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Bridging religious difference in an Autonomous Region: cultural mediators and the promise of transcultural capital

Superando diferencias religiosas en una Región Autónoma:
mediadores culturales y la promesa de la capital transcultural

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Summary: Introduction. 1. Diversity governance: expanding thinking on cultural mediators through the lens of transcultural capital. 1.1. Cultural mediators in diversity governance. 1.2. Transcultural capital and new religious minorities. 2. Governing religious diversity in Italy through cultural mediators. 2.1. Legal frameworks for religious diversity. 2.2. Laws and policies around cultural mediators in Italy. 3. Diversity governance towards religious minorities in South Tyrol. 3.1. New religious minorities in South Tyrol. 3.2. Implementing policies for cultural mediators in South Tyrol. 3.3. The impact of the law on integration as part of diversity governance. Conclusions. References.

Abstract: This research contributes to the discussion of how diversity governance is dealing with demands to accommodate the increasing religious diversity born of recent migration flows. As part of the toolkit for managing religious diversity at the regional level, cultural mediators are seen as contributing to the sincere and real inclusion of religious minority perspectives, reducing tensions and assisting new religious minorities to overcome barriers. Using the case of South Tyrol in Italy, I explore how national and regional diversity governance have developed policies to establish the figure of cultural mediator as part of supporting meaningful participation in pluralist societies. I

argue that this role is further enhanced in diversity governance with policies that promote members of new religious minorities as cultural mediators, valorizing their transcultural capital. This case shows how regions with political autonomy can adapt and expand national policies to address religious diversities.

Keywords: Religious minorities, cultural mediators, diversity management, intercultural awareness, migrants.

Resumen: Esta investigación contribuye a la discusión sobre cómo la gobernanza de la diversidad está respondiendo a las demandas de acomodar la creciente diversidad religiosa derivada de los recientes flujos migratorios mediante el uso de mediadores culturales. Como parte del conjunto de herramientas para gestionar la diversidad religiosa a nivel regional, se considera que los mediadores culturales contribuyen a la inclusión sincera y real de las perspectivas de las minorías religiosas, reduciendo tensiones y ayudando a las nuevas minorías religiosas a superar barreras. Utilizando el caso del Tirol del Sur en Italia, muestro cómo la gobernanza de la diversidad, tanto nacional como regional, ha desarrollado políticas para establecer la figura del mediador cultural como parte del apoyo a la participación significativa en sociedades pluralistas. Sostengo que este papel se ve aún más reforzado en la gobernanza de la diversidad a través de políticas que promueven a las nuevas minorías religiosas como mediadores culturales, valorizando su capital transcultural. Este caso muestra cómo la legislación regional puede adaptar y ampliar las políticas nacionales para abordar mejor las diversidades religiosas.

Palabras clave: Minorías religiosas, mediadores culturales, gestión de la diversidad, conciencia intercultural, migrantes.

Introduction¹

Recent migration flows have led to various challenges related to cultural and religious differences that often impact new religious minorities, adherents of traditional faiths who find themselves in a new territory (Bretscher 2017). New religious minorities may need additional guidance in navigating the often-confusing landscape for legal protection of human rights and religious diversity (Ruiz Vieytes 2024). Moreover, claims for recognition on the basis of new religious identities may impact the preservation of social cohesion and unity in interactions with both the majority and historical minority religious groups (Medda-Windischer et al. 2024). Meanwhile, various transnational dynamics have encouraged new religious minorities to develop hybrid forms of belonging, yet these are “actively shaped by both constraints and opportunities within receiving societies” (Ruiz Andrés and Sajir 2025, 3). Thus, increasing religious diversity has placed pressure on diversity governance to devise innovative ways to mediate across diverse contexts and cultures and build opportunities for peacefully navigating religious difference. Various intermediary actors with advocacy experience, local expertise, or legal knowledge are gaining prominence for assisting new religious minorities as part of diversity governance (Budabin and Nardocci Forthcoming; Griera et al. 2019; Griera and Forteza 2011). Of particular relevance are cultural mediators who may be uniquely situated to understand the different contexts and assist with migrant integration and minority protections.

This article looks closely at the policies and practices surrounding the figure of cultural mediators, who can be considered key actors in diversity governance able to bridge religious difference. The work of cultural mediation is understood to have a normative agenda, “favouring constructive convivence among persons, promoting mutual learning and negotiating differences, rather than imposing an alleged homogeneity or indulging in assimilatory attempts” (Avolio et al. 2023, 123). Cultural mediators are regarded as third party actors who may modify a conflict situation in ways that build “intercultural understanding and positive coexistence” (Busch 2023). In addition to benefiting from the services of cultural mediators, members of new religious minorities may also be able to contribute to this diversity governance when they work as cultural mediators themselves, as part of

¹ The author wishes to thank Roberta Medda-Windischer, Andrea Carla, Michael Luther, Zakaria Sajir, and Anna Wolf for research assistance and constructive feedback that contributed to the development of this article.

policies and practices that valorize their transcultural capital (Meinhof and Triafylladou 2006). Overall, this inquiry is organized around two research questions: how has the role of cultural mediators been expanded in diversity governance, particularly with regard to religious diversity? Second, to what extent is the role of cultural mediators enhanced when members of new religious minorities are engaged?

As part of this special issue on “Religions, diversities and human rights: Public policies for democratic coexistence”, the piece will adopt a socio-legal approach to contextualize the policies and practices of cultural mediators as part of diversity governance around migrant integration and minority protection. I use the case of South Tyrol in Italy to show how national and regional diversity governance situate the figure of cultural mediator as part of the one word for not only advancing integration but also including minority perspectives. Examining both national and regional frameworks for cultural mediation demonstrates how local contexts are expanding upon national policies in innovative and effective ways (Karanikola and Panagiotopoulos 2025). Further, I use the concept of transcultural capital to interpret these legal and policy frameworks to detect when and how people of migrant background themselves, often members of new religious minorities, are encouraged to take up the role of cultural mediators. I argue that this role is further enhanced when cultural mediators are themselves members of new religious minorities, who may therefore be considered decisive figures in reducing tensions in everyday spaces, helping religious minorities overcome barriers that may often lead directly and indirectly to discrimination.

Drawing from research on religious diversity, cultural mediators and diversity governance, I examine developments related to cultural mediation through the case of the subnational region of South Tyrol, a province in Italy. The country of Italy, which has only recently become a country of immigration, has been challenged in recognizing the new cultural and religious diversity. The country is characterized by a majority religion and has implemented various diversity governance policies around religious minorities as part of legislation related to migration where cultural mediators have been seen as critical for facilitating migrant integration (Karanikola and Panagiotopoulos 2025). Historically, South Tyrol is known for having successfully settled a minority conflict and is considered a model for dealing with ethnic tensions. Like many regions in Italy, South Tyrol is experiencing increasing diversity due to recent migration; in 2024, around 10% of the population was foreign born and religious diversity has increased in the predominantly Catholic region (Volgger et al. 2024). As an autonomous province whose power

exceed those of other Italian provinces and regions, South Tyrol was the first province in Italy to enact legislation on cultural mediators, making it a model for other subnational policy-makers in devising diversity and integration policies related to building social cohesion while also offering a contrast to policies at the national level.

The article takes the following form. First, I discuss how this research builds upon the literature on diversity governance related to religious diversity by deepening work on cultural mediators through the concept of transcultural capital. Then I offer a brief review of the national context for religious minorities, immigration, and religious diversity in Italy as well as relevant policies and legislation before turning to the South Tyrolian context. To assess Italy and South Tyrol's approaches to religious minorities through cultural mediation, I identify not only legislation and policies related to religion but also policies that deal with the integration of minorities and recognition of increasing cultural and religious pluralism. The data sources include legal texts, reports, websites, and national and regional guidelines.² Finally, I share insights on the regional landscape for cultural mediators, drawn from the organizational profile a long-standing cultural mediation operator and background conversations with people who have been working in and studying diversity management in South Tyrol for over two decades. I conclude with a reflection on how the policies and practices of cultural mediation in South Tyrol and Italy have come to valorize transcultural capital and how this approach enhances diversity governance in relation to processes of migrant integration and minority protection.

1. Diversity governance: expanding thinking on cultural mediators through the lens of transcultural capital

This article reaches across sociology, legal studies, and social work to situate the role of cultural mediators in the policies and practice of religious diversity governance. The need to mediate across diverse religious backgrounds has become more urgent in light of increased diversity, in large part due to new religious minorities who arrived through recent migration movements (Medda-Windischer 2008). New religious minorities may be adherents of traditional faiths—Sikh or Islam—but find themselves in a new territory (Bretscher 2017). Despite the expansion of religious protections and policies to manage religious

² The author takes responsibility for translations from German and Italian.

diversity, members of new religious minorities continue to contend with discrimination and exclusion (S. Ferrari 2024; Medda Windischer et al. 2024). As part of responding to repression and suppression, cultural mediators are key figures who help work towards the harmonious coexistence of people and groups from different religious backgrounds. Work on cultural mediators in diversity governance is related to the study of interreligious actors, where many innovative transformations are seen to be taking place at the local level (Griera et al. 2019). This section reviews scholarship on cultural mediators in diversity governance and expands this literature by incorporating findings and insights from studies on transcultural capital.

1.1. *Cultural mediators in diversity governance*

Research on cultural mediation has moved from anthropology and the interaction between different cultures to the study of the role of cultural mediators in diversity governance as figures able to foster democratic coexistence amid religious diversity, particularly at the regional level. Part of this research has centered on the principle of dialogue among different parties and its value, “how we communicate across cultural and identity differences in a way that does not deny or avoid those differences” (Sealy 2025, 73). Recent work within diversity governance discussions related to post-secularism has underscored the need to adopt a transnational lens on the diversity stemming from contemporary migration and has opened up the possibilities for new hybrid forms of identity and belonging, which are actively negotiated “through everyday interactions, political discourse, and institutional settings” (Ruiz Andrés and Sajir 2025, 3).

The figure of cultural mediator is traditionally defined by their positionality within a liminal space between two or more cultures. Such figures are therefore known for “turning in two directions at once, becoming specialists in mediating the interests and expectations of both sides and thus facilitating the social integration of complex societies on different levels” (Dietze 2018, 494). They have risen in prominence in the last few decades amid increasing transregionalism and transnationalism. Dietze (2018, 494 and 495) has tracked the emergence of a “new social function” of figures such as religious leaders, teachers, and community leaders who broker “relations between the nation-state and the local community”. More than a direct linguistic translation, the public service linguistic-cultural mediator “performs tasks of coordination, mediation, or negotiation

of cultural and social meanings” (Casadevante 2023, 106-107). Further, there is the expectation that cultural mediators will be familiar with and able to interpret “the cultural markers of the two cultures in contact” and “detect the assumptions and stereotypes that one community has of the other” (de Casadevante 2023 referring to Valero Garcés 2016, 106-107). Cultural mediators are now seen in contexts such as healthcare, education, prisons, and other public services.

The essential contribution of cultural mediators has been widely examined at the local-municipal level, especially in cities with high migrant populations (Molli 2025). One investigation into Germany and its culturally heterogenous environment revealed tensions with the Muslim population thereby “making the intervention of linguistic-cultural professionals necessary to mediate and try to resolve or prevent” conflict (de Casadevante 2023, 105). In such settings, cultural mediators “must be familiar with the social, cultural, and religious contexts involved” (de Casadevante 2023, 107). Cultural mediators are seen to help manage the impacts that religious difference may pose in everyday encounters, where “the religious factor sometimes leads to situations of rejection, misunderstandings or the appearance of barriers in communication” (de Casadevante 2023, 105).

As with any diversity governance practice, cultural mediation is affected by both constraints and opportunities (Ruiz Andrés and Sajir 2025, 3). It will first be important to consider the legal and policy frameworks around cultural mediation, which may also contrast across national and regional contexts (Karanikola and Panagiotopoulos 2025). As described above, many adaptations and innovations are occurring in subnational or urban settings. Second, there are salient critiques that point to ways in which practices of cultural mediation related to religious diversity can be improved, particularly when thinking about the profile of the cultural mediator. This is because, as Sealy (2025: 74) reminds us, “the contexts in which dialogues occur are ones marked by power relations”. To the extent to which members of new religious minorities can enhance the field of cultural mediation as mediators themselves to respond to power inequalities, I turn to the ways in which their transcultural capital may be elevated in religious diversity governance.

1.2. *Transcultural capital and new religious minorities*

This article argues that cultural mediators can be seen as key actors in diversity governance especially when in possession of transcultural capital. Transcultural capital has been identified as a crucial resource

enabling migrants to leverage their fluency across multiple cultural contexts. Adapting field theory on Bourdieu's taxonomy of economic, cultural and social capital, Meinhof and Triandafyllidou introduced transcultural capital as a way to understand the strategic resources of diaspora groups connected to their knowledge, skills and networks across host and home countries. Transcultural capital encompasses economic, social and cultural capital but it is the cultural capital that recognizes a migrant's multiple languages and multiculturalism. The concept was originally used to discuss the ways in which migrant activists themselves promote their transcultural qualities as transcultural capital, in an empowering process that seeks to turn a disadvantaged position into an asset (Triandafyllidou 2008). Interestingly, the use of transcultural instead of transnational speaks to the possibilities for migrants to become acquainted with cultures and customs beyond those of their nationality.

Transcultural capital is becoming recognized as a critical resource in diversity governance at regional and local levels as part of policymaking, urban planning, and adaptation of public services. Recent scholarship has applied the concept of transcultural capital to specific subgroups of migrants, such as youth, while also elaborating on the ways in which this capital can be accessed and mobilized for the benefit of both migrants and the communities to which they belong. Arias et al. (2022, 755) see transcultural capital as offering an agentic, transformative potential, as a challenge to what they see as 'deficit' models of cultural and ethnic difference. Further, the authors see transcultural capital as a means "to resist social marginalization and cultural oppression" (Arias et al. 2022, 756). Connecting this concept to debates on post-secularity, Sajir (2025) argued that transcultural capital enables us to highlight the agency of Muslim migrant descendants in mediating between secular and religious domains to actively shape their multicultural environments. He pushes us to think of transcultural capital as a societal asset that can be seen as part of diversity governance, "as an active mechanism of social transformation in the governance of religious and cultural diversity" (Sajir 2025, 326). These applications of the concept reinforce its usefulness in analyzing the positive role of migrants in diversity governance.

Here I apply the concept of transcultural capital to policies and practices that encourage the engagement of migrants or members of new religious minorities as cultural mediators. This transcultural element lends itself quite well to the work of cultural mediators in addressing religious diversity; while religious practices may differ across national contexts, familiarity with minority religions still can be

considered an asset. The profile of the cultural mediator has already been distinguished by cultural expertise born of a professional background from those cultural mediators who possess other nonprofessional expertise that may come from being a lay person or member of the cultural group (Cavallari 2023, 51). Within societies with growing diversity in light of migration, cultural mediators who are themselves migrants and share the same cultural background have been shown to “understand very well the needs of their clients and the obstacles they have to overcome” relying on “their own experience in adapting to the host country” (Minervino and Calvo 2007, 195). Policies and practices that advance the engagement of new religious minorities and migrants may avoid the reinforcement of eurocentricism and instead seek to bridge “localised understandings with transnational realities” (Ruiz Andrés and Sajir 2025, 4-5). The combination of migrants’ cultural capital, rooted in multilingualism and multiculturalism, together with their familiarity with minority religions across different national contexts (though not necessarily in the host country), constitutes a strategic resource for diversity governance. However, there are some risks; cultural mediators may be “marginalized by their own communities” due to perceptions of betrayal or taking sides (Minervino and Calvo 2007, 196).

These insights lay the foundation for thinking of why and how the possession of transcultural capital may enhance cultural mediation. In the next section, I investigate a case of how regional institutions implement the role of cultural mediators as part of managing religious diversity and examine the extent to which transcultural capital is valorized. This work will help us in thinking about the legal structures and institutional conditions that support the engagement of members of new religious minorities as cultural mediators.

2. **Governing religious diversity in Italy through cultural mediators**

The case of South Tyrol in Italy offers a useful case to investigate the national policies for cultural mediators and as well as adaption of these policies and practices at the subnational level. Religious diversity in Italy has been increasing as part of the country’s shift to becoming a destination rather than a country of emigration. While Italy is still considered a Catholic country, the influx of immigrants has increased religious diversity without concomitant actions by the national government. Compared to other countries, Italy is seen to have

“largely avoided recognizing the cultural and religious implications of the process of pluralization” and remains “without an established model of integration or pluralism” (Allievi 2013, 724). Particularly in the area of religion, Italy’s lack of a coherent policy towards religious pluralism is based on “the inability of the political class to metabolize the profound changes” in the country (A. Ferrari 2024, 110). While legislation towards religious diversity remains unformulated, frameworks related to cultural mediation, especially at the regional level, offer innovative adaptations that merit scrutiny.

2.1. *Legal frameworks for religious diversity*

The legal frameworks recognize pluralism and the freedom of religion is constitutionally protected, but the legal status of most religious minorities in Italy is weak. Silvio Ferrari argues that this is the case due to the lack of a unique law on religious freedom and the fact that laws governing religious minorities are nearly a century old.³ Enshrining the principle of religious pluralism, the Italian Republican Constitution of 1947 established the basis for religious freedom while situating Catholicism as the national religion and minority religions are accorded only limited recognition. Article 7 protects the bilateral relations between the state and the Catholic Church. In particular, Article 8 protects the communal aspects of religious minorities and religious denominations are seen to be equally free in the eyes of the law. The individual right to religious freedom is protected in Article 19, which safeguards religious practices for “everyone” including non-citizens (Dutta 2019, 83). However, religious minorities are divided across three categories, depending on whether they have been officially recognized. Enacted during the fascist period, Law n. 1159 (Legge 24 giugno 1929, n. 1159) that regulates all non-Catholic religions together was maintained by the Italian Republic and is considered the root cause of many of the inequalities facing religious minorities (Bottoni 2023, 178). Magazzini et al. (2022, 407) categorize the Italian Constitution as a case of moderate secularism, yet the majority religion receives disproportionate benefits from the state. The extension of some of the privileges of the majority religion to some minorities reflects the Italian State’s recognition of religious pluralism, but only along the lines of selective cooperation

³ See Atlas of religious or belief minority rights, Italy: <https://atlasminorityrights.eu/countries/Italy.php#top>

(Bottoni 2023, 186). This explains why many new religious minorities may continue to fall outside these frameworks in terms of protections and rights.

Though immigration to Italy became more significant in the 1970s, it is only recently that this influx became more visible and led to the need to define some contours for diversity governance. Various laws in the area of employment in the 1980s belatedly attempted to regulate the presence of foreigners and move towards integration (Allievi 2013, 726). The Martelli Law of 1990 aimed to regularize immigrant employment and set a quota for residence permits. Next, the so-called Turco-Napolitano Law passed in 1998 further regulated the process of acquiring permanent residency while also creating temporary detention centers for illegal and irregular immigrants. However, this law also included the first reference to cultural mediators, as will be discussed below. The subsequent Bossi-Fini Law passed in 2002 focused on illegal migration and tightened regulations. In summary, the laws dealing with immigration failed to reckon with the impact of cultural and religious pluralism nor did they make much reference to cultural integration (Allievi 2013, 730). This omission to recognize and put forth proposals for addressing the process of cultural pluralization and fostering integration was surprising in light of the increasing challenges and debates that were centering on the country's multiculturalism. Situations were emerging where the practices of minority religions came in direct conflict with the organization of social and civic life in Italy (Ambrosini et al. 2012; Timellini 2019). Meanwhile, the intensity of controversies in cases and situations involving religious education, symbols, and the building of mosques "suggests potential difficulties in imposing secularism" (Dutta 2019, 91).

In summary, diversity governance towards new religious minorities need to be considered alongside the regulation of foreigners in Italy and their integration. In Italy, the debates around immigration and increasing cultural and religious pluralism continue to be characterized by a dualistic thinking. As Dutta describes, a distinction endures "between 'us' (hosts, Italians, Catholics) and 'them' (guests, immigrants, Muslims)" (Duta 2019: 96). However, a number of examples from cities and regions in Italy attest to innovation and adaption in diversity management related to religious minorities (Guglielmo and Sbalchiero 2024; Molli 2025; Griera et al. 2019; Rech 2024). These practices reflect dualistic thinking between the inadequate laws of recognition and policies towards religious minorities and the policies and practices towards building cohesion at

the regional level.⁴ Among the policies and practices seeking to build cohesion, we need to also consider the use of cultural mediation, which would be promoted as part of national and regional legislation around immigration.

2.2. *Laws and policies around cultural mediators in Italy*

As Italy grappled with immigration and growing religious diversity, the figure of the intercultural mediator became elevated as a useful tool for migrant integration as part of diversity governance. Cultural mediators had already begun to be implemented but in an unsystematic way in healthcare, social, and education services in Italy. The first national legislation for migrant integration included the concept of intercultural mediation: passed in 1998 and known as the Turco-Napolitano Law, Legislative Decree 286/98 on the “Regulations on immigration and provisions on the status of foreigners” promotes the use of cultural mediators (*mediatori interculturali*) as part of measures for social integration.⁵ In a nod to the valorization of the transcultural capital of recently arrived migrants, Art. 42, 1d pushes governing bodies at municipal, provincial, regional, and national levels to collaborate with local associations in the employment of foreigners who had been in Italy for more than two years as intercultural mediators. This was seen as a means “to facilitate relations between individual administrations and foreigners belonging to different ethnic, national, linguistic and religious groups.” This emphasis on facilitation by members of new religious minorities and migrants speaks to the strategic resources possessed by this group in diversity governance.

A set of guidelines produced by the Italian Interior Ministry in 2009 further expounded on the role of a cultural mediator. The emphasis was on the notion of intercultural mediation as a “bridge” that differed from conflict mediation processes.⁶ Zadra points out that the focus on bridging “allows for new avenues of exchange, without asking any of the areas to renounce their positions in any way”. There

⁴ The author appreciates an anonymous reviewer for sharing this insight.

⁵ These provisions were later incorporated into Articles 38 and 42 of Legislative Decree n. 286 of July 25, 1998, “Consolidated Act on Immigration Regulations” (*Testo Unico sull’immigrazione*).

⁶ See *Linee di indirizzo per il riconoscimento della figura professionale del mediatore interculturale del Gruppo di Lavoro Istituzionale per la promozione della Mediazione Interculturale*, p. 8.

is also an emphasis on avoiding notions of superiority, a critical aspect as the contexts where cultural mediators operate may be characterized by power asymmetries (Zadra 2025, 146). The guidelines explained that culture was intended broadly, "encompassing cultural and religious customs, traditions, and lived experiences, with language as a primary factor expressed through verbal and non-verbal communication, including body language and proxemics." The guidelines also valorized the notion of identity and how cultural identity was not to be challenged during mediation but rather identity was to be "seen as a value, not an obstacle." The guidelines stressed that dialogue between different cultures "fosters enrichment and exchange, helping to develop intercultural relational skills that are essential in the context of global citizenship." Overall, the guidelines suggest a very open dialogue where exchanges through language and other communication could be facilitated on equal footing along with the possibilities for new hybrid forms of identity and belonging to flourish.

As part of its diversity governance, the national legislation continues to detail an important role for cultural mediators. Criteria were specified in a Ministerial Order in 2010, their importance was reinforced in the 2014 National Integration Plan for Persons entitled to international Protection and there is a register of public and private mediation organizations provided by Ministry of Justice (Karanikola and Panagiotopoulos, 2025). Cultural mediators are seen as crucial for handling current migration flows into Italy; starting in 2018, the International Organization for Migration has contracted 280 cultural mediators with funding from the Italian Ministry of Interior to assist with recently arrived migrants at entry points.⁷

Yet, while the law developed policies on cultural mediation as an important resource for migrant integration as part of diversity governance, there is still no national legal framework that outlines implementation provisions. In light of this absence in guidelines for the training and assessment of cultural mediators, the gap has been filled by NGOs, charities, social cooperatives, and universities, along with regional and local institutions (Avolio et al. 2023, 131). The resulting fragmentation across different actors can negatively affect regulations and practices (Biague 2017). Lack of institutional professionalization is also cited as a weakness in the building of networks between cultural

⁷ See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/italy/voices-hope-vital-role-cultural-mediators-supporting-migrants>

mediators and stakeholders (De Leo et al. 2024) and their involvement in legal proceedings (Cavallari 2025). In some cases, adaptations have been developed in response to the lack of inter-institutional relationships and standardized procedures; cultural mediators often must work to connect different services and foster collaboration (De Leo et al. 2024). As an autonomous province, seeking to operate in the absence of a clear policy framework at the national level, South Tyrol will forge its own policies.

3. Diversity governance towards religious minorities in South Tyrol

Responding to religious diversity is a relatively new aspect of diversity management for South Tyrol. The province is well known for having successfully resolved a minority conflict with the development of a unique legislative and political autonomy and consociational agreements (Carlà 2015). Three different historic ethnic and linguistic groups are present in the territory and are officially recognized; these include German, Ladin, and Italian speakers. Much of the attention around tolerance, participation, and sharing of resources is organized to reflect the region's linguistic pluralism. However, demographic shifts called for new paradigms in South Tyrol (Medda-Windischer 2019).

Incoming minorities of migrant background are often described as "new" compared to the "old" national minorities that have defined the previous diversity arrangements (Medda-Windischer 2008). The management of the diversity brought by the influx of new minorities "ends up intersecting with the [local] complex historical and identarian dynamics" (Landini 2024). The approach that South Tyrol has taken towards foreign migration is seen, in particular, to reflect the institutional stances of the "old" linguistic divisions: this increasing diversity from migration had led to the adoption of a "defensive approach to migration", which is based on these dynamics but is also related to the growth of far-right parties and the proliferation of anti-immigration campaigns locally and nationally (Medda-Windischer 2017, 555). New religious minorities fall within the category as minorities of migrant background.

3.1. *New religious minorities in South Tyrol*

The religious profile of South Tyrol reveals a predominantly Catholic province but recent migration flows have increased religious

diversity. Data suggest that more than 90% of the population is Catholic while the remainder are linked to various religious faiths such as Islam, Evangelical-Lutheran, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhs, and Orthodox Christianity (Medda-Windischer and Membretti 2020, 34). Based on the census of 2024, the number of foreign residents (without Italian citizenship) is calculated at more than 10% of the population (Volgger et al. 2024). Comparing this to statistics around the national proportionality in Italy, among this population of foreign residents, nearly 50% are estimated to be Christian and around 40% are Muslim.⁸ Most migrants are settled in the larger towns and cities of South Tyrol.

The situation for new religious minorities is a mixed picture. A 2011 report on diversity provided evidence that, compared to the country of origin, migrants found the situation regarding religion and culture in South Tyrol to be better (22,7%) than their origin country (Medda-Windischer et al. 2011, 30-31). However, the same report also found that nearly 50% of respondents reported that there were no suitable places of worship in the nearby vicinity. A 2021 report found that a majority of migrants (64,3%) attested to the importance of maintaining religious traditions; yet, the research found that respondents also stressed the private and family-related nature of cultural and religious traditions (Crepaz 2012, 20, 32-33). Meanwhile, various political parties have used strong language against migrants, Islam, and the need to protect local cultures, traditions, and religion (Carlá 2013, Part I). Episodes of religious othering have been found in educational institutions (Thoma 2023). The needs of members of new religious minorities reflect the challenges of maintaining transnational ties while laying down local roots, crafting hybrid identities amid an increasingly hostile atmosphere for religious diversity. Moreover, they speak to the need for cultural mediators to assist in connecting members of new religious minorities and helping them seek accommodations.

3.2. *Implementing policies for cultural mediators in South Tyrol*

While the Italian State retains jurisdiction over many migration-related matters, the province of South Tyrol can submit non-binding opinions. Moreover, as an autonomous region, South Tyrol has

⁸ See: Astat info, *Popolazione straniera residente 2022*, 14 Aprile 2024, p. 6.

competencies on integration and thus the ability to pass legislation to regulate schools, labor, welfare and health (Medda-Windischer and Carlà 2015). The autonomous province is “granted certain powers in crucial areas for migrants and for the management of their cultural, linguistic and/or religious diversity” (Medda-Windischer 2017, 552). This autonomy was innovatively applied in the case of cultural mediation.

Historically, South Tyrol was the first Italian Province to invest in developing the position of the *mediatore interculturale* (intercultural mediator), following the increase of immigration in the late 1990s (Carlà 2013, 93-94). Previously, the position of para-mediator had been present on a small scale, within networks of families and friends due to a lack of non-EU citizens in the region (Biague 2017, 272). In 2001, this position was institutionalized and political guidelines were developed for the training and implementation of cultural mediators in schools and other public agencies. The deliberation of the provincial council (D.G.P.) n. 4266/2001 with reference to Provincial Law n. 40/1992 regulating the Vocational Training Organization, implicitly defines the role of the intercultural mediator as part of the approval of the related training program. This legislation gave the role of cultural mediator legitimacy by providing official definitions and direction for the criteria and professional training of cultural mediators. The advancement of policy moved in tandem with the increase of migrants in the territory, with the expectation that migrants with transcultural capital would enter the field as cultural mediators.

The regional policy towards cultural mediators emphasizes not only understanding and respect but also the possibilities for transformation and adaptation. According to the resolution, the intercultural mediator is described as “an intercultural operator, an educator of differences” who is capable of “facilitating communication and linguistic and cultural understanding between people from different cultures, particularly between foreign users and public or private service providers, while respecting the rights of all parties involved in the relationship.”⁹ This includes not only helping foreign users make use of Italian services and institutions but also “encouraging services to progressively adapt to the needs of foreign users, and preventing and managing conflicts between foreign users and local services.” Moreover, there was an emphasis on

⁹ See D.G.P. of 26 November 2001, n. 4266 Approval of the program of the annual full-time course for the qualification of ‘Intercultural Mediator’ (art. 5, comma 2 della LP 12.11.1992, n. 40). Official Gazette of the Region Trentino-South Tyrol, n. 51/II of 11. 12. 2001, p. 92.

the neutrality of the position, similar to the national guidelines discussed above: "The role of the mediator is therefore to act as a bridge, a link, and an interface between foreign users and public or private service providers, as well as between different cultural assumptions and meanings. This must be done while respecting the specific roles, functions, and powers of each party in the relationship, without replacing or representing either side."¹⁰ These calls for adaption to the needs of foreign users speaks to a more expanded role for cultural mediators in the region, especially when thinking about power dynamics, compared to the national legislation.

South Tyrol's policy also opened the possibility of encouraging the recruitment of migrants and members of new religious minorities with transcultural capital. The training course was open to eligible candidates, who could be Italian or foreign nationals. Similar to the national legislation, there is a two year's residency requirement, this time in the territory of South Tyrol. In a nod to the diversity management already in place, candidates are expected to have knowledge of both Italian and German. This was alongside a high level of proficiency in the mother tongue or "vehicular" language of use in the language-cultural mediation. Within the province, there was the expectation that intercultural mediators would carry out "cultural interpreting activities", which consisted of explaining to service operators the "significance of foreign users' behaviors and communication" and in turn, clarify to foreign users "the logic and organizational culture of Italian services and institutions."¹¹ This emphasis on mutual understanding would benefit from the transcultural capital of someone recently arrived but yet familiar with Italian practices.

Regarding the operational contexts, which are also implicitly defined by the same D.G.P. n. 4266/2001, the intercultural mediator may be called upon to intervene within public and private services in the areas of education, employment, and healthcare. The first group of professionally trained cultural mediators delivered services at the hospital in the provincial capital of Bozen-Bolzano (Zadra 2025, 149). The following decade saw these programs further expanded and mediators were integrated into other sectors such as prisons and schools (Agostini 2014).

Observers report that there were some growing pains related to the qualifications and how to assess practical experience for people

¹⁰ See D.G.P. of 26 November 2001, n. 4266, p. 91-92.

¹¹ See D.G.P. of 26 November 2001, n. 4266, p. 91.

arriving without formal certification/credentials.¹² There was also recognition of the variance in language competencies. In terms of awarding contracts, the public administrative requirement to accept the lowest bids resulted in the reduction of the quality of cultural mediation. For some time, cultural mediators were treated as language interpreters and their full value was not appreciated, for example in the area of non-verbal communication.

Despite these early challenges, the province's work in the area of intercultural mediators was considered pioneering and contributed to defining the professional role at the national level.¹³ A 2009 Conference of Regions and Autonomous Provinces had already focused on the recognition of the figure of the cultural mediator and highlighted the activities of South Tyrol.¹⁴ An Interregional Project for the Qualification of Competencies and Professional Figures in the Humanitarian Sector – Peace Operator and Intercultural Mediator led to a Memorandum of Understanding with a number of regions who have agreed to coordinate in this area.

3.3. *The impact of the law on integration as part of diversity governance*

While the province was the first to enact legislation on intercultural mediators, there were no forthcoming measures and laws outlining a comprehensive approach to integration as part of diversity governance. Indeed, before the enactment of the Provincial Law in 2011, South Tyrol was one of the few provinces of Italy that did not have its own regional law on migration. As Carlà argues, the delay in enacting a provincial integration law was in tension with the desire of the government to expand and exercise its political competencies (Carlà 2013, 96). This slow approach was connected to the presence of xenophobic parties, concerns for the effect of migrants on the fragile relationship between the different language groups (Medda-

¹² Based on conversations with people familiar with decades of experience with diversity governance.

¹³ Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano. 2002. *Presentato il corso per mediatore interculturale, "un ponte tra immigrati e società"*, April 6, 2001; and Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano. 2002. *La Provincia nel gruppo di lavoro delle Regioni sulla mediazione interculturale: accolta la proposta Gneccchi*, June 27.

¹⁴ Conferenza delle Regioni delle Province Autonome. 2009. *Riconoscimento della figura professionale del Mediatore interculturale*. P. 9.

Windischer 2011, 24) and the strength of regional minority cultures and languages (Wisthaler 2015).

The 2011 law set in place a new institutional framework that reflected efforts towards the integration of the “new” migrants outlining in particular “a process of mutual exchange” and identifying as a goal: “the mutual recognition of cultural, religious and linguistic identities” (Article 1). The law also provides for the guiding principles of the process of integration and social inclusion of the migrant population in South Tyrol. The act briefly defines integration as a “process of exchange and reciprocal dialogue” and it states that South Tyrol “favours the reciprocal recognition and valorisation of the cultural, religious and linguistic identities, aspiring to the principles of equality and freedom of religion” (Article 2). Moreover, as part of diversity governance, one of the objectives of the provincial government was to pursue the reciprocal comprehension of cultural differences (together with the knowledge of the regional history and culture) in order to promote integration.

Intercultural mediators were tasked with fulfilling this goal of fostering exchange and reciprocal dialogue through a specific framework for intercultural mediation outlined in Article 9. The promotion of intercultural mediation was described as a means to “improve relationships between foreign citizens, the local community, and institutions” (Article 9). In this regard, the various sectors were expanded, including education, employment, vocational training, social assistance, healthcare, and subsidized housing, a provincial list of intercultural mediators is established. Apart from measures for cultural mediators and reference to intercultural education projects and the general guarantee provided for in Art. 1, the law does not include further specific actions for sustaining the maintenance of migrants’ mother tongues, customs, or guaranteeing the practice of their religion. Still, the expansion of sectors and registration list gave further shape and legitimacy to the cultural mediator role.

A more recent Deliberation also dealt with intercultural mediators and concerned the registration list that was to be managed and maintained by the Provincial Coordination Service for Integration. In the meantime, various training courses began to be offered by private institutions such as the social cooperatives Centro Documentazione e Cultura Sociale and Società Cooperativa Sociale (SAVERA). In sum, the passing of the 2011 law led to a significant increase in intercultural mediation activities (Biague 2017, 272). This second phase saw the implementation of regulations, making the system more efficient.

There are some notable features of the cultural mediator role in South Tyrol. The course for training cultural mediators was organized

bilingually, an unusual deviation from the compartmentalized language practices of the province. Due to the province's particularities of language diversity management, it has been seen as important to have mediation available in languages of the countries of origin, in addition to the officially recognized languages of the province (Biague 2017, 239). Meanwhile, the emphasis was on mediation with foreign citizens and not between the members of the three recognized language groups. Further, there are high expectations around religious knowledge and familiarity with the practices of the religious sects present in South Tyrol. A set of guidelines produced by the organization *Porte Aperte* noted that "not only is knowledge of languages (at least two) important, but they should also be well acquainted with the traditions, hierarchies, religious customs, sense of honor, perception of time, and other specific characteristics of the interacting cultures in order to facilitate mutual understanding" (Rapo and Rapo 2007, 20).

The overall experience of cultural mediators has been seen positively. As Pfanzerter and Rupnow (2017, 12) observe, "there is no doubt that these services have played a crucial role in fostering exchange between locals and immigrants, especially in recent years, as the complexity and scale of migration have increased unpredictably". Currently, South Tyrol is featured on the website of "living and working in Italy" hosted by the various Italian ministries as an example of good practices.¹⁵ The website also lauded the province for promoting the initiation of various intercultural mediation projects in the territory that partnered public bodies and social cooperatives and associations. However, in the absence of a clear national legal framework, the field of cultural mediation continues to lack a regulated and official professional profile at the subnational level. As Biague (2017, 257) points out, "with few exceptions, intercultural mediation remains a service that is provided on demand and only where needed". He notes that the professionalization and development of the mediator profession is "a process that is still ongoing" (Biague 2017, 272). The lack of clarity around regulations and the increasing role played by private operators suggests government reluctance in fully implementing cultural mediation.

At the regional level, research suggests that the sector for cultural mediation in practice has promoted the engagement of persons with transcultural capital. Research has shown that the majority are

¹⁵ See: http://sitiarcheologici.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/Attualita/Approfondimenti/approfondimento/Pagine/Mediazione/Bolzano_scheda.html#1

women of migrant background, where their sociocultural knowledge about their countries of origin is recognized and appreciated (Biague 2017, 271). In this context, the cultural mediator with migrant background “helps her fellow countrymen navigate their way, accompanies them, explains how the most important social services work, and introduces them to the culture of the host country” (Biague 2017, 271). A recent survey of associations made up of citizens with migrant backgrounds found that over 53% engaged in intercultural mediation, even if not necessarily in the professional sense (Attanasio 2023, 16). In the preface to the survey, the Provincial Councilor for Integration Philipp Achammer explains how these entities offer another significant point of reference for migrants as “places for dialogue and exchange of opinions, to explore new cultural, religious, educational, and training contexts, thereby supporting people’s social integration” (Attanasio 2023, 3). These findings confirm that officially and unofficially, cultural mediation is sustained by individuals of migrant background.

The NGO Savera, where many of the directors themselves have been of migrant background, offers further insights into how this policy looks in practice. Founded in 2009, Savera has the mission “to promote the integration and inclusion of foreign citizens, as well as fostering mutual understanding, as well as mutual awareness.”¹⁶ The description also imparts how “those running the cooperative have a profound knowledge of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the original and host territories of the foreign nationals in the Province of Bolzano.” The region supports the professional courses for training intercultural mediators.¹⁷ Language requirements for cultural mediators include being a native speaker of the language of new citizens of the Province along with good knowledge of Italian and/or German. The expectations of bilingualism appear to have been relaxed; among the roster of cultural mediators in 2016, there were 45 languages spoken.¹⁸ The emphasis on being a native speaker reinforces the value of transcultural capital for cultural mediators and this is reflected in their linguistic diversity. In supporting members of new religious minorities as cultural mediators, Savera provides various accommodations. Cultural mediators don’t have to work excessively during Ramadan and can decide their own working hours. These organizational details demonstrate the importance and support given

¹⁶ <https://www.savera.it/en/>

¹⁷ <https://www.savera.it/trasparenza/>

¹⁸ See: <https://news.provincia.bz.it/it/news-archivio/547912>

to people of migrant background whose transcultural capital is clearly valued.

Conclusions

This piece aimed to explore how public policies have developed around the role of cultural mediators in diversity governance specifically in terms of their work related to religious diversity and to what extent these policies can be enhanced by engaging migrants and members of new religious minorities as cultural mediators. Firstly, I demonstrated that in Italy, there has been a steady development of public policies for cultural mediators that has elevated their role in migrant integration as part of diversity governance. This role was expanded upon and deepened at the subnational level, looking at the situation in South Tyrol. The province's support for cultural mediation began unevenly but was strengthened in ways that improved services. I showed how legislation and the complementary guidelines appear to have gone a long way in providing structure, clarity, as well as legitimacy for the activities of cultural mediators. What was seen as an unsystematic process for training and implementing cultural mediators has been greatly improved. This demonstrates the impact of legislation and the need for regulation for public administration of such an integration measure. Here we see how public policies translated from the state to subnational level can offer innovations in diversity governance. Implementation continues to be uneven with persisting challenges related to professionalization.

Secondly, I marshalled the concept of transcultural capital to interpret when and how migrants themselves, often members of new religious minorities, are being encouraged to engage as cultural mediators as part of public policy. Legislation at both national and subnational levels confirmed the significance of enlisting migrants as cultural mediators as part of the overlap in policies around governing foreign migration and cultural and religious diversity. The example of South Tyrol detailed the recognition of transcultural capital in the findings around cultural mediators who themselves have migrant backgrounds and the ways in which cultural mediator associations can accommodate new religious minorities. These developments herald new modes of participation that offer the opportunity to better incorporate minority perspectives and govern religious diversities in ways that will enhance diversity governance.

Various constraints remain and will need to be addressed through further national, regional, and provincial regulations, particularly

around the process for professionalization. The fact that much cultural mediation happens outside of professional settings—through migrant associations— suggests that some flexibility is needed when thinking about the needs and contours of the field. Meanwhile, there is reflection on the changing demographics and the shifting needs of foreign migrants who may express different requirements and different migration backgrounds. Future research can examine the interaction between subnational political autonomy and diversity governance in relation to integration policies and the protection of religious minorities.

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Bridging religious difference in an Autonomous Region: cultural mediators and the promise of transcultural capital

Superando diferencias religiosas en una Región Autónoma: mediadores culturales y la promesa de la capital transcultural

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Summary: Introduction. 1. Diversity governance: expanding thinking on cultural mediators through the lens of transcultural capital. 1.1. Cultural mediators in diversity governance. 1.2. Transcultural capital and new religious minorities. 2. Governing religious diversity in Italy through cultural mediators. 2.1. Legal frameworks for religious diversity. 2.2. Laws and policies around cultural mediators in Italy. 3. Diversity governance towards religious minorities in South Tyrol. 3.1. New religious minorities in South Tyrol. 3.2. Implementing policies for cultural mediators in South Tyrol. 3.3. The impact of the law on integration as part of diversity governance. Conclusions. References.

Abstract: This research contributes to the discussion of how diversity governance is dealing with demands to accommodate the increasing religious diversity born of recent migration flows. As part of the toolkit for managing religious diversity at the regional level, cultural mediators are seen as contributing to the sincere and real inclusion of religious minority perspectives, reducing tensions and assisting new religious minorities to overcome barriers. Using the case of South Tyrol in Italy, I explore how national and regional diversity governance have developed policies to establish the figure of cultural mediator as part of supporting meaningful participation in pluralist societies. I

argue that this role is further enhanced in diversity governance with policies that promote members of new religious minorities as cultural mediators, valorizing their transcultural capital. This case shows how regions with political autonomy can adapt and expand national policies to address religious diversities.

Keywords: Religious minorities, cultural mediators, diversity management, intercultural awareness, migrants.

Resumen: Esta investigación contribuye a la discusión sobre cómo la gobernanza de la diversidad está respondiendo a las demandas de acomodar la creciente diversidad religiosa derivada de los recientes flujos migratorios mediante el uso de mediadores culturales. Como parte del conjunto de herramientas para gestionar la diversidad religiosa a nivel regional, se considera que los mediadores culturales contribuyen a la inclusión sincera y real de las perspectivas de las minorías religiosas, reduciendo tensiones y ayudando a las nuevas minorías religiosas a superar barreras. Utilizando el caso del Tirol del Sur en Italia, muestro cómo la gobernanza de la diversidad, tanto nacional como regional, ha desarrollado políticas para establecer la figura del mediador cultural como parte del apoyo a la participación significativa en sociedades pluralistas. Sostengo que este papel se ve aún más reforzado en la gobernanza de la diversidad a través de políticas que promueven a las nuevas minorías religiosas como mediadores culturales, valorizando su capital transcultural. Este caso muestra cómo la legislación regional puede adaptar y ampliar las políticas nacionales para abordar mejor las diversidades religiosas.

Palabras clave: Minorías religiosas, mediadores culturales, gestión de la diversidad, conciencia intercultural, migrantes.

Introduction¹

Recent migration flows have led to various challenges related to cultural and religious differences that often impact new religious minorities, adherents of traditional faiths who find themselves in a new territory (Bretscher 2017). New religious minorities may need additional guidance in navigating the often-confusing landscape for legal protection of human rights and religious diversity (Ruiz Vieytes 2024). Moreover, claims for recognition on the basis of new religious identities may impact the preservation of social cohesion and unity in interactions with both the majority and historical minority religious groups (Medda-Windischer et al. 2024). Meanwhile, various transnational dynamics have encouraged new religious minorities to develop hybrid forms of belonging, yet these are “actively shaped by both constraints and opportunities within receiving societies” (Ruiz Andrés and Sajir 2025, 3). Thus, increasing religious diversity has placed pressure on diversity governance to devise innovative ways to mediate across diverse contexts and cultures and build opportunities for peacefully navigating religious difference. Various intermediary actors with advocacy experience, local expertise, or legal knowledge are gaining prominence for assisting new religious minorities as part of diversity governance (Budabin and Nardocci Forthcoming; Griera et al. 2019; Griera and Forteza 2011). Of particular relevance are cultural mediators who may be uniquely situated to understand the different contexts and assist with migrant integration and minority protections.

This article looks closely at the policies and practices surrounding the figure of cultural mediators, who can be considered key actors in diversity governance able to bridge religious difference. The work of cultural mediation is understood to have a normative agenda, “favouring constructive convivence among persons, promoting mutual learning and negotiating differences, rather than imposing an alleged homogeneity or indulging in assimilatory attempts” (Avolio et al. 2023, 123). Cultural mediators are regarded as third party actors who may modify a conflict situation in ways that build “intercultural understanding and positive coexistence” (Busch 2023). In addition to benefiting from the services of cultural mediators, members of new religious minorities may also be able to contribute to this diversity governance when they work as cultural mediators themselves, as part of

¹ The author wishes to thank Roberta Medda-Windischer, Andrea Carla, Michael Luther, Zakaria Sajir, and Anna Wolf for research assistance and constructive feedback that contributed to the development of this article.

policies and practices that valorize their transcultural capital (Meinhof and Triafylladou 2006). Overall, this inquiry is organized around two research questions: how has the role of cultural mediators been expanded in diversity governance, particularly with regard to religious diversity? Second, to what extent is the role of cultural mediators enhanced when members of new religious minorities are engaged?

As part of this special issue on “Religions, diversities and human rights: Public policies for democratic coexistence”, the piece will adopt a socio-legal approach to contextualize the policies and practices of cultural mediators as part of diversity governance around migrant integration and minority protection. I use the case of South Tyrol in Italy to show how national and regional diversity governance situate the figure of cultural mediator as part of the one word for not only advancing integration but also including minority perspectives. Examining both national and regional frameworks for cultural mediation demonstrates how local contexts are expanding upon national policies in innovative and effective ways (Karanikola and Panagiotopoulos 2025). Further, I use the concept of transcultural capital to interpret these legal and policy frameworks to detect when and how people of migrant background themselves, often members of new religious minorities, are encouraged to take up the role of cultural mediators. I argue that this role is further enhanced when cultural mediators are themselves members of new religious minorities, who may therefore be considered decisive figures in reducing tensions in everyday spaces, helping religious minorities overcome barriers that may often lead directly and indirectly to discrimination.

Drawing from research on religious diversity, cultural mediators and diversity governance, I examine developments related to cultural mediation through the case of the subnational region of South Tyrol, a province in Italy. The country of Italy, which has only recently become a country of immigration, has been challenged in recognizing the new cultural and religious diversity. The country is characterized by a majority religion and has implemented various diversity governance policies around religious minorities as part of legislation related to migration where cultural mediators have been seen as critical for facilitating migrant integration (Karanikola and Panagiotopoulos 2025). Historically, South Tyrol is known for having successfully settled a minority conflict and is considered a model for dealing with ethnic tensions. Like many regions in Italy, South Tyrol is experiencing increasing diversity due to recent migration; in 2024, around 10% of the population was foreign born and religious diversity has increased in the predominantly Catholic region (Volgger et al. 2024). As an autonomous province whose power

exceed those of other Italian provinces and regions, South Tyrol was the first province in Italy to enact legislation on cultural mediators, making it a model for other subnational policy-makers in devising diversity and integration policies related to building social cohesion while also offering a contrast to policies at the national level.

The article takes the following form. First, I discuss how this research builds upon the literature on diversity governance related to religious diversity by deepening work on cultural mediators through the concept of transcultural capital. Then I offer a brief review of the national context for religious minorities, immigration, and religious diversity in Italy as well as relevant policies and legislation before turning to the South Tyrolian context. To assess Italy and South Tyrol's approaches to religious minorities through cultural mediation, I identify not only legislation and policies related to religion but also policies that deal with the integration of minorities and recognition of increasing cultural and religious pluralism. The data sources include legal texts, reports, websites, and national and regional guidelines.² Finally, I share insights on the regional landscape for cultural mediators, drawn from the organizational profile a long-standing cultural mediation operator and background conversations with people who have been working in and studying diversity management in South Tyrol for over two decades. I conclude with a reflection on how the policies and practices of cultural mediation in South Tyrol and Italy have come to valorize transcultural capital and how this approach enhances diversity governance in relation to processes of migrant integration and minority protection.

1. Diversity governance: expanding thinking on cultural mediators through the lens of transcultural capital

This article reaches across sociology, legal studies, and social work to situate the role of cultural mediators in the policies and practice of religious diversity governance. The need to mediate across diverse religious backgrounds has become more urgent in light of increased diversity, in large part due to new religious minorities who arrived through recent migration movements (Medda-Windischer 2008). New religious minorities may be adherents of traditional faiths—Sikh or Islam—but find themselves in a new territory (Bretscher 2017). Despite the expansion of religious protections and policies to manage religious

² The author takes responsibility for translations from German and Italian.

diversity, members of new religious minorities continue to contend with discrimination and exclusion (S. Ferrari 2024; Medda Windischer et al. 2024). As part of responding to repression and suppression, cultural mediators are key figures who help work towards the harmonious coexistence of people and groups from different religious backgrounds. Work on cultural mediators in diversity governance is related to the study of interreligious actors, where many innovative transformations are seen to be taking place at the local level (Griera et al. 2019). This section reviews scholarship on cultural mediators in diversity governance and expands this literature by incorporating findings and insights from studies on transcultural capital.

1.1. *Cultural mediators in diversity governance*

Research on cultural mediation has moved from anthropology and the interaction between different cultures to the study of the role of cultural mediators in diversity governance as figures able to foster democratic coexistence amid religious diversity, particularly at the regional level. Part of this research has centered on the principle of dialogue among different parties and its value, “how we communicate across cultural and identity differences in a way that does not deny or avoid those differences” (Sealy 2025, 73). Recent work within diversity governance discussions related to post-secularism has underscored the need to adopt a transnational lens on the diversity stemming from contemporary migration and has opened up the possibilities for new hybrid forms of identity and belonging, which are actively negotiated “through everyday interactions, political discourse, and institutional settings” (Ruiz Andrés and Sajir 2025, 3).

The figure of cultural mediator is traditionally defined by their positionality within a liminal space between two or more cultures. Such figures are therefore known for “turning in two directions at once, becoming specialists in mediating the interests and expectations of both sides and thus facilitating the social integration of complex societies on different levels” (Dietze 2018, 494). They have risen in prominence in the last few decades amid increasing transregionalism and transnationalism. Dietze (2018, 494 and 495) has tracked the emergence of a “new social function” of figures such as religious leaders, teachers, and community leaders who broker “relations between the nation-state and the local community”. More than a direct linguistic translation, the public service linguistic-cultural mediator “performs tasks of coordination, mediation, or negotiation

of cultural and social meanings” (Casadevante 2023, 106-107). Further, there is the expectation that cultural mediators will be familiar with and able to interpret “the cultural markers of the two cultures in contact” and “detect the assumptions and stereotypes that one community has of the other” (de Casadevante 2023 referring to Valero Garcés 2016, 106-107). Cultural mediators are now seen in contexts such as healthcare, education, prisons, and other public services.

The essential contribution of cultural mediators has been widely examined at the local-municipal level, especially in cities with high migrant populations (Molli 2025). One investigation into Germany and its culturally heterogenous environment revealed tensions with the Muslim population thereby “making the intervention of linguistic-cultural professionals necessary to mediate and try to resolve or prevent” conflict (de Casadevante 2023, 105). In such settings, cultural mediators “must be familiar with the social, cultural, and religious contexts involved” (de Casadevante 2023, 107). Cultural mediators are seen to help manage the impacts that religious difference may pose in everyday encounters, where “the religious factor sometimes leads to situations of rejection, misunderstandings or the appearance of barriers in communication” (de Casadevante 2023, 105).

As with any diversity governance practice, cultural mediation is affected by both constraints and opportunities (Ruiz Andrés and Sajir 2025, 3). It will first be important to consider the legal and policy frameworks around cultural mediation, which may also contrast across national and regional contexts (Karanikola and Panagiotopoulos 2025). As described above, many adaptations and innovations are occurring in subnational or urban settings. Second, there are salient critiques that point to ways in which practices of cultural mediation related to religious diversity can be improved, particularly when thinking about the profile of the cultural mediator. This is because, as Sealy (2025: 74) reminds us, “the contexts in which dialogues occur are ones marked by power relations”. To the extent to which members of new religious minorities can enhance the field of cultural mediation as mediators themselves to respond to power inequalities, I turn to the ways in which their transcultural capital may be elevated in religious diversity governance.

1.2. *Transcultural capital and new religious minorities*

This article argues that cultural mediators can be seen as key actors in diversity governance especially when in possession of transcultural capital. Transcultural capital has been identified as a crucial resource

enabling migrants to leverage their fluency across multiple cultural contexts. Adapting field theory on Bourdieu's taxonomy of economic, cultural and social capital, Meinhof and Triandafyllidou introduced transcultural capital as a way to understand the strategic resources of diaspora groups connected to their knowledge, skills and networks across host and home countries. Transcultural capital encompasses economic, social and cultural capital but it is the cultural capital that recognizes a migrant's multiple languages and multiculturalism. The concept was originally used to discuss the ways in which migrant activists themselves promote their transcultural qualities as transcultural capital, in an empowering process that seeks to turn a disadvantaged position into an asset (Triandafyllidou 2008). Interestingly, the use of transcultural instead of transnational speaks to the possibilities for migrants to become acquainted with cultures and customs beyond those of their nationality.

Transcultural capital is becoming recognized as a critical resource in diversity governance at regional and local levels as part of policymaking, urban planning, and adaptation of public services. Recent scholarship has applied the concept of transcultural capital to specific subgroups of migrants, such as youth, while also elaborating on the ways in which this capital can be accessed and mobilized for the benefit of both migrants and the communities to which they belong. Arias et al. (2022, 755) see transcultural capital as offering an agentic, transformative potential, as a challenge to what they see as 'deficit' models of cultural and ethnic difference. Further, the authors see transcultural capital as a means "to resist social marginalization and cultural oppression" (Arias et al. 2022, 756). Connecting this concept to debates on post-secularity, Sajir (2025) argued that transcultural capital enables us to highlight the agency of Muslim migrant descendants in mediating between secular and religious domains to actively shape their multicultural environments. He pushes us to think of transcultural capital as a societal asset that can be seen as part of diversity governance, "as an active mechanism of social transformation in the governance of religious and cultural diversity" (Sajir 2025, 326). These applications of the concept reinforce its usefulness in analyzing the positive role of migrants in diversity governance.

Here I apply the concept of transcultural capital to policies and practices that encourage the engagement of migrants or members of new religious minorities as cultural mediators. This transcultural element lends itself quite well to the work of cultural mediators in addressing religious diversity; while religious practices may differ across national contexts, familiarity with minority religions still can be

considered an asset. The profile of the cultural mediator has already been distinguished by cultural expertise born of a professional background from those cultural mediators who possess other nonprofessional expertise that may come from being a lay person or member of the cultural group (Cavallari 2023, 51). Within societies with growing diversity in light of migration, cultural mediators who are themselves migrants and share the same cultural background have been shown to “understand very well the needs of their clients and the obstacles they have to overcome” relying on “their own experience in adapting to the host country” (Minervino and Calvo 2007, 195). Policies and practices that advance the engagement of new religious minorities and migrants may avoid the reinforcement of eurocentricism and instead seek to bridge “localised understandings with transnational realities” (Ruiz Andrés and Sajir 2025, 4-5). The combination of migrants’ cultural capital, rooted in multilingualism and multiculturalism, together with their familiarity with minority religions across different national contexts (though not necessarily in the host country), constitutes a strategic resource for diversity governance. However, there are some risks; cultural mediators may be “marginalized by their own communities” due to perceptions of betrayal or taking sides (Minervino and Calvo 2007, 196).

These insights lay the foundation for thinking of why and how the possession of transcultural capital may enhance cultural mediation. In the next section, I investigate a case of how regional institutions implement the role of cultural mediators as part of managing religious diversity and examine the extent to which transcultural capital is valorized. This work will help us in thinking about the legal structures and institutional conditions that support the engagement of members of new religious minorities as cultural mediators.

2. **Governing religious diversity in Italy through cultural mediators**

The case of South Tyrol in Italy offers a useful case to investigate the national policies for cultural mediators and as well as adaption of these policies and practices at the subnational level. Religious diversity in Italy has been increasing as part of the country’s shift to becoming a destination rather than a country of emigration. While Italy is still considered a Catholic country, the influx of immigrants has increased religious diversity without concomitant actions by the national government. Compared to other countries, Italy is seen to have

“largely avoided recognizing the cultural and religious implications of the process of pluralization” and remains “without an established model of integration or pluralism” (Allievi 2013, 724). Particularly in the area of religion, Italy’s lack of a coherent policy towards religious pluralism is based on “the inability of the political class to metabolize the profound changes” in the country (A. Ferrari 2024, 110). While legislation towards religious diversity remains unformulated, frameworks related to cultural mediation, especially at the regional level, offer innovative adaptations that merit scrutiny.

2.1. *Legal frameworks for religious diversity*

The legal frameworks recognize pluralism and the freedom of religion is constitutionally protected, but the legal status of most religious minorities in Italy is weak. Silvio Ferrari argues that this is the case due to the lack of a unique law on religious freedom and the fact that laws governing religious minorities are nearly a century old.³ Enshrining the principle of religious pluralism, the Italian Republican Constitution of 1947 established the basis for religious freedom while situating Catholicism as the national religion and minority religions are accorded only limited recognition. Article 7 protects the bilateral relations between the state and the Catholic Church. In particular, Article 8 protects the communal aspects of religious minorities and religious denominations are seen to be equally free in the eyes of the law. The individual right to religious freedom is protected in Article 19, which safeguards religious practices for “everyone” including non-citizens (Dutta 2019, 83). However, religious minorities are divided across three categories, depending on whether they have been officially recognized. Enacted during the fascist period, Law n. 1159 (Legge 24 giugno 1929, n. 1159) that regulates all non-Catholic religions together was maintained by the Italian Republic and is considered the root cause of many of the inequalities facing religious minorities (Bottoni 2023, 178). Magazzini et al. (2022, 407) categorize the Italian Constitution as a case of moderate secularism, yet the majority religion receives disproportionate benefits from the state. The extension of some of the privileges of the majority religion to some minorities reflects the Italian State’s recognition of religious pluralism, but only along the lines of selective cooperation

³ See Atlas of religious or belief minority rights, Italy: <https://atlasminorityrights.eu/countries/Italy.php#top>

(Bottoni 2023, 186). This explains why many new religious minorities may continue to fall outside these frameworks in terms of protections and rights.

Though immigration to Italy became more significant in the 1970s, it is only recently that this influx became more visible and led to the need to define some contours for diversity governance. Various laws in the area of employment in the 1980s belatedly attempted to regulate the presence of foreigners and move towards integration (Allievi 2013, 726). The Martelli Law of 1990 aimed to regularize immigrant employment and set a quota for residence permits. Next, the so-called Turco-Napolitano Law passed in 1998 further regulated the process of acquiring permanent residency while also creating temporary detention centers for illegal and irregular immigrants. However, this law also included the first reference to cultural mediators, as will be discussed below. The subsequent Bossi-Fini Law passed in 2002 focused on illegal migration and tightened regulations. In summary, the laws dealing with immigration failed to reckon with the impact of cultural and religious pluralism nor did they make much reference to cultural integration (Allievi 2013, 730). This omission to recognize and put forth proposals for addressing the process of cultural pluralization and fostering integration was surprising in light of the increasing challenges and debates that were centering on the country's multiculturalism. Situations were emerging where the practices of minority religions came in direct conflict with the organization of social and civic life in Italy (Ambrosini et al. 2012; Timellini 2019). Meanwhile, the intensity of controversies in cases and situations involving religious education, symbols, and the building of mosques "suggests potential difficulties in imposing secularism" (Dutta 2019, 91).

In summary, diversity governance towards new religious minorities need to be considered alongside the regulation of foreigners in Italy and their integration. In Italy, the debates around immigration and increasing cultural and religious pluralism continue to be characterized by a dualistic thinking. As Dutta describes, a distinction endures "between 'us' (hosts, Italians, Catholics) and 'them' (guests, immigrants, Muslims)" (Duta 2019: 96). However, a number of examples from cities and regions in Italy attest to innovation and adaption in diversity management related to religious minorities (Guglielmo and Sbalchiero 2024; Molli 2025; Griera et al. 2019; Rech 2024). These practices reflect dualistic thinking between the inadequate laws of recognition and policies towards religious minorities and the policies and practices towards building cohesion at

the regional level.⁴ Among the policies and practices seeking to build cohesion, we need to also consider the use of cultural mediation, which would be promoted as part of national and regional legislation around immigration.

2.2. *Laws and policies around cultural mediators in Italy*

As Italy grappled with immigration and growing religious diversity, the figure of the intercultural mediator became elevated as a useful tool for migrant integration as part of diversity governance. Cultural mediators had already begun to be implemented but in an unsystematic way in healthcare, social, and education services in Italy. The first national legislation for migrant integration included the concept of intercultural mediation: passed in 1998 and known as the Turco-Napolitano Law, Legislative Decree 286/98 on the “Regulations on immigration and provisions on the status of foreigners” promotes the use of cultural mediators (*mediatori interculturali*) as part of measures for social integration.⁵ In a nod to the valorization of the transcultural capital of recently arrived migrants, Art. 42, 1d pushes governing bodies at municipal, provincial, regional, and national levels to collaborate with local associations in the employment of foreigners who had been in Italy for more than two years as intercultural mediators. This was seen as a means “to facilitate relations between individual administrations and foreigners belonging to different ethnic, national, linguistic and religious groups.” This emphasis on facilitation by members of new religious minorities and migrants speaks to the strategic resources possessed by this group in diversity governance.

A set of guidelines produced by the Italian Interior Ministry in 2009 further expounded on the role of a cultural mediator. The emphasis was on the notion of intercultural mediation as a “bridge” that differed from conflict mediation processes.⁶ Zadra points out that the focus on bridging “allows for new avenues of exchange, without asking any of the areas to renounce their positions in any way”. There

⁴ The author appreciates an anonymous reviewer for sharing this insight.

⁵ These provisions were later incorporated into Articles 38 and 42 of Legislative Decree n. 286 of July 25, 1998, “Consolidated Act on Immigration Regulations” (*Testo Unico sull’immigrazione*).

⁶ See *Linee di indirizzo per il riconoscimento della figura professionale del mediatore interculturale del Gruppo di Lavoro Istituzionale per la promozione della Mediazione Interculturale*, p. 8.

is also an emphasis on avoiding notions of superiority, a critical aspect as the contexts where cultural mediators operate may be characterized by power asymmetries (Zadra 2025, 146). The guidelines explained that culture was intended broadly, "encompassing cultural and religious customs, traditions, and lived experiences, with language as a primary factor expressed through verbal and non-verbal communication, including body language and proxemics." The guidelines also valorized the notion of identity and how cultural identity was not to be challenged during mediation but rather identity was to be "seen as a value, not an obstacle." The guidelines stressed that dialogue between different cultures "fosters enrichment and exchange, helping to develop intercultural relational skills that are essential in the context of global citizenship." Overall, the guidelines suggest a very open dialogue where exchanges through language and other communication could be facilitated on equal footing along with the possibilities for new hybrid forms of identity and belonging to flourish.

As part of its diversity governance, the national legislation continues to detail an important role for cultural mediators. Criteria were specified in a Ministerial Order in 2010, their importance was reinforced in the 2014 National Integration Plan for Persons entitled to international Protection and there is a register of public and private mediation organizations provided by Ministry of Justice (Karanikola and Panagiotopoulos, 2025). Cultural mediators are seen as crucial for handling current migration flows into Italy; starting in 2018, the International Organization for Migration has contracted 280 cultural mediators with funding from the Italian Ministry of Interior to assist with recently arrived migrants at entry points.⁷

Yet, while the law developed policies on cultural mediation as an important resource for migrant integration as part of diversity governance, there is still no national legal framework that outlines implementation provisions. In light of this absence in guidelines for the training and assessment of cultural mediators, the gap has been filled by NGOs, charities, social cooperatives, and universities, along with regional and local institutions (Avolio et al. 2023, 131). The resulting fragmentation across different actors can negatively affect regulations and practices (Biague 2017). Lack of institutional professionalization is also cited as a weakness in the building of networks between cultural

⁷ See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/italy/voices-hope-vital-role-cultural-mediators-supporting-migrants>

mediators and stakeholders (De Leo et al. 2024) and their involvement in legal proceedings (Cavallari 2025). In some cases, adaptations have been developed in response to the lack of inter-institutional relationships and standardized procedures; cultural mediators often must work to connect different services and foster collaboration (De Leo et al. 2024). As an autonomous province, seeking to operate in the absence of a clear policy framework at the national level, South Tyrol will forge its own policies.

3. Diversity governance towards religious minorities in South Tyrol

Responding to religious diversity is a relatively new aspect of diversity management for South Tyrol. The province is well known for having successfully resolved a minority conflict with the development of a unique legislative and political autonomy and consociational agreements (Carlà 2015). Three different historic ethnic and linguistic groups are present in the territory and are officially recognized; these include German, Ladin, and Italian speakers. Much of the attention around tolerance, participation, and sharing of resources is organized to reflect the region's linguistic pluralism. However, demographic shifts called for new paradigms in South Tyrol (Medda-Windischer 2019).

Incoming minorities of migrant background are often described as "new" compared to the "old" national minorities that have defined the previous diversity arrangements (Medda-Windischer 2008). The management of the diversity brought by the influx of new minorities "ends up intersecting with the [local] complex historical and identarian dynamics" (Landini 2024). The approach that South Tyrol has taken towards foreign migration is seen, in particular, to reflect the institutional stances of the "old" linguistic divisions: this increasing diversity from migration had led to the adoption of a "defensive approach to migration", which is based on these dynamics but is also related to the growth of far-right parties and the proliferation of anti-immigration campaigns locally and nationally (Medda-Windischer 2017, 555). New religious minorities fall within the category as minorities of migrant background.

3.1. *New religious minorities in South Tyrol*

The religious profile of South Tyrol reveals a predominantly Catholic province but recent migration flows have increased religious

diversity. Data suggest that more than 90% of the population is Catholic while the remainder are linked to various religious faiths such as Islam, Evangelical-Lutheran, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhs, and Orthodox Christianity (Medda-Windischer and Membretti 2020, 34). Based on the census of 2024, the number of foreign residents (without Italian citizenship) is calculated at more than 10% of the population (Volgger et al. 2024). Comparing this to statistics around the national proportionality in Italy, among this population of foreign residents, nearly 50% are estimated to be Christian and around 40% are Muslim.⁸ Most migrants are settled in the larger towns and cities of South Tyrol.

The situation for new religious minorities is a mixed picture. A 2011 report on diversity provided evidence that, compared to the country of origin, migrants found the situation regarding religion and culture in South Tyrol to be better (22,7%) than their origin country (Medda-Windischer et al. 2011, 30-31). However, the same report also found that nearly 50% of respondents reported that there were no suitable places of worship in the nearby vicinity. A 2021 report found that a majority of migrants (64,3%) attested to the importance of maintaining religious traditions; yet, the research found that respondents also stressed the private and family-related nature of cultural and religious traditions (Crepaz 2012, 20, 32-33). Meanwhile, various political parties have used strong language against migrants, Islam, and the need to protect local cultures, traditions, and religion (Carlá 2013, Part I). Episodes of religious othering have been found in educational institutions (Thoma 2023). The needs of members of new religious minorities reflect the challenges of maintaining transnational ties while laying down local roots, crafting hybrid identities amid an increasingly hostile atmosphere for religious diversity. Moreover, they speak to the need for cultural mediators to assist in connecting members of new religious minorities and helping them seek accommodations.

3.2. *Implementing policies for cultural mediators in South Tyrol*

While the Italian State retains jurisdiction over many migration-related matters, the province of South Tyrol can submit non-binding opinions. Moreover, as an autonomous region, South Tyrol has

⁸ See: Astat info, *Popolazione straniera residente 2022*, 14 Aprile 2024, p. 6.

competencies on integration and thus the ability to pass legislation to regulate schools, labor, welfare and health (Medda-Windischer and Carlà 2015). The autonomous province is “granted certain powers in crucial areas for migrants and for the management of their cultural, linguistic and/or religious diversity” (Medda-Windischer 2017, 552). This autonomy was innovatively applied in the case of cultural mediation.

Historically, South Tyrol was the first Italian Province to invest in developing the position of the *mediatore interculturale* (intercultural mediator), following the increase of immigration in the late 1990s (Carlà 2013, 93-94). Previously, the position of para-mediator had been present on a small scale, within networks of families and friends due to a lack of non-EU citizens in the region (Biague 2017, 272). In 2001, this position was institutionalized and political guidelines were developed for the training and implementation of cultural mediators in schools and other public agencies. The deliberation of the provincial council (D.G.P.) n. 4266/2001 with reference to Provincial Law n. 40/1992 regulating the Vocational Training Organization, implicitly defines the role of the intercultural mediator as part of the approval of the related training program. This legislation gave the role of cultural mediator legitimacy by providing official definitions and direction for the criteria and professional training of cultural mediators. The advancement of policy moved in tandem with the increase of migrants in the territory, with the expectation that migrants with transcultural capital would enter the field as cultural mediators.

The regional policy towards cultural mediators emphasizes not only understanding and respect but also the possibilities for transformation and adaptation. According to the resolution, the intercultural mediator is described as “an intercultural operator, an educator of differences” who is capable of “facilitating communication and linguistic and cultural understanding between people from different cultures, particularly between foreign users and public or private service providers, while respecting the rights of all parties involved in the relationship.”⁹ This includes not only helping foreign users make use of Italian services and institutions but also “encouraging services to progressively adapt to the needs of foreign users, and preventing and managing conflicts between foreign users and local services.” Moreover, there was an emphasis on

⁹ See D.G.P. of 26 November 2001, n. 4266 Approval of the program of the annual full-time course for the qualification of ‘Intercultural Mediator’ (art. 5, comma 2 della LP 12.11.1992, n. 40). Official Gazette of the Region Trentino-South Tyrol, n. 51/II of 11. 12. 2001, p. 92.

the neutrality of the position, similar to the national guidelines discussed above: "The role of the mediator is therefore to act as a bridge, a link, and an interface between foreign users and public or private service providers, as well as between different cultural assumptions and meanings. This must be done while respecting the specific roles, functions, and powers of each party in the relationship, without replacing or representing either side."¹⁰ These calls for adaption to the needs of foreign users speaks to a more expanded role for cultural mediators in the region, especially when thinking about power dynamics, compared to the national legislation.

South Tyrol's policy also opened the possibility of encouraging the recruitment of migrants and members of new religious minorities with transcultural capital. The training course was open to eligible candidates, who could be Italian or foreign nationals. Similar to the national legislation, there is a two year's residency requirement, this time in the territory of South Tyrol. In a nod to the diversity management already in place, candidates are expected to have knowledge of both Italian and German. This was alongside a high level of proficiency in the mother tongue or "vehicular" language of use in the language-cultural mediation. Within the province, there was the expectation that intercultural mediators would carry out "cultural interpreting activities", which consisted of explaining to service operators the "significance of foreign users' behaviors and communication" and in turn, clarify to foreign users "the logic and organizational culture of Italian services and institutions."¹¹ This emphasis on mutual understanding would benefit from the transcultural capital of someone recently arrived but yet familiar with Italian practices.

Regarding the operational contexts, which are also implicitly defined by the same D.G.P. n. 4266/2001, the intercultural mediator may be called upon to intervene within public and private services in the areas of education, employment, and healthcare. The first group of professionally trained cultural mediators delivered services at the hospital in the provincial capital of Bozen-Bolzano (Zadra 2025, 149). The following decade saw these programs further expanded and mediators were integrated into other sectors such as prisons and schools (Agostini 2014).

Observers report that there were some growing pains related to the qualifications and how to assess practical experience for people

¹⁰ See D.G.P. of 26 November 2001, n. 4266, p. 91-92.

¹¹ See D.G.P. of 26 November 2001, n. 4266, p. 91.

arriving without formal certification/credentials.¹² There was also recognition of the variance in language competencies. In terms of awarding contracts, the public administrative requirement to accept the lowest bids resulted in the reduction of the quality of cultural mediation. For some time, cultural mediators were treated as language interpreters and their full value was not appreciated, for example in the area of non-verbal communication.

Despite these early challenges, the province's work in the area of intercultural mediators was considered pioneering and contributed to defining the professional role at the national level.¹³ A 2009 Conference of Regions and Autonomous Provinces had already focused on the recognition of the figure of the cultural mediator and highlighted the activities of South Tyrol.¹⁴ An Interregional Project for the Qualification of Competencies and Professional Figures in the Humanitarian Sector – Peace Operator and Intercultural Mediator led to a Memorandum of Understanding with a number of regions who have agreed to coordinate in this area.

3.3. *The impact of the law on integration as part of diversity governance*

While the province was the first to enact legislation on intercultural mediators, there were no forthcoming measures and laws outlining a comprehensive approach to integration as part of diversity governance. Indeed, before the enactment of the Provincial Law in 2011, South Tyrol was one of the few provinces of Italy that did not have its own regional law on migration. As Carlà argues, the delay in enacting a provincial integration law was in tension with the desire of the government to expand and exercise its political competencies (Carlà 2013, 96). This slow approach was connected to the presence of xenophobic parties, concerns for the effect of migrants on the fragile relationship between the different language groups (Medda-

¹² Based on conversations with people familiar with decades of experience with diversity governance.

¹³ Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano. 2002. *Presentato il corso per mediatore interculturale, "un ponte tra immigrati e società"*, April 6, 2001; and Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano. 2002. *La Provincia nel gruppo di lavoro delle Regioni sulla mediazione interculturale: accolta la proposta Gneccchi*, June 27.

¹⁴ Conferenza delle Regioni delle Province Autonome. 2009. *Riconoscimento della figura professionale del Mediatore interculturale*. P. 9.

Windischer 2011, 24) and the strength of regional minority cultures and languages (Wisthaler 2015).

The 2011 law set in place a new institutional framework that reflected efforts towards the integration of the “new” migrants outlining in particular “a process of mutual exchange” and identifying as a goal: “the mutual recognition of cultural, religious and linguistic identities” (Article 1). The law also provides for the guiding principles of the process of integration and social inclusion of the migrant population in South Tyrol. The act briefly defines integration as a “process of exchange and reciprocal dialogue” and it states that South Tyrol “favours the reciprocal recognition and valorisation of the cultural, religious and linguistic identities, aspiring to the principles of equality and freedom of religion” (Article 2). Moreover, as part of diversity governance, one of the objectives of the provincial government was to pursue the reciprocal comprehension of cultural differences (together with the knowledge of the regional history and culture) in order to promote integration.

Intercultural mediators were tasked with fulfilling this goal of fostering exchange and reciprocal dialogue through a specific framework for intercultural mediation outlined in Article 9. The promotion of intercultural mediation was described as a means to “improve relationships between foreign citizens, the local community, and institutions” (Article 9). In this regard, the various sectors were expanded, including education, employment, vocational training, social assistance, healthcare, and subsidized housing, a provincial list of intercultural mediators is established. Apart from measures for cultural mediators and reference to intercultural education projects and the general guarantee provided for in Art. 1, the law does not include further specific actions for sustaining the maintenance of migrants’ mother tongues, customs, or guaranteeing the practice of their religion. Still, the expansion of sectors and registration list gave further shape and legitimacy to the cultural mediator role.

A more recent Deliberation also dealt with intercultural mediators and concerned the registration list that was to be managed and maintained by the Provincial Coordination Service for Integration. In the meantime, various training courses began to be offered by private institutions such as the social cooperatives Centro Documentazione e Cultura Sociale and Società Cooperativa Sociale (SAVERA). In sum, the passing of the 2011 law led to a significant increase in intercultural mediation activities (Biague 2017, 272). This second phase saw the implementation of regulations, making the system more efficient.

There are some notable features of the cultural mediator role in South Tyrol. The course for training cultural mediators was organized

bilingually, an unusual deviation from the compartmentalized language practices of the province. Due to the province's particularities of language diversity management, it has been seen as important to have mediation available in languages of the countries of origin, in addition to the officially recognized languages of the province (Biague 2017, 239). Meanwhile, the emphasis was on mediation with foreign citizens and not between the members of the three recognized language groups. Further, there are high expectations around religious knowledge and familiarity with the practices of the religious sects present in South Tyrol. A set of guidelines produced by the organization *Porte Aperte* noted that "not only is knowledge of languages (at least two) important, but they should also be well acquainted with the traditions, hierarchies, religious customs, sense of honor, perception of time, and other specific characteristics of the interacting cultures in order to facilitate mutual understanding" (Rapo and Rapo 2007, 20).

The overall experience of cultural mediators has been seen positively. As Pfanzerter and Rupnow (2017, 12) observe, "there is no doubt that these services have played a crucial role in fostering exchange between locals and immigrants, especially in recent years, as the complexity and scale of migration have increased unpredictably". Currently, South Tyrol is featured on the website of "living and working in Italy" hosted by the various Italian ministries as an example of good practices.¹⁵ The website also lauded the province for promoting the initiation of various intercultural mediation projects in the territory that partnered public bodies and social cooperatives and associations. However, in the absence of a clear national legal framework, the field of cultural mediation continues to lack a regulated and official professional profile at the subnational level. As Biague (2017, 257) points out, "with few exceptions, intercultural mediation remains a service that is provided on demand and only where needed". He notes that the professionalization and development of the mediator profession is "a process that is still ongoing" (Biague 2017, 272). The lack of clarity around regulations and the increasing role played by private operators suggests government reluctance in fully implementing cultural mediation.

At the regional level, research suggests that the sector for cultural mediation in practice has promoted the engagement of persons with transcultural capital. Research has shown that the majority are

¹⁵ See: http://sitiarcheologici.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/Attualita/Approfondimenti/approfondimento/Pagine/Mediazione/Bolzano_scheda.html#1

women of migrant background, where their sociocultural knowledge about their countries of origin is recognized and appreciated (Biague 2017, 271). In this context, the cultural mediator with migrant background “helps her fellow countrymen navigate their way, accompanies them, explains how the most important social services work, and introduces them to the culture of the host country” (Biague 2017, 271). A recent survey of associations made up of citizens with migrant backgrounds found that over 53% engaged in intercultural mediation, even if not necessarily in the professional sense (Attanasio 2023, 16). In the preface to the survey, the Provincial Councilor for Integration Philipp Achammer explains how these entities offer another significant point of reference for migrants as “places for dialogue and exchange of opinions, to explore new cultural, religious, educational, and training contexts, thereby supporting people’s social integration” (Attanasio 2023, 3). These findings confirm that officially and unofficially, cultural mediation is sustained by individuals of migrant background.

The NGO Savera, where many of the directors themselves have been of migrant background, offers further insights into how this policy looks in practice. Founded in 2009, Savera has the mission “to promote the integration and inclusion of foreign citizens, as well as fostering mutual understanding, as well as mutual awareness.”¹⁶ The description also imparts how “those running the cooperative have a profound knowledge of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the original and host territories of the foreign nationals in the Province of Bolzano.” The region supports the professional courses for training intercultural mediators.¹⁷ Language requirements for cultural mediators include being a native speaker of the language of new citizens of the Province along with good knowledge of Italian and/or German. The expectations of bilingualism appear to have been relaxed; among the roster of cultural mediators in 2016, there were 45 languages spoken.¹⁸ The emphasis on being a native speaker reinforces the value of transcultural capital for cultural mediators and this is reflected in their linguistic diversity. In supporting members of new religious minorities as cultural mediators, Savera provides various accommodations. Cultural mediators don’t have to work excessively during Ramadan and can decide their own working hours. These organizational details demonstrate the importance and support given

¹⁶ <https://www.savera.it/en/>

¹⁷ <https://www.savera.it/trasparenza/>

¹⁸ See: <https://news.provincia.bz.it/it/news-archivio/547912>

to people of migrant background whose transcultural capital is clearly valued.

Conclusions

This piece aimed to explore how public policies have developed around the role of cultural mediators in diversity governance specifically in terms of their work related to religious diversity and to what extent these policies can be enhanced by engaging migrants and members of new religious minorities as cultural mediators. Firstly, I demonstrated that in Italy, there has been a steady development of public policies for cultural mediators that has elevated their role in migrant integration as part of diversity governance. This role was expanded upon and deepened at the subnational level, looking at the situation in South Tyrol. The province's support for cultural mediation began unevenly but was strengthened in ways that improved services. I showed how legislation and the complementary guidelines appear to have gone a long way in providing structure, clarity, as well as legitimacy for the activities of cultural mediators. What was seen as an unsystematic process for training and implementing cultural mediators has been greatly improved. This demonstrates the impact of legislation and the need for regulation for public administration of such an integration measure. Here we see how public policies translated from the state to subnational level can offer innovations in diversity governance. Implementation continues to be uneven with persisting challenges related to professionalization.

Secondly, I marshalled the concept of transcultural capital to interpret when and how migrants themselves, often members of new religious minorities, are being encouraged to engage as cultural mediators as part of public policy. Legislation at both national and subnational levels confirmed the significance of enlisting migrants as cultural mediators as part of the overlap in policies around governing foreign migration and cultural and religious diversity. The example of South Tyrol detailed the recognition of transcultural capital in the findings around cultural mediators who themselves have migrant backgrounds and the ways in which cultural mediator associations can accommodate new religious minorities. These developments herald new modes of participation that offer the opportunity to better incorporate minority perspectives and govern religious diversities in ways that will enhance diversity governance.

Various constraints remain and will need to be addressed through further national, regional, and provincial regulations, particularly

around the process for professionalization. The fact that much cultural mediation happens outside of professional settings—through migrant associations— suggests that some flexibility is needed when thinking about the needs and contours of the field. Meanwhile, there is reflection on the changing demographics and the shifting needs of foreign migrants who may express different requirements and different migration backgrounds. Future research can examine the interaction between subnational political autonomy and diversity governance in relation to integration policies and the protection of religious minorities.

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