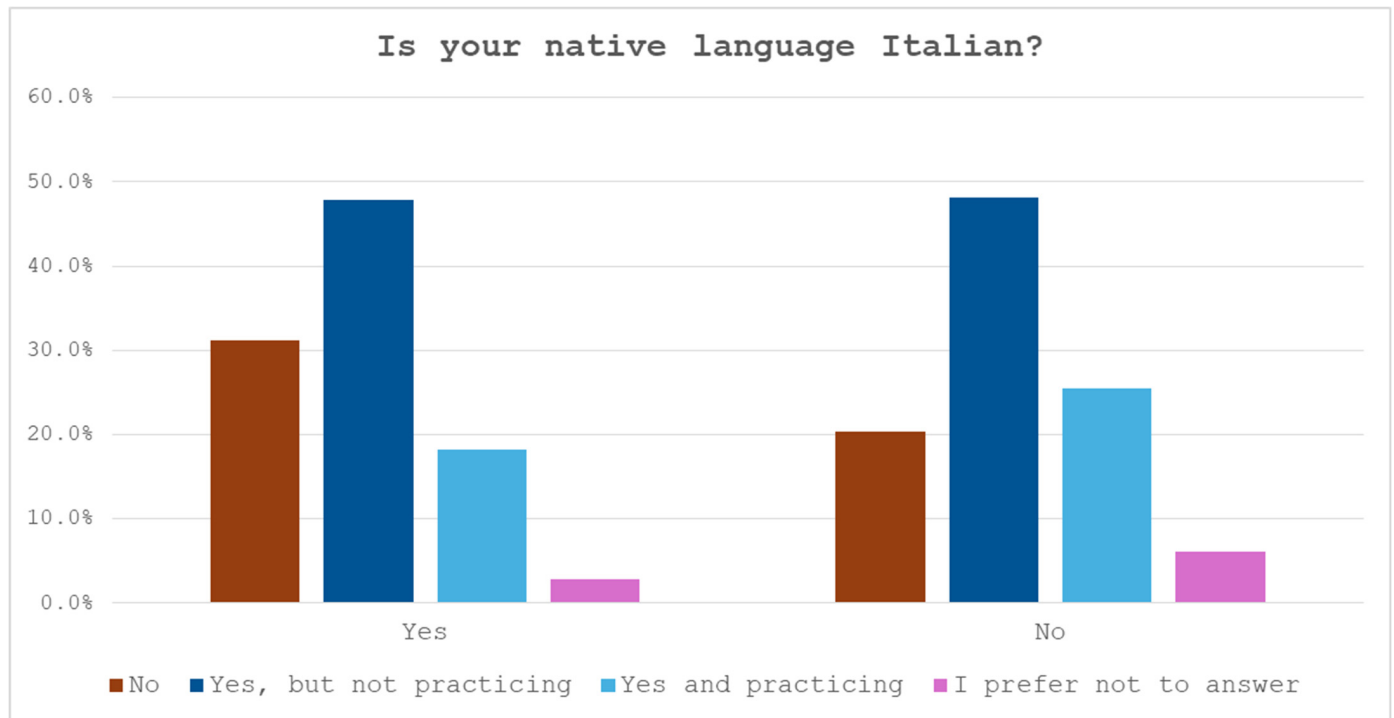


**Figure 2.** Religiosity by urban area.

In this regard, it is worth noting that, among those whose mother tongue is not Italian, 73% identify as religious (48% as practitioners or 25.5% as non-practitioners) compared to 66% of Italian speakers. While no significant difference is observed between Italian and non-Italian speakers in terms of non-practicing religiosity, a notable disparity emerges among practicing individuals: 25.5% of non-Italian speakers belong to this group, compared to 18% of Italian speakers (Figure 3). Thus, it can be speculated that foreign respondents exhibit slightly higher and more active religious identification.

As previously mentioned, 31% of respondents do not consider themselves religious. This position is more prevalent among younger individuals, 44% of those aged 15–24 and 43% of those aged 25–34 identify as non-religious, and less common among older age groups and women (a pattern also observed among those who identify as religious but do not practice). Non-religiosity is also higher among native Italian speakers and lower among individuals with other linguistic backgrounds. However, it does not appear to be significantly influenced by educational level or social status. In terms of religious affiliation, the sample from the CHANGES survey exhibits a certain heterogeneity. It is worth considering, to comment on the city’s prevailing religious identity, that 58% of the respondents identify themselves as Catholic. However, among those who identify as religious, both practicing

and non-practicing, non-Catholics constitute 12% of the group. This figure is nonetheless higher than the estimated proportion for Italy as a whole, where 4.3% of Italian citizens belong to religious minorities, or 10.5% when including non-citizen residents (CESNUR 2024). Additionally, 5.3% of respondents who identified as religious either could not specify a particular religion or preferred not to answer.



**Figure 3.** Religiosity by native language.

Among non-Catholics, 2.7% identify as Protestant, 2.5% as Buddhist, and 2.3% as Orthodox Christian. Smaller proportions—just over 1%—identify as Jehovah’s Witnesses or Muslim, including both Sunni and Shia Islam (Figure 4). Regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of these groups, younger age cohorts are particularly represented among those who identify as Buddhist and Orthodox Christian. Among those with a university education, Catholicism remains the predominant religion, but slightly higher percentages of people without religious affiliation can be observed. Buddhism and Protestantism have a more significant presence among graduates compared to those with a lower level of education. Finally, people without religious affiliation (“none in particular”) and those belonging to religions other than Catholicism seem to have a higher incidence in areas where the circulation of cars is particularly dense (“città dell’automobile”) and areas with public housing and peripheral neighborhoods (“città del disagio”). The wealthy city (“città ricca”) and the area defined as “città compatta” maintain a high percentage of Catholics.

The landscape of religious diversity changes significantly when considering linguistic background, which can serve as a proxy for geographical origin or nationality. Among respondents whose native language is not Italian, Catholic affiliation drops to 51%, while the proportion of those belonging to other religions rises to 46%. The presence of non-Italian-speaking respondents is particularly significant among Orthodox Christians (93%) and Protestants (79%) and is nearly universal in the case of Islam (Figure 5).

Overall, the findings of the survey reveal a widespread religiosity, significantly detached from active practice, alongside a certain degree of religious plurality. Both active participation and adherence to religions other than Catholicism increase when considering only respondents whose mother tongue is not Italian. These results align closely with

the evidence emerging from sociological research on religiosity and religious diversity in Italy. On the one hand, despite the ongoing process of secularization, religion remains a significant dimension for many, albeit in ways that tend to detach from formal institutional affiliation. On the other hand, religious participation and pluralization seem at least driven by the presence of migrants, as the data on linguistic characteristics of the sample show.

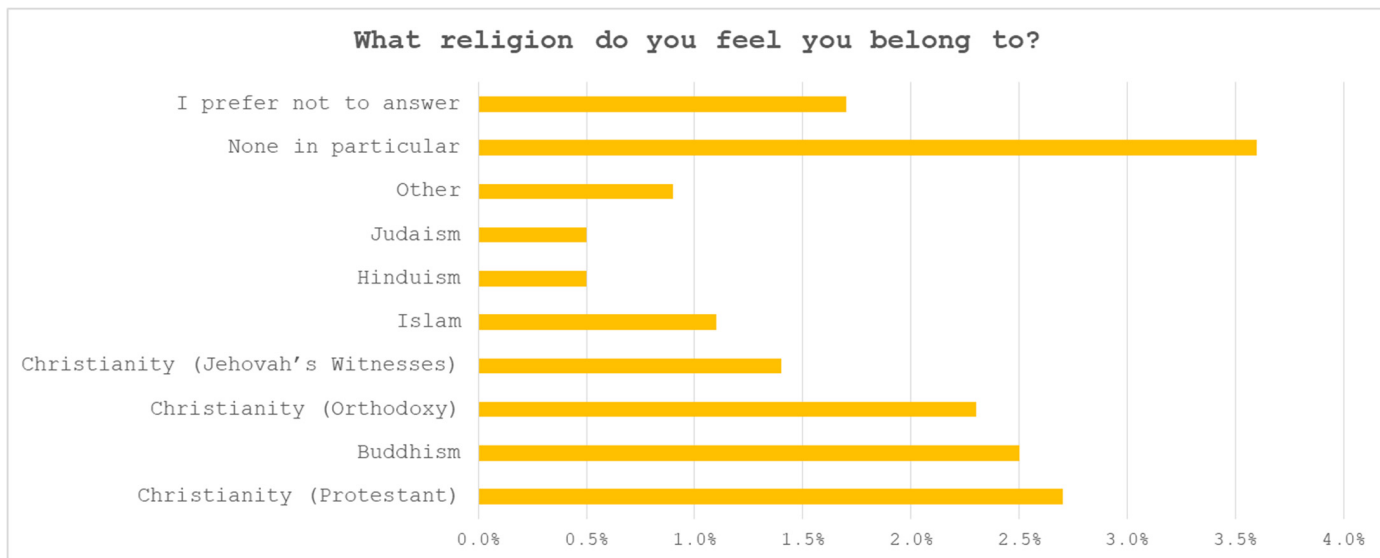


Figure 4. Religious diversity.

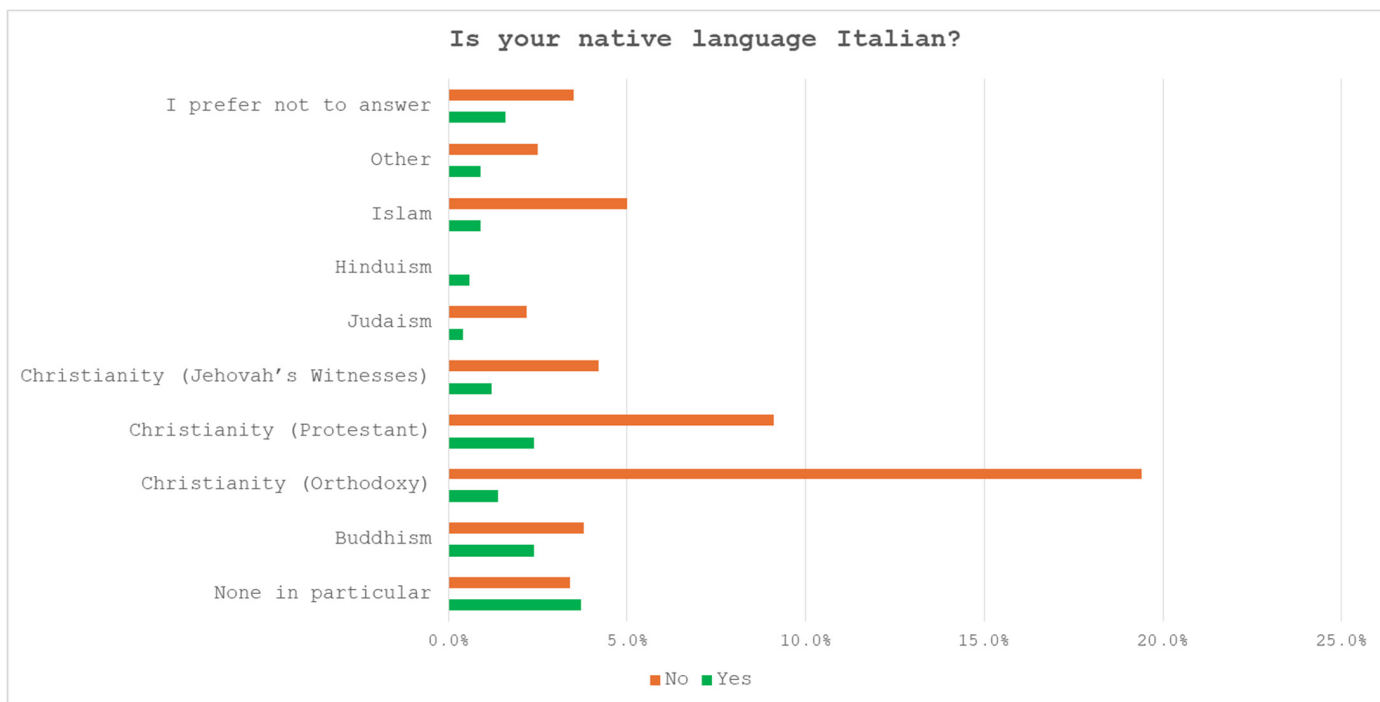


Figure 5. Religious diversity by native language.

### 5. Uses and Representations of Religious Places in Rome

A further section of the CHANGES survey shed light on the accessibility, adaptability, and effective use of religious spaces, which continue to fulfill their religious function, being cultural and social spaces, while also opening to new forms of participation.

A specific question investigated *where* those who identify as practicing (18.5% of the respondents) engage in their religion/spirituality, allowing respondents to select multiple

answers. Among them, 72.5% select places of worship, such as churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, while 25.5% practice their religion at home. A smaller proportion, ranging from 5 to 6%, utilizes outdoor, likely public, spaces, with another 6% engaging in online religious activities (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Religious practice by place.

The classification of religious spaces into sites of worship, domestic environments, and outdoor settings used in the survey risks reducing the complex and evolving nature of religious expression to overly rigid typologies. Practices such as informal or domestic worship frequently transgress these categorical boundaries, intertwining private and sacred functions and contributing significantly to the construction of communal and devotional networks. While such complexities undoubtedly warrant deeper investigation—potentially through spatial ethnography or thematically focused inquiries—this lies beyond the scope of the present analysis based on a structured survey. Typological frameworks have been examined in detail elsewhere (Giorda 2023); our present objective is rather to underscore the heterogeneity of religious spaces, whose outward appearances often belie their deeper identities, and which are frequently shaped by stratified processes of transformation over time.

Responses reflect a notable diversification of utilized spaces and a marked difference in modes of religious practice according to age group. Worship in physical locations involves mostly the over-55 bracket, a demographic in which approximately 80% frequent physical spaces, whereas online practice is especially common among very young people aged 15–26 (10%) and those aged 45–54 (9%); meanwhile, outdoor practice is particularly widespread in the 25–34 bracket. We might hypothesize that factors such as tradition, entrenched habits, and available time affect the choice of where to practice, while online engagement mainly attracts younger people, given their familiarity with digital technologies.

As far as the urban areas are concerned, it is worth noting that in peripheral municipalities, such as “Città del disagio”, the online religious participation rate is higher (11%) than in historical municipalities and “Città/Campagna” (among 2%). Our investigation has focused on key aspects related to religious spaces, particularly examining which services are

offered in the places of worship our respondents attend. Among the various activities and services that practitioners report being offered by the places of worship they attend, there is a pronounced prevalence of religious practices (67%); however, non-religious services are quite common, such as civic education (40%), after-school child care (12%), economic support (11%) and language courses (9%).

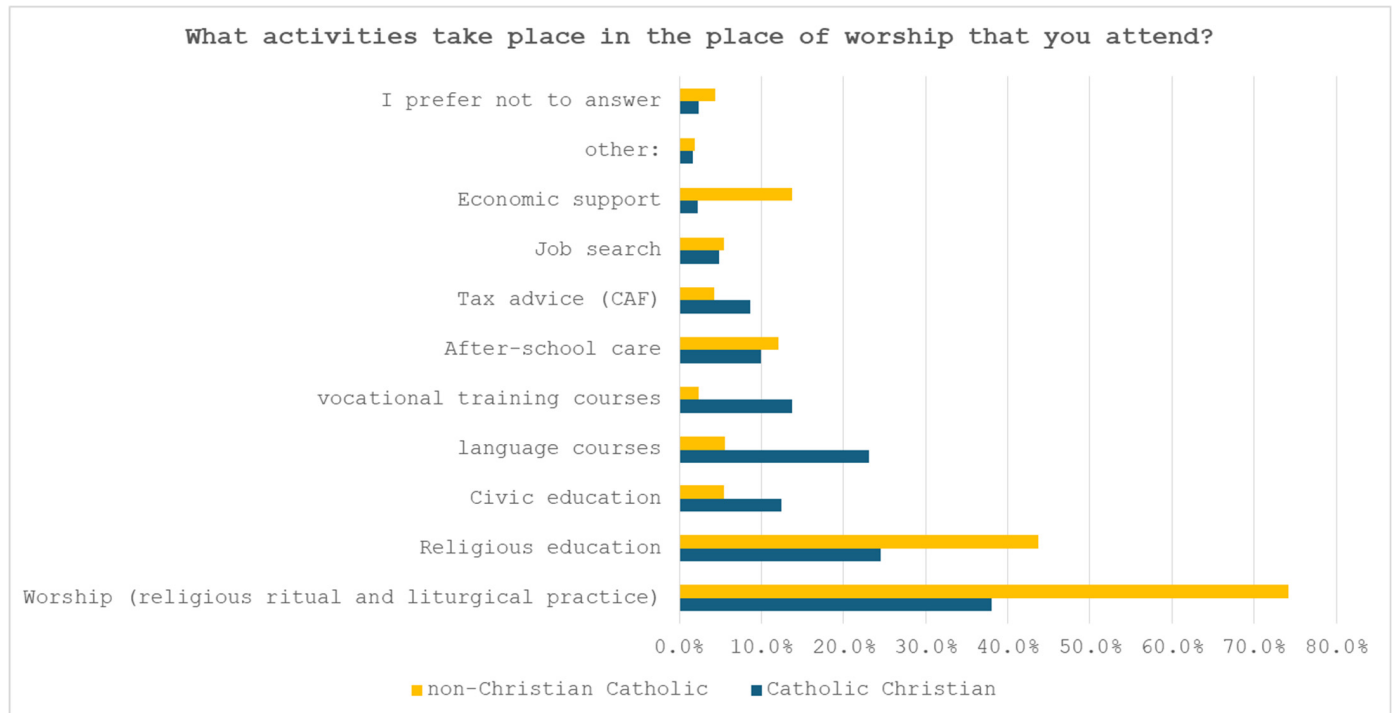
This contrasts starkly with the 74.2% participation rate in worship activities among Catholics compared to a mere 38% among non-Catholics. This figure reflects a strong connection between the community and religious traditions, underscoring how spirituality and participation in worship moments reside at the heart of religious life. The space thereby fosters a form of cultural and social identity permeating numerous facets of daily life through communal rites, celebrations, and devotional practices. In this context, religious activity seems to be a priority for many respondents, prompting reflection on the relationship between religious and secular activities within sacred spaces. For instance, religious education, accounting for 39.9% of practitioners, follows worship as the second most endorsed activity, signifying that the teaching of religious values and traditions serves as another critical aspect for the community, with percentages approximately at 43.7% for Catholics and 24.5% for non-Catholics. Although lower than direct worship, religious education is crucial in shaping the development of both youth and adults, whether within familial or institutional frameworks. Less prominent activities, such as after-school programs for children (11.7% of practitioners), economic support (11.4%), or language courses (9%), still hold some significance. Notably, 23% of non-Catholics affirm the availability of language courses, while only 5.5% of Catholics report similar offerings. This discrepancy highlights that Catholic churches are not yet adequately equipped to meet such needs, particularly among non-Italian-speaking congregants. These figures suggest that while religious practice plays a predominant role, individuals do not overlook other necessities, such as supplementary education for children or economic support, particularly in contexts of economic fragility and social marginalization. However, the relatively low percentage associated with economic support initiatives (13.7% among Catholics and merely 2.2% among non-Catholics) compared to religious education and worship activities may indicate that while material assistance is essential, it does not evoke the same emotional intensity or social familiarity as religious practices do (Figure 7). This is a noteworthy consideration for studies examining grassroots welfare systems provided by religious communities and accessible within the spaces of worship (Ascoli and Arlotti 2019; Glatzer and Manuel 2020). Data concerning vocational training and tax consultation, at 4.5% and 5.1% respectively, affirm that these services, while important, are perceived as secondary. These results may also mirror a social system in which pursuing employment or addressing tax matters is considered less urgent compared to personal or spiritual growth. Finally, it is noteworthy that a small fraction of respondents chose not to answer (3.9%), possibly indicating a certain reluctance to express opinions or a level of unfamiliarity with less-frequented spaces.

The data illustrate a strong inclination towards religious practices as central to individuals' activities and needs, with a relatively lesser yet still notable focus on other requirements concerning education, economic support, and vocational training. Worship emerges not only as a factor satisfying spiritual needs but also, in some instances, appears to overshadow and take precedence over other dimensions of social and economic life.

The differences between Catholics and non-Catholics are also evident from the availability of places of worship.

Accessibility emerges as a key factor: 81.3% of practitioners find their worship space "easy to reach," juxtaposed against 18.7% who perceive it as "difficult to reach." This highlights the importance attributed to logistical convenience and proximity, crucial factors in facilitating participation in religious activities. In conclusion, practitioners generally

perceive their places of worship as distinctly visible, relatively modern, characterized by simple furnishings, and easily accessible. The only notable variance between Catholics and non-Catholics pertains to access to places of worship: the percentage of non-Catholics who report difficulties in reaching their places of worship is over double that of Catholics (32.4% compared to 15.2%).



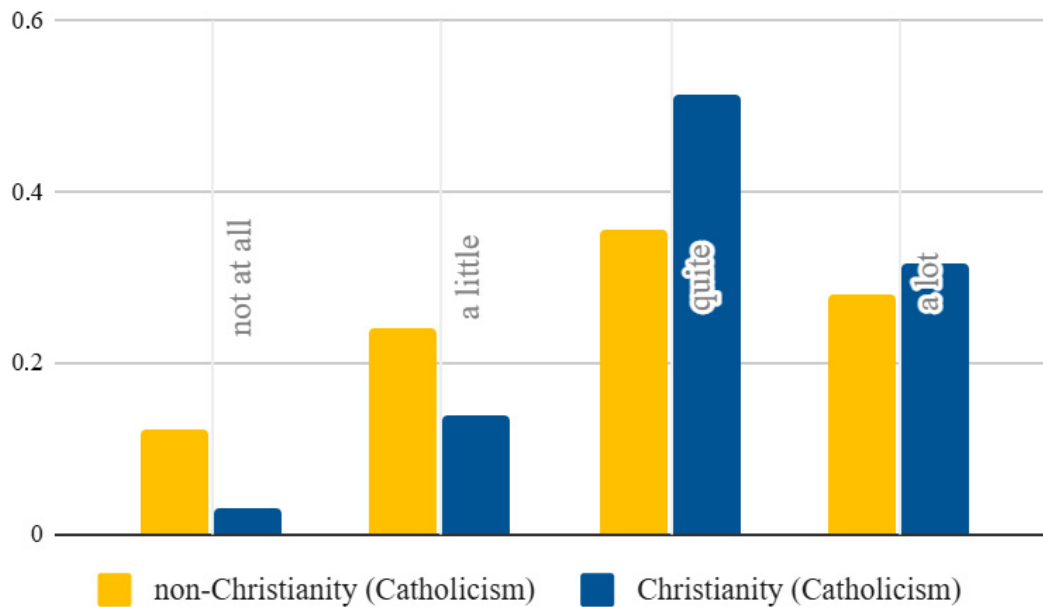
**Figure 7.** Services offered in the places of worship by religious affiliation.

Most practitioners (82.4%) attribute to their places of worship the value of representing their identity (individual or collective), with 33.7% regarding it as “very important”, and 48.7% as “fairly important.” These data underscore the strong symbolic link between the place of worship and communal identity, perceived as central to one’s sense of belonging. A key role is attributed to the preservation and transmission of traditions: 79.1% of practitioners believe that their place of worship maintains and passes down community traditions, with similar percentages among those who see it as “very” (31%) or “fairly important” (48.1%). This underscores the place of worship as an intergenerational space, essential for cultural heritage. The familial significance is similarly profound: 72.5% perceive it as a venue frequented by various generations within their family, serving as an indicator of continuity and social centrality. Likewise, 70% acknowledge the capacity of their place of worship to preserve the community’s historical memory, reinforcing its role as a custodian of the past. On a personal level, 68.7% associate it with a significant event in their life, illustrating the emotional and spiritual value that these spaces hold for many respondents. Additionally, 61.8% link it to connections with their country of origin or familial roots, further solidifying the importance of places of worship in the construction of individual and collective identity (Figure 8a,b).

The analyzed data reveal a notable distinction between Catholics and non-Catholics in their perceptions of the role and significance of places of worship. For 51.3% of Catholics, the worship site is seen as a space that “sufficiently” upholds traditions, while 31.7% regard it as a strong custodian of traditions. In contrast, lower percentages are found among non-Catholics: 35.5% believe that the worship site preserves traditions adequately, and only 28.1% see it as having a crucial role in this regard. This suggests that, for Catholics,

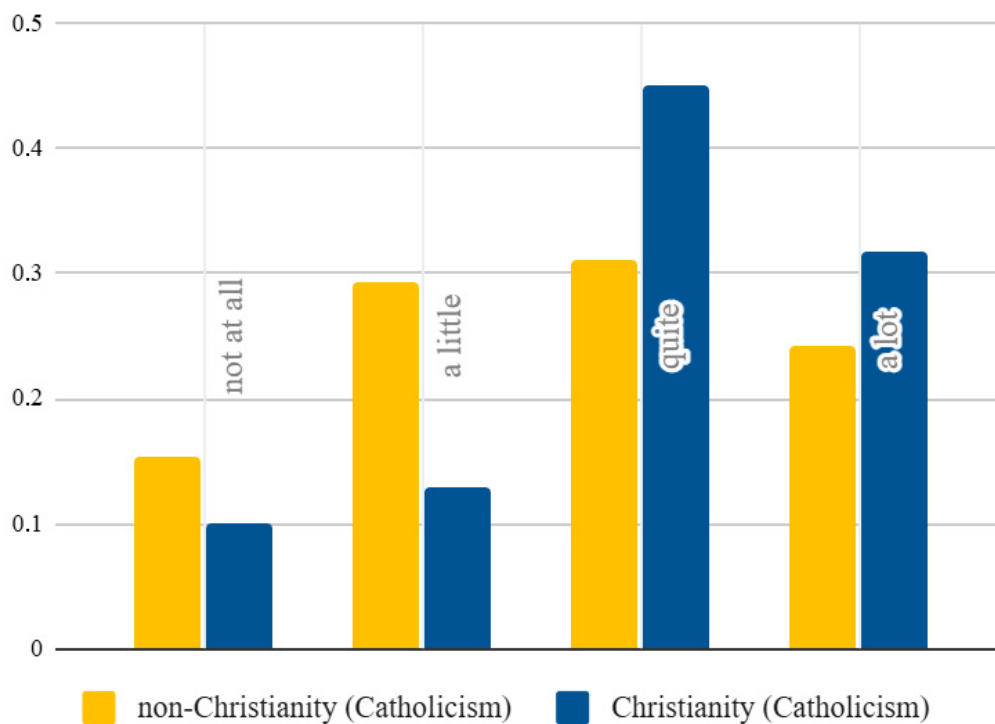
places of worship carry a more profound symbolic and cultural significance as guardians of tradition compared to the perceptions of non-Catholics.

### Maintains and TRANSMITS THE TRADITIONS of my community



(a) Tradition significance attributed to the places worship.

### It has a FAMILY SIGNIFICANCE, it is frequented by different people



(b) Family significance attributed to the places worship

Figure 8. Significance attributed to the places worship.

Moreover, the acknowledgment of places of worship as historic buildings demonstrates a significant difference. Among Catholics, 20.2% recognize them as largely historic, while only 9.0% of non-Catholics share this view regarding their historical and architectural value.

The familial significance of places of worship appears especially important to Catholics: 45.2% consider it quite important, and 31.7% deem it very important. Conversely, among non-Catholics, these figures are lower: 31% attribute a moderate familial significance to places of worship, and only 24.3% regard it as very important. This indicates that, for Catholics, places of worship also represent a closer connection to familial and communal traditions.

In summary, the data indicate that Catholics assign a higher value to places of worship compared to non-Catholics in terms of traditions, historical significance, and familial connections. These differences highlight how places of worship are perceived not just as religious spaces, but also as cultural and social symbols, particularly for the Catholic community. Such spaces are viewed primarily as emblems of identity and tradition, serving also to foster familial continuity and historical memory. While certain practical or historical aspects may be considered less important, the cultural, spiritual, and symbolic function of places of worship clearly emerges as central for most respondents.

Disaggregated data by municipality reveals significant variations in how places of worship are perceived and utilized throughout the city. In central municipalities, 85% of respondents view places of worship as essential elements of cultural heritage, while in peripheral areas, 60% regard them as spaces for social activities. This suggests that the needs of local communities influence how places of worship are understood and utilized. In Municipality 5 (Labicano, Torpignattara, Centocelle, Tor Sapienza), one of Rome's most multicultural areas, the worship site is considered vital for maintaining traditions and historical memory. An impressive 84.6% of residents, when combining "somewhat" and "very," attribute an important role to places of worship in preserving traditions, and 85.2% regard it as significant for collective memory.

In Municipality 6 (Tor Bella Monaca, Tor Vergata, Giardinetti, Borghesiana), known as one of the most populous and socially complex regions of Rome, the percentages reflecting the importance of places of worship for traditions and historical memory reach 88.9% and 76.8%, respectively.

In Municipality 10 (Ostia, Acilia), located along the coast, the importance of places of worship is particularly evident for the celebration of significant events, with 87.4% of residents considering it "very" or "somewhat" relevant in this context. In an area that blends maritime traditions with growing cultural diversity due to the presence of new communities, places of worship serve as a central point for both personal and communal occasions. In Municipality 12 (Monteverde), known as a "historic" neighborhood, 56.4% of residents attribute a "very" high importance to places of worship for maintaining traditions (31.2% somewhat). Additionally, 68.4% recognize a significant value (either very or somewhat) linked to their family's country of origin, highlighting a strong migratory component. This area of Rome, characterized by vibrant cultural activity, stands out for its ability to integrate historical roots with contemporary influences. In Municipality 15 (Ponte Milvio, Tor di Quinto), located in northern Rome, places of worship are perceived as symbols of cultural identity, with 89.5% of residents assigning them a central role in this regard (combining very and somewhat). Conversely, in Municipality 2 (Parioli) and Municipality 12, the historical value of religious buildings is recognized "very" and "somewhat" by 49.5% and 53.2% of inhabitants, respectively. Such figures highlight the importance of places of worship not only as sites of prayer and worship but also as valued historical and architectural heritage for the local community. This suggests, to quote [Tsivolas \(2014\)](#), that "the religious heritage is related to history, general welfare and public enjoyment, and its preservation should therefore take place within the framework of cultural heritage legislation." Places

are crucial elements in constructing a heritage that is not solely religious, but often also a cultural heritage where secular aspects related to history and memory intertwine with religious elements in a legal framework and in a typical social and cultural attachment to mixed-status assets.

## 6. Religion and Well-Being

Ultimately, the CHANGES survey allows exploring if religious affiliation and practice contribute to well-being and resilience among the respondents in Rome. In this paragraph, we draw on those data, cross-referencing them with measures of religiosity to explore their interrelationship. It examines if and how the orientation towards religion—namely being a non-believer, a believer who does not practice, and an active practitioner—affects well-being and resilience. In parallel, it looks at how various religious affiliations, including Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and others, relate to resilience and overall well-being.

To capture overall well-being, the study employs the Cantril Ladder Scale, also known as the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale (Cantril 1965), which invites respondents to envision a ladder with steps with participants asked to reply to the question “On which rung of the ladder would you say you personally find yourself?” and answer from 0 (the bottom step) to 10 (the highest step). Participants rate their current well-being by selecting the step that best represents their situation and indicate where they expect to be in the future, 5 years from the present. The survey asked individuals to assess how they felt in a variety of challenging situations, such as adapting to change, facing obstacles, finding humor in difficult situations, handling stress, recovering from illnesses, achieving goals despite obstacles, maintaining concentration under pressure, not getting discouraged by failure, perceiving themselves as strong, and managing unpleasant feelings.

A first analysis of the Cantril Ladder results reveals that, in all three groups (non-religious, religious and practicing, and religious and not practicing), well-being levels are predominantly clustered in the higher range. Notably, 62.6% of non-religious respondents score between 6 and 10, while this concentration rises to 70% among religious but non-practicing individuals. The distribution among religious and practicing respondents closely resembles that of non-religious individuals. When considering future projections, a significant number of respondents across all categories anticipate improvements in five years, with 69.6% of non-religious respondents scoring between 6 and 10, 74.5% among religious and practicing, and 72.3% among non-practicing religious respondents. The highest proportion of level 10 scores is observed among religious and practicing individuals (4.9%), whereas the highest percentage at the lowest end (level 0) is found among non-religious respondents (3.3%).

The similar distribution of well-being scores across non-religious, religious non-practicing, and religious practicing groups suggests that the impact of religiosity on well-being is nuanced. These findings are only limitedly consistent with the prevalent view in the literature that ritual practice alone significantly enhances well-being. It is possible that the benefits of religious practice are moderated by other dimensions of life, including social support networks, cultural heritage, and individual experiences of adversity. Religious practice is notably higher among non-residents, those who are domiciled in the city rather than being permanent residents. This may indicate a larger proportion of migrant citizens in this group, as further supported by an analysis of linguistic background.

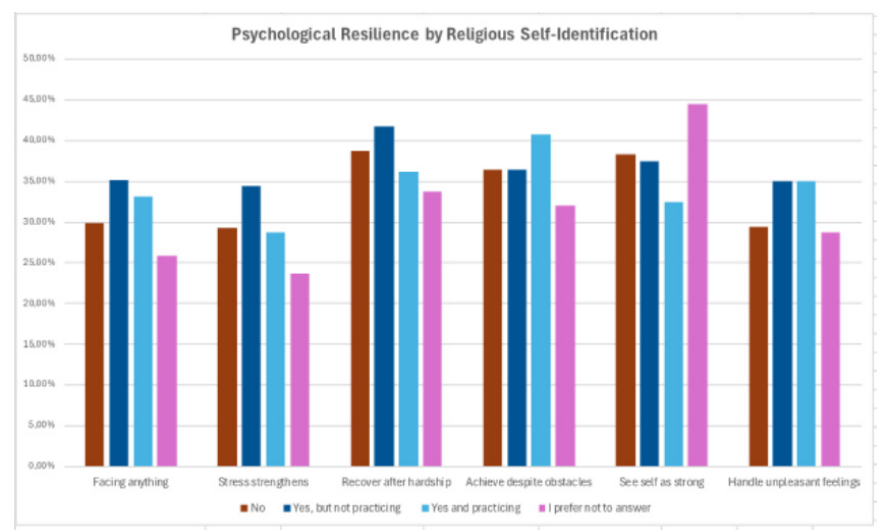
The data collected partially allows the relationship between the different religious affiliations and well-being to be analyzed. Protestants cluster most heavily at the upper end of the well-being scale, while Orthodox Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses lean toward the lower end, and Catholics occupy a middle ground. Overall, respondents of every

affiliation tend to settle near the midpoint, but the distribution stretches slightly upward for Protestants—who distribute from 6 to 10 grades in 58% of cases—and downward for Jehovah’s Witnesses, assessing a value from 6 to 10 in 43.5% of cases.

Looking ahead five years, Catholics are the most optimistic, although it is worth noting that among Buddhists, 21.3% expect to reach the top well-being score of 10. At the other extreme, only 2.8 percent of Jehovah’s Witnesses foresee a level 10, and they also register the highest share at the bottom of the scale (4.1 percent). Protestants and Orthodox Christians cluster more evenly between scores 6 and 8, showing a comparatively moderate yet broadly positive outlook.

Overall, these findings suggest the importance of considering religious diversity when examining well-being outcomes in a complex urban context like Rome. We can speculate that not only the internal social composition of these groups, in terms of the incidence of different age groups or prevailing economic conditions, but also the degree of recognition these communities enjoy in the social and urban context, exerts a role in mediating the relationship between religion and well-being.

Regarding resilience, the CHANGES survey asked respondents to react to the 10 items on the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor and Davidson 2003), self-assigning a score for each statement in a range between 0 (“not at all true”) and 4 (“almost always true”). The analysis of the data revealed that, regardless of whether respondents identified as non-religious, religious but not practicing, or religious and practicing, the most common rating for each question fell between 3 and 4, suggesting that the Roman community is fairly resilient (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** Resilience by religious self-identification.

Furthermore, across several indicators—as adaptability, stress management, optimism, perseverance, and emotional regulation—religious practitioners consistently reported higher frequencies of positive responses (“often true”) compared to non-religious individuals. For instance, 40.8% of the religious and practicing stated they were almost always able to overcome obstacles (vs. 36.5% among non-religious), and 35.10% reported handling unpleasant feelings (vs. 29.4%). Similarly, in items related to humor, concentration, and strength, practitioners again scored higher. Non-practicing believers generally fell between the non-religious and the practitioners.

Having said this, the nuanced patterns observed in the well-being scale and the items concerning resilience suggest that further qualitative research may be needed to capture the full complexity of the relationship between religiosity and well-being. Only through a

more detailed examination of individual experiences and cultural contexts can we gain a deeper understanding of how religious practices serve as sources of comfort and resilience in times of stress and uncertainty.

## 7. Conclusions

As the data reported highlights, Rome, with its impressive institutional cultural offer and cultural heritage, presents itself as a city of great religious plurality, where different faiths not only coexist but also shape the social and cultural fabric. The CHANGES survey confirms the persistent reference to religion in such a global city, with 66.5% of respondents identifying as religious, 48% non-practicing, and 18.5% practicing. Although Catholicism remains dominant (58%), religious minorities account for 12% of religious respondents, with higher proportions among non-Italian speakers. In this regard, the findings reflect a growing detachment from institutional religion, yet a persistent role for faith in identity, particularly among migrant communities. We assert that the city's strong Catholic identity has contributed to religious pluralization, attracting diverse groups and shaping newcomers' demands through religious discourse. This plurality spreads heterogeneously throughout the urban fabric, without distinctly marking religiously one area over another.

Places emerge as essential components of urban religious life. Their role is perceived as key in preserving traditions, especially when they are considered as historical sites. However, the symbolic role attributed to places of worship varies across the different religious affiliations. For Catholics, the church is not only a place of prayer but also a symbol of continuity with tradition and family. For other communities, while places of worship remain important, the transmission of traditions often occurs within the private sphere, with the family acting as the main pillar of cultural and spiritual continuity. In turn, some minority religious groups, particularly those with a strong migrant component, rely on places of worship to meet everyday needs related to integration, such as language learning or financial aid. The data shows significant territorial differences in how places of worship are used and perceived. While in central areas, these spaces are primarily seen as part of the cultural heritage, on the outskirts, they take on a more dynamic role, serving as key points for social support and integration. Although the survey collected a substantial amount of data, its overall effectiveness in capturing the relationship between religiosity and well-being remains questionable. The results reveal only minimal differences in well-being and resilience across various religious groups, suggesting that the measurement instruments employed might not be sensitive enough to detect more nuanced effects. Broader contextual factors, such as socio-economic status, cultural background, and individual life experiences, could have overshadowed any specific influence of religious practice. This possible interpretation is supported by data indicating that religious practice is more prevalent among respondents who are domiciled rather than officially resident, and especially among those whose native language is not Italian, suggesting a significant presence of migrants within this group.

This indicates that further research, perhaps employing alternative or more qualitative methodologies, is needed to better understand this intricate relationship. The concept of well-being is multifaceted, spanning disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, economics, health, religion, and education, and it encompasses both objective conditions, such as income, employment, and health, and subjective assessments of life satisfaction and emotional balance. Traditional indicators like GDP are increasingly seen as insufficient to capture the real well-being of a society, as they fail to account for social, environmental, and qualitative aspects. In response, researchers have emphasized the need to consider both objective and subjective dimensions of well-being. These developments reflect an interdisciplinary shift toward a more holistic understanding of well-being that goes beyond material standards. Ultimately, such comprehensive frameworks are crucial for advancing our understanding of

well-being in modern societies. Data collected using the Cantril Ladder indicate that well-being scores among different religious groups are generally positive, with most respondents rating themselves between levels 6 and 8. While the data reveal generally positive well-being and resilience scores across all groups, the differences between non-religious individuals, religious non-practicing individuals, and religious practicing individuals are rather subtle. However, data show a positive association between religious practice and self-perceived psychological resilience. While causality cannot be inferred, the data support previous findings in the literature that link religious engagement with greater emotional resources and adaptive coping. This raises concerns about whether the survey's instruments and methodology were sensitive enough to capture the nuanced effects of religiosity on well-being. Additionally, the influence of other factors such as socio-economic conditions, cultural background, and personal experiences may have overshadowed the specific impact of religious practice. Thus, while the survey provides some insights, it also suggests that further, perhaps more qualitative, research is needed to fully understand the complex relationship between religious sentiment and personal resilience.

Overall, incorporating insights related to the religious sphere into studies such as CHANGES, which aim to reconstruct the dynamics of cultural participation and engagement in contemporary cities, proves to be particularly valuable. This is especially important to ensure that such a vital dimension of urban life is not overlooked in analyses that inform and shape local cultural policies and public programming. A deeper engagement with the religious fabric of the city can significantly enhance decision-making processes concerning not only the management of cultural institutions and activities, but also the preservation and promotion of religious diversity as a constitutive part of cultural heritage. Recognizing the presence and role of plural religious expressions in the urban landscape is essential for fostering inclusive approaches to heritage, identity, and social cohesion. In this light, failing to account for these dimensions risks producing narratives and policies that are reductive, exclusionary, or misaligned with the lived realities of contemporary cities.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** We only receive questionnaire responses (including the section on religion), each associated with a numerical identifier. There is no way for us to trace these responses back to specific individuals. The only entity holding identifying information is the survey partner company, which manages respondent databases and creates samples based on our statistical specifications. However, they never share participant's names with us. This ensures compliance with GDPR regulations: respondent's privacy is fully protected, no answer can be linked to a particular individual, and if a respondent wishes to access their responses, they can always do so directly.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author(s).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The article was conceived jointly and equally by the four authors. In terms of individual authorship, we state what follows: Section 1. Introduction was written by Maria Chiara Giorda; Section 2. Investigating Religious Diversity, Cultural Heritage, and Well-being in the Urban Space was written by Valeria Fabretti; Section 3. The CHANGES Survey: Methodological Notes was written by Angelica Federici; Section 4. Religion and Religious Diversity in Rome was written by Valeria Fabretti and Adele Tabbia; Section 5. Uses and Representations of Religious Places in Rome was written by Maria Chiara Giorda and Adele Tabbia; Section 6. Religion and Well-being was written by Angelica Federici and Adele Tabbia; Section 7. Conclusion was written by Maria Chiara Giorda.
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- <sup>3</sup> The survey was conducted by Ergo Research (a social and market research institute specialised in the analysis of cultural and entertainment consumption). Web page: <https://www.ergoresearch.it/>, accessed on 24 July 2025.

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