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Cristiana Giordano

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## Secular Redemptions: Biopolitics by Example

Cristiana Giordano

Department of Anthropology, University of California-Davis, Davis, California, USA

### ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyze the practices of a group of Catholic nuns who run shelters for ‘victims of human trafficking’ in Italy, and are thus involved in state-funded rehabilitation programs for former foreign prostitutes. This case shows how the state and the Church are deeply implicated in each other’s projects of redemption and the creation of new forms of life. In Italy, the legal model for rehabilitating foreign prostitutes is avowedly secular yet also deeply shaped by a Catholic impetus to purify sinners. At the same time, however, the nuns themselves develop an understanding of redemption as a secular life-saving project in line with the state’s project of recognition, and thus inscribe their practices within the biopolitical effort to transform lives. Ultimately, I argue, leading by example becomes a specific Catholic instantiation of biopolitics that characterizes both the state’s and the Church’s approach to foreigners.

### KEYWORDS

Biopolitics; Catholicism; Italy; politics of recognition; redemption; victims

“Jesus never imposed prayer on his disciples. Instead, he waited until they asked him to teach them how to address the Lord. He set an example; just as us nuns must set an example for the women at the shelter through our lifestyles.” Sister Maria said this to me on a fall afternoon in 2003, when I started volunteering for *Emancipazione Oggi* (Emancipation Today),<sup>1</sup> a Catholic nongovernmental organization (NGO) founded in 2000 with the primary mission of fighting ‘modern slavery’ in the forms of human trafficking and foreign prostitution. In their work to get the people they consider ‘victims of human trafficking’ off the streets and into a state-sponsored rehabilitation program, this group of nuns and lay volunteers mostly helps women file criminal charges against their exploiters and hosts them in shelters. Sister Maria was in her late sixties and belonged to the order of the Sisters of Charity when I met her.<sup>2</sup> At that time, she ran the association as well as a shelter for victims in the outskirts of Turin. She was keen to make it clear to me that their mission was not about converting foreign women to Catholicism—evangelization “old style,” as she put it—but rather helping them regain agency by modeling a ‘lifestyle’ that was different from the one they had learned on the streets.

At the time of my research, the women who reached out to projects of rehabilitation for victims were mostly from Nigeria, Albania, Romania, and Ukraine. Among these, Nigerians made up the majority of those who took advantage of the state-funded program. They had all migrated illegally in search of employment and a better life in Italy. Some of them knew that prostitution was an option and took it; others were forced into it.<sup>3</sup> In order to obtain legal recognition—and thus access to services and rights—under Article 18 of Italy’s Immigration Law, women must participate in a rehabilitation program that is fully funded by the state, but mostly implemented by Catholic groups engaged in fighting criminality and foreign prostitution.<sup>4</sup>

The first step of the process requires filing charges against traffickers at a police station. Women must identify themselves as victims of international traffickers and produce a coherent victim narrative that marks the beginning of a pact between them and the state. In other words, subjects

are considered outlaws as long as they fail to introduce themselves to the legal authorities as having chosen to repent from a form of life into which they had been forced. This logic of repenting resembles the Catholic ontology that the human is inherently ‘sinful,’ even prior to having committed any sin. To enter formally into the Church one must repent for something for which one has always already been responsible. Redemption then leads to recognition—and in the case of the Italian state, this can only happen through the categories that it makes available to foreign others. After denouncing their traffickers and their life on the streets, victims are then required to live in a shelter, get professional training in the Italian language, and learn domestic skills such as cooking, housekeeping, and elder care.<sup>5</sup> The rehabilitation program for victims of human trafficking thus provides a set of practices that show in striking ways how the state and the Church are deeply implicated in each other’s projects of redemption and integration in Italian social and political life.

As I demonstrate here, while the state categorizes these women as victims and thus sets them on a path toward self-reform, it is by providing rules and setting examples that the nuns present them with the possibility of a new life that can be experienced as ‘whole.’ Through Sister Maria’s representation of the women as victims we can see how Catholic nuns view themselves as examples for producing new subjectivities that enable ‘victims’ to become rehabilitated ‘subjects.’ In their work with ex-prostitutes<sup>6</sup> at shelters, nuns develop an understanding of redemption as a secular project of saving lives in line with the state’s project of recognition, and thus inscribe their practices within the state’s biopolitical effort to transform lives. By exposing themselves as examples, the nuns also engage in their own self-purification and in a project of societal transformation that paradoxically positions the foreign woman as a necessary means of expiation. Thus, nuns and the other women alike are transformed in this biopolitical project.

The reciprocal nature of these processes of transformation (of life projects and of subjectivities) is what interests me here. In the following, I focus on how questions of religious redemption and political inclusion overlap in the state’s and the Church’s approach to their imagined others.<sup>7</sup> I argue that leading by example is a specific Catholic instantiation of biopolitics—reminiscent of monastic life and practices of charity—that the state utilizes to make illegal migrant prostitutes into subjects fit for inclusion within Italian social life and, eventually, for citizenship. In this particular form of politics, the body of the outlaw is approached as a site of intervention and reform. The body’s ‘old’ life and habits must be transformed and overcome to take on a new character that is exemplified in the nuns’ conduct and relationship to the victim.

## Purifications

In the 1990s, Italy witnessed a radical increase in the number of incoming illegal migrants, and foreign prostitution became more visible. In the new Europe—characterized simultaneously by the abolition of internal borders between the European Union’s member states and by stricter external border controls—trafficking as a legal and social issue has emerged alongside the tightening of immigration laws and the enforcement of borders. In 1998, in line with this trend, Italy revised the existing Immigration Law (Legge Martelli) to create new categories of foreigners in need of legal protection; among them were ‘victims of human trafficking.’ The new Article 18 gave women who qualified as ‘victims’ the right to temporary and renewable residence permits to escape situations of exploitation. Consequently, associations already informally involved in the assistance of foreign prostitutes could turn their aid projects into official programs funded by the Ministry of Equal Opportunities and the Immigration Offices of various municipalities.

Around the same time Italy passed Article 18, Catholic groups started to identify foreign prostitutes as ‘the poorest of the poor,’ ‘the most marginal of the marginalized,’ and therefore in need of assistance. In several conversations, nuns told me that over the past 15 years, with the increase of illegal migration in Italy and the spread of prostitution as a phenomenon mostly affecting the female migrant population, their mission to help those in need radically shifted to victims of human trafficking. Historical and legal events in 1999 and 2000 were also particularly important

catalysts for this type of social intervention. For Catholics, the year 2000 was the Holy Year of the Jubilee, established as an important Catholic celebration in 1300 by Pope Bonifacio VIII and celebrated every 50 years. Traditionally, it is a time of purification, when seekers refresh their faith and their commitment to the church. It was on this occasion that some Catholic associations gathered to reflect on the meaning of their mission to assist the poor. The main questions they asked themselves were, “Who are today’s poor?” and “What does it mean to carry on the mission of evangelization today?” These questions found an answer, at least for several Catholic groups, in the victim of human trafficking. The Catholic discourse of emancipating victims overlapped and, moreover, found some resonance in human rights discourses, which also identify trafficking as a form of slavery and one of the worst possible injustices (Miller and Vance 2004; Agustin 2007; Ticktin 2011).

Per Article 18, victims of human trafficking are the responsibility of the state. Legislative enactments name their predicament, define their legal status, and develop projects to rehabilitate them. The public rhetoric centers on a campaign of rescue in which foreign prostitution is portrayed as one of the most insidious forms of contemporary slavery. The choice of the language of slavery—far from innocently describing a phenomenon—rhetorically shifts the scope of the debate away from questions of choice and responsibility (as framed, for instance, by the members of the Italian Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes)<sup>8</sup> to emphasize the victimization of the subject. In everyday speech, the reference to a ‘slave trade’ evokes strong associations with narratives of ‘white slavery’ and ‘trafficking’ (Bernstein 2007a, 2007b; Doezema 2010). What is clear in these debates is the fact that migrant prostitution, trafficking, and exploitation get conflated as if they were the same experience. Understood from this semantic field, prostitution is always a slave-like condition, and therefore the literal antithesis of freedom.

This rhetoric calls for an aggressive process of legal purification that must expel all forms of criminality to ‘free’ the victim from her bond to exploiters. This process begins with the woman filing criminal charges, referred to formally as *denuncia*, against her own traffickers and exploiters (Giordano forthcoming).<sup>9</sup> The act of denuncia is partly based on a form of bureaucratic confession during which women admit their position as ‘victims’ of larger networks of exploitation. In the story told (and filed) at the police station, women must emphasize their lack of awareness in getting involved in prostitution. The dimension of ‘betrayal’—of having been misled and deluded by their traffickers—must emerge from the account as a proof of their innocence and unwillingness to work as prostitutes. What matters in terms of the law—what counts in order for a denuncia to be effective in obtaining a residency permit—is the intention behind the decision to migrate. If, through the narratives produced during the interrogation, a woman can prove that she did not plan to work in the sex industry, she has a higher chance of qualifying as a victim. In the split between the actions performed (prostitution) and the intention behind them, the law can measure the degree of victimhood.

This narrative process resembles a religious confession, when sins are formally, but privately, admitted to the priest in order for the sinner to be redeemed. Despite the clear parallel, denuncia only partly resembles the process of confession. Confession entails admitting one’s own sins, while denuncia is about claiming and proving to be a victim. But the two overlap in the sense that the state needs a confession in order to make a denunciation, and to be recognized as a victim, one must prove to be without sins, or at least show purity of intent. Filing criminal charges in the context of the rehabilitation program does have a confessional connotation inasmuch as it marks the first step of a process of transformation and self-reform. The bureaucratic and confessional discourses thus overlap and create a diffuse discourse of the victim, while also producing what I call a form of confessional recognition (Giordano 2014).

From the state’s point of view, the purpose of collecting accounts of women’s experiences of migration and prostitution is mainly to unveil the ‘truth’ of their stories, and thus recognize them as ‘victims’ rather than ‘prostitutes.’ By inscribing women as ‘the victim,’ the state positions them in a socially acceptable and legally commensurable category, thus making them digestible through

confession. In this way, the state also produces its own legal truth. Following the history of confession (Foucault 2003a), I argue that the religious and moral dimensions of confession (as a penalty that marks the beginning of the process of expiation) converge as tools of recognition in the juridical practices of filing criminal charges. Thus a juridical logic permeates confession and a confessional logic echoes in the testimonies that ‘victims’ depose at police stations against their exploiters.

The other steps of rehabilitation focus on reforming women’s conduct, habits, and dispositions, which also mirror the Catholic logic of achieving redemption through different phases of purification (remorse, confession, penance, transformation, and forgiveness). Redemption and expiation, therefore, are central issues not only for Catholic groups involved in aid programs for victims, but also for the state’s integration policies. In terms of Article 18 and the program for victim of human trafficking, legal purification also occurs by moving the prostitute (who remains a criminal subject as long as she does not confess to having been ‘forced’ into sex-work) into a shelter to clean her from any contamination with the criminal world and to help her produce a new self. The state portrays the transition from working on the streets to living in a shelter as a rupture that has the potential to redefine a woman’s way of life and position in society. In the shelters, women are presented with new rules and modes of action that can help them form a new life in line with the Church’s codes of purity and honor; they learn to live a ‘normal’ and ‘good’ life. This involves re-sexualizing the body as well as training it to inhabit the modern representation of a gendered and domestic self via cleaning, washing, cooking, working, scheduling one’s time, and sharing. These are all aspects of what Michel Foucault (1980) perceived as the state’s and Church’s historical invasions into women’s bodies, beginning in early modernity. The focus on the prostitute’s body follows a peculiar Catholic model of biopolitics that singles out the body of the outlaw as the site where impure forces need to be fought and won over. In this way, the foreign body also becomes a metaphor for the body of society made pure again.

While the state’s redemptive effort lies in its forensic desire to collect victim testimonies (through denuncia) as a way to integrate foreign others within Italian society, the nuns’ redemptive approach aims at reconstituting the ‘victim’ as a whole being, in touch with her own spirituality and human dignity. These two takes on redemption are extensions of each other, at times at odds with each other, but both fall within the biopolitical. Biopolitics is a form of politics that takes the health of its population as its object (Foucault 2003b). In this case, the foreign woman as prostitute—and as other—falls out of the equation all together. As Foucault taught us, racism is inscribed within the basic mechanism of modern states’ power, and it functions as “a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population” (2003b:255). It is thus as ‘victims’ and through the nuns’ and the state’s charity that the women are to be reformed to conform to the standards of a good biopolitical subject, and to be reinserted within the population that needs to be kept alive and healthy. In the nuns’ rehabilitation of victims, maintaining life itself not only refers to biological existence, but also to the life of the spirit and in communion with Christ.

In these processes, the discourses of law, religion, and the different kinds of redemption envisioned by the state and the Church both overlap and blur. One could say that the state is mostly concerned with documenting victim testimonies in order to grant legal status, and thus is invested in the forensic aspect of redeeming a life by disclosing its truth; the nuns, for their part, take charge of redeeming lives by teaching a new form of conduct that, as some of them explained to me, is aimed at creating an authentic life cleansed of material attachment and free from subjection. The Italian state thus relies on Catholic groups not only for their resources and infrastructures but also for their discipline in producing proper female subjects. Therefore, confessional logics overlap with forensic ones, and the power of the forensic with the force of the redemptive.

## Transformations

Sister Maria was the head of a group of Catholic nuns with past experience in assisting marginalized Italian women—mostly single mothers and ex-prostitutes—that in 2000 opened a shelter for foreign victims in Turin. They were funded by the municipality and hosted six to eight women at a time. As

the mission statement of the association asserts, its main purpose is to extend ‘social solidarity’ to victims of human trafficking: “Through hospitality we help women regain their independence and encourage them to integrate themselves—through educational and professional trainings—in the socio-professional life” of the receiving country. Thus, the shelter “provides an effective response to the growing phenomenon of prostitution by setting the example of evangelical love, social responsibility, and solidarity.”<sup>10</sup> The rules and mission statement of this shelter are similar to other Catholic shelters’ regulations and are in line with the guidelines and advice provided by mental practitioners and social workers. Women’s progress is measured on the basis of their ability to “cut ties with the past,” adjust to life within the community, integrate new relationships of “reciprocity” instead of relationships of “exploitation” within their lives, learn the language and the skills to find a job, and, finally, reach a psychological balance within themselves.

There are different shelters for people qualifying as victims under Article 18. The first kind is called “escape home” and serves the same function as the emergency room, as nuns and social workers explained to me. It is a place where women are introduced to the education process in which, as a sister stated, women learn that “the night is for sleep and the day is for work.” Women must acquire new routines and, most importantly, prove that they have “real intentions” to enter the program. Once this is assessed, they can move into a shelter of “second reception,” like the one sister Maria runs. Four nuns and four lay Catholic volunteers take turns to make sure that the guests are supervised 24 hours a day.

The main rules of the house state that each guest is required to: (1) follow the “personal program” agreed upon by the social workers and the nuns; (2) ask for permission to go out during the day and, on Saturdays, at night; (3) go on out-of-town trips only after a certain time in the program, when mutual trust between the nuns and the woman has been established; (4) eat lunch and dinner at the shelter with the other guests; (5) watch TV only during free time and no later than 10:30 p.m.; (6) turn off cell phones during meals and turn them over to the nuns at night; (7) for personal safety and the protection of other guests, never give out the address or phone number of the shelter; (8) ask for permission from the nuns before going out with a “boyfriend”; (9) dress simply and appropriately; (10) never use alcohol or drugs; and finally, (11) participate in preparing the meals and cleaning up.<sup>11</sup>

Following the shelter’s rules is meant to produce a radical shift in the women’s behaviors and in their understanding of their past ‘captive’ lives. By practicing the rules, a woman learns to craft a new art of living. This is reminiscent of monastic life (beginning in the fifth century) where rules regulate every aspect of existence to the extent that rule and life, *regula* and *vita*, become indistinguishable (Agamben 2013). But rules are different from the law as understood in juridical terms. In fact, in monastic life in order to teach a rule nuns and monks need to set the example for their disciples without becoming their legislators (Agamben 2013:18). Similarly, in the context of my ethnography, state law does not coincide with the shelter rules, which are modeled around the law that envisions the emancipation of ‘victims’ but are not regulated by it. They have an oblique relationship to the law and they transcend its scope (that of granting foreigners legal status and fighting criminality) by embracing the task of reforming life in its minor details and dispositions. When sister Maria told me that Jesus taught his disciples to pray by exemplifying it for them, she was referring to the fact that the example translates the rule into a conduct that has the potential to transform life into an experience worth living—punctuated, in the case of ex-prostitutes, by autonomy, dignity, and responsibility.

The state represents shelters as liminal spaces where legal logics are suspended to make space for rules that restore life to its fullness. This liminality enables the performance of what resembles a transformation ritual of a ‘lost’ subject—excluded from the population as envisioned by the biopolitical project—into one that can be redeemed. Here, all identifications with life and work on the street are suspended, and alternative practices are encouraged in order to create a new sense of self. The shelter—just like the convent for postulants who are leaving the external world behind to embrace life with and for God—provides women with a resting place for reflection where they can

gradually re-articulate their relationship to the world, where time and space are devoted to reforming one's relationship to oneself and others. One nun once explained to me: "Women are taken care of in the entirety of their being." Not only do they enter the realm of legality by acquiring a residency permit, but they also supposedly undergo a process of radical transformation of spirit, body, and mind. This transformation is the responsibility of the state, which, using the mediating role provided by Catholic associations, is in charge of 'rebirthing' foreign women as socially acceptable subjects.

Unlike at the escape house, the nuns describe the time spent at the second reception shelter as a moment not only for rehabilitation but also to contemplate one's purpose in life and come to terms with one's past. Sister Chiara, who had many years of experience working in this domain, described the women's first few months in the program as the most challenging time, in which women need to be "re-modeled, re-set, re-motivated." In the words of Petra, a young Franciscan nun from another association, shelters provide the space and time for women to "re-own their past." She thought that women who prostituted themselves were "complete slaves, with no freedom of choice." Thus, it is only by recuperating a narrative that gives meaning to that moment in the larger context of their lives that they can start a process of healing.

In one of our many conversations, Sister Maria described the conditions of women who have just entered the program as damaged: "They are twisted inside; they have a wound that hasn't healed. Until they heal it and take responsibility for it, you can't put anything on them because it hurts. Only then, can we start to teach them something." Sister Maria referred to the fact that one needs to heal and take responsibility for her own existence before she is ready to follow rules for a new life. The purpose of the shelter is to allow the self the time to recover from having lost itself. While the nuns' understanding of time is more in line with the time of phenomenology (Binswanger and Foucault 1986) than the juridical time of the state, by means of their collaboration, state and Catholic groups are implicated in different temporalities of the self.

## Responsibility and redemption

In the same conversation, Sister Maria told me about a long illness she had suffered for many years, which forced her to revisit her whole life: "Being ill taught me a lot; it taught me that I was not in control of myself and my life. I had to come to terms with it and take responsibility for it, re-own my life in light of my sickness. It was a form of redemption." When I asked her what she meant by that, she answered that it was not about moral redemption, but about "taking responsibility for the moments of suffering and looking at what positive learning they have brought to you." I interpreted Maria's statements as her way of explaining how difficult experiences can lead to great transformation and to a life lived fully. I understood her mention of responsibility in the phenomenological sense of assuming, for oneself, the imperative to truly exist (Binswanger and Foucault 1986). She paralleled her illness with the lack of agency she imagined women had as 'victims,' and understood redemption not strictly in a spiritual sense, but as a bodily transformation of the self, a re-articulation of subjectivity that passes through physical changes.<sup>12</sup> The illness provides a test and an example simultaneously: it tests one's resilience and, as an example, it performs a different form of life. Maria's capacity to learn from her illness was an example that women could follow; her very embodied experience of sickness, recovery, and the life lessons acquired became a form of leading by example.

At other times the question of redemption was raised more specifically in relation to the issue of freedom. Nuns would evoke this term to point out the need to come to terms with the experience of exploitation. In this sense, they saw redemption as being freed from subjugation, from victimhood, and enslavement. Sister Romana explained, "We must help women re-own their dreams of migration, their project of emancipation, and show them that they can be the agent of it." In the nuns' perspective, this would lead to autonomy, which, as part of the migration trajectory, certainly did not correlate with working as a prostitute. In listening to their conceptions of redemption, I noted an interesting parallel between the nuns' idea that the victim could not have agreed to her own slavery

and the state's discourse. For the juridical apparatus, it is paramount that the victim's intentions were pure, and that there was no proof of her complicity in prostitution. Any allusion to the contrary was to be effaced in the testimony deposed at the police station. For both religious and juridical discourses redemption is only possible if the women were victims (and not free) when they agreed to engage in prostitution, and later became agents by taking responsibility for their own life.

From the nuns' perspective, the victim's life is reduced to the body as a tool for sex and money that can only represent a state of alienation. What is at issue for the nuns in trafficking and prostitution is a misappropriation of the sexual capacity of the body that is used to earn money rather than sexual reproduction within the bounds of marital intimacy. Sex outside the context of the family, thus reduced to a matter of economic exchange, alienates women from the original purpose of the body and sexuality. As sister Silvia put it: "According to the Church the body and sex cannot be commodified. When we work with victims, we take care of their bodies by making sure they eat and sleep well. Their bodies have been mistreated and we help them care for it. Once we have taken care of the body, we can take care of other needs, such as the needs of the soul."

The nuns resist the possibility that women might have been aware of the prospect of working in prostitution before leaving their countries. For them, these women are victims on many different levels. By considering them in this way, they spare them the burden of being 'sinners.' On several occasions, I asked about the relationship between sin and redemption. For me, there could not be redemption unless one had committed a sin, and therefore the victim-redemption logic was paradoxical and at odds in the nuns' narratives. While the possibility of retaining purity despite prostitution is inherent in the rhetoric of the victim who was forced to sell her body and sexual services, the nuns' practices and conceptions of the rehabilitation program aim at transforming the victim not only into an agent of her own life, but also into a person who is 'better fitted' to society and cleansed of her past deeds. In this sense, the nuns' project coincides with the state's biopolitical aim at the confession and moral expiation of the victim. Although she is a victim, she is simultaneously treated as a sinner in need of redemption.

"What do you think of women who make the decision to work as prostitutes? Do you think they are sinners?" I once asked sister Chiara, one of the nuns in charge of an escape home. She was a young nun who belonged to the newly formed Franciscan Sisters of the New Jerusalem, which was officially recognized by the Franciscan Order only in 2006. It was explicitly founded to create shelters and escape homes for victims of violence and human trafficking. Chiara always struck me as a very progressive and politically engaged person, very informal in her demeanor, and open to talking about different issues related to women's sexuality. Shortly before having this conversation, she had told me about women in the program who wanted to have abortions and how, although the question was very troubling to her, she found ways to support them. At other times, we had talked about the issue of condoms, and how she encouraged women to use them with their boyfriends, although this raised contradictory feelings in her. On the particular question about the relationship between sin and prostitution, she answered with no hesitation: "I don't think a woman who is mentally healthy can make such a conscious decision. Even those who say they want to work as prostitutes must have some psychological problems. So, I think they too are victims of some sort and have no control over their lives." This religious paradigm leaves no possibilities for life outside the binary opposition of the victim/agent categories of recognition; one cannot be simultaneously a victim and an agent, a sinner and mentally ill.

In the nuns' narratives, women are spared from sinner status, but nonetheless they must undergo a process of radical self-transformation. They are slaves and need to be re-educated in order to become autonomous. In addition to the biopolitical concern with their bodily processes, there is also a demand for forgiveness that differentiates the discourse of the nuns from that of the juridical apparatus. Women are encouraged to forgive the harm that has been inflicted upon them, and to find paths toward redemption. The shelter provides a space where, at first, time is suspended and women can focus on introspection. Nonetheless, when women are disciplined in bodily and moral practices in order to be transformed into independent subjects, it becomes clear how the nuns'



practices are inscribed within the state's biopolitical project of redeeming lives. In other words, these disciplines are means of becoming proper citizens. In this sense, the nuns use the state's secular categories to accomplish the task of rehabilitation, while the state resorts to confessional practices (*denuncia*) to document women's trajectories and map international criminal networks. In their work with the women, the nuns recognize the redemptive aspect of state power and turn redemption into a secular project of saving lives. In this effort, the nuns use state categories of recognition—victim, agent, prostitute, migrant—that make all lives translatable into one specific form of life, a victimized or sacrificial life deprived of autonomous choice. This secular-religious paradigm is influenced by the demands of the juridical apparatus, which defines the limits within which life is worth redeeming. In a resolutely Catholic country, the language of victimhood and sacrifice does not leave foreigners many choices for political or economic recognition; it only allows for transforming what the state deems necessary.

## Conversions

Although never addressed explicitly, the logic of conversion is inherent to the pedagogy of exemplarity, the mission of which is to transform victims into independent subjects. This same logic—and its implications for questions of redemption—constitutes the heart of the Church's mission of evangelization. How do nuns rearticulate this universalizing mission in their work with foreign women at this particular historical conjuncture? The entire discourse on conversion is challenged by the presence of foreigners who have different faiths and spiritual practices that the nuns want to respect. Thus, they approach evangelization today through seemingly ambivalent logics. The state's discourse on multiculturalism and tolerance overlaps with the Catholic discourse of acceptance and provides a different language in which to talk about the relationship to the migrant other. Instead of talking about religious conversion, the nuns invoke the logic of reform and emancipation, of facilitating the women's integration within Italian society. In a way, just as with redemption, they translate their project of conversion into a secular process of transformation of the self that maps onto the state's biopolitical categories.

In our conversations, the nuns evoked multiple levels of conversion: of the other, and of themselves as servants of God. In questioning their mission of converting souls, they seem to find the meaning of Christ's teaching in "welcoming the Christ in the other without any discrimination of color or religion." Therefore, they encourage women to pursue their own confessions by pushing them to attend the Mosque, the Orthodox Church, or African Pentecostal churches, according to their respective faiths. Women's spirituality is very important for the nuns. They believe that they should take care of women "in their wholeness," considering both the need to receive legal recognition and the need to pursue a spiritual life as essential. The spiritual dimension is not necessarily a transformation of ex-captives into catholic subjects; rather, it is freeing existence from subjection. Nuns use monastic rules to provide discipline to a soul that has lived, according to them, in chaos.

At a meeting in Turin—organized by several groups, including educators, social workers, and lay volunteers involved in the program—to discuss the spiritual implications of rehabilitation, Sister Carla said, "We don't only take care of the legal aspect of their lives, in other words of the residency permit, but we provide them with food, clothes, shelter, and we should also provide some spiritual nourishment." This conversation was part of a larger debate among religious and secular organizations on the role of cultural difference and tolerance in their work with migrants. What does difference mean and how should it be dealt with?

What emerged was that some nuns suspended their mission to convert people to Catholicism by invoking cultural and spiritual difference as heritage, which has meaning in and of itself, and must be respected as such. As long as women attended a church or mosque, the nuns supported their spiritual practices. The manifestation of their faiths may be different, but nuns recognized in them the universality of believing in God. "I have complete respect for those who believe in a superior

being, because in it my own God certainly exists. If they are Muslims, Christian Orthodox, or Pentecostal, I respect them all as long as they believe in something,” said Sister Anna. In this view, all human beings have a spiritual side, and the nuns were mostly concerned about it being sustained in the women’s lives. Another nun at the meeting commented:

There are girls who only want the residency permit. But then the person comes into the picture. It is obvious that that is the excuse, but then a new path of life starts. And here my situation as a consecrated woman comes into play. This doesn’t mean that I ask them to come to mass, but by my very presence the girl asks herself certain questions and their spirituality finds a way to express itself.

Thus, conversion—like rehabilitation—does not happen through proselytization, but by setting a good example. This is supposed to inspire women to resort to their own spirituality, which is immanent to all human beings. The rehabilitation program is supposed to spark, or rekindle, spiritual longing. Only this can make the women whole. For Catholic groups, the pedagogical process implied in the state rehabilitation program cannot run its course if the spiritual component of life is not addressed.

“Evangelization does not only happen through words,” Sister Chiara told me. “It happens through your very deeds and your life; my condition as a nun raises questions in them that doing catechism would not bring up.” Her words emphasized the fact that there are different forms of ‘evangelization’ and that spreading God’s word is not the only way to touch and transform people’s lives. Thus, I interpreted the nuns’ attempt to be more ‘culturally sensitive’ to women’s difference as a way of conforming to the state’s and NGOs’ discourses on multiculturalism and the importance of welcoming difference instead of reducing it to sameness. Various discourses are at play in the nuns’ words, and a complex overlapping of logics makes their practices ambivalent: logics of domination and conversion, on the one hand, and logics of tolerance and respect of difference on the other.

Moreover, in this particular field of rehabilitation, the nuns take up the state’s guidelines and translate the pedagogical project inherent in all forms of evangelization into a project of disciplining the body, behaviors, and desires. Although not in the sphere of women’s spiritual practices, the logic of conversion nonetheless informs how the nuns engage with the women and their mission of emancipation. Rehabilitation, just as evangelization, occurs when a woman has the opportunity to follow an example that then creates a practice that through repetition, translates itself into a new mode of being. Is this not what the state intended by delegating the implementation of the program to religious groups?

As for the women, conversion and transformation through the rehabilitation program had different and ambivalent connotations.<sup>13</sup> While they often acted as if the shelter was a ‘good family’ and the nuns the mothers of it, at the same time they told me that they were using it in order to obtain legal status in Italy. As Ana once said to me, “I haven’t changed; I didn’t need to change. I wanted the residency permit and this has changed.” For some, the whole apparatus of the program for victims provided real support and opened up opportunities for their future in Italy. In contrast, others referred to their experience in the shelters as “being in prison” or felt they were being forced to follow rules that were just as alienating as the ones they had to follow when they worked the streets. In this sense, paradoxically, women often experienced what the state and religious groups refer to as “a process of liberation from victimhood” as another form of subjugation.

Women also showed ambivalence in regards to the nuns’ role. Although some of the women I met at shelters had developed a fantasy of becoming nuns in order to purify themselves from their past (and therefore had associated the power of redemption with the image of the nun), for many, the nun represented a figure to both respect and disrespect. In Micaela’s words, “Nuns have nothing to teach us about real life, they cannot prepare us for that.” They are distant, and yet so close to the women. They end up representing a mirror that only partially reflects back. They are more like a repository of authority, the gatekeepers of rules and norms. I once asked Ana about her take on the program and, in particular, on the nuns’ and the volunteers’ roles in it. She answered, “We are only an experiment, this is what we are to them. They come here to feel clean inside, or because they have

nothing better to do.” The lucidity of this statement stayed with me for a long time. It also partially resonated with the nuns’ admissions that they are purified and changed by their work with the women.

## Specular examples

In the encounters between nuns and ex-prostitutes, the transformative power of the example goes both ways. The women, too, set an example worth following. Sister Tina once put it in these words: “I help you go through it, and you help me purify myself. While you purify yourself from your previous life, I purify myself of prejudice.” “This is the teaching of the Gospels,” Maria once told me. “I support you and you support me.” These words made me aware of how, through the rhetoric of liberation, the nuns engage in projects of self-purification as well. Conversion of oneself is a transformation the nuns personally experience time and again in the course of their work within the shelter. For them, relating to women who are morally at risk is redemptive in and of itself, and it raises questions about their own way of intervening. What is at stake for the nuns is that while they are implicated in the biopolitical project of rehabilitating others, they themselves are transformed.

Maria once told me about her personal turning point in her work with prostitutes. She referred to it as “the culmination of my conversion.” When she began serving in shelters for ex-prostitutes, she mostly worked with Italian women. Her conviction at the time was that those who chose sex work were fundamentally sinners, even though she recognized that they all came from disadvantaged backgrounds. One day, social services sent over a woman who had worked in the sex industry by choice for several years. She had AIDS and other major health problems and, as Maria described it to me, “it did show on her face.” This is how she described the “redemptive moment” triggered by this encounter:

I used to treat her very well, or at least this is what I thought. She didn’t think so. Unconsciously I thought that since she had chosen that work she must have deserved all the illnesses she suffered. I felt as if I was schizophrenic myself: on the one hand I treated her very well, and on the other hand, in my thoughts I punished her. She used to rebel against everything I would say or ask her to do. One day, I told her: “I treat you with kid’s gloves and you are always so rude to me; why?” She answered, “You treat me with kid’s gloves because you are disgusted by me.” I didn’t know what to say. Then I realized that she was right. My disgust was unconscious, but she perceived it. So, from that moment onwards I started to treat her less well, but I felt more sincere and transparent.

For Maria this was a transformative moment that allowed her to realize the meaning of acceptance: “I understood that we must accept them as they are. When we work with migrant women, we as nuns must put our morality aside. This is a form of sacrifice. We must be prepared to sacrifice ourselves for them.”

In Maria’s account, the prostitute becomes the means of purification; through the example of her life, she produces a transformation in those who want to save her. She mirrors the nun’s unconscious sense of disgust and judgment. The woman’s difference provides for a moment of catharsis. Encountering damaged life entails assuming the disgust for the other within oneself and owning up to it in a radical taking of responsibility. For Maria it was clear that she was not only saving the damaged life of the ex-prostitute: she was saving her own.

Similarly, Sister Rosaria summarized how, through her shelter work, she was able to let the shame of prejudice come to the surface to be expelled:

I consider myself lucky because some of my cultural prejudices that were lying dormant in me, such as racism, have come to the surface again. I was able to experience a catharsis of my personal purification. I was able to see again a lot of mental and cultural schemas. Living with those who are different serves the purpose of personal growth.

Within the shelter the women themselves become mirrors for the nuns who, as Sisters Rosaria and Maria expressed, experience a form of purification through them. The power comes from the women, from the way they experience their sexuality. Through them, the nuns learn the anatomy of the body and the rules of desires; they can imagine bodily pleasures, even though they interpret them in the register of sin. The nuns also recognize that working with ex-prostitutes can have the spiritual outcome of overcoming prejudice and discrimination. In this cathartic process, they can improve themselves by understanding their disgust for the prostitute. Furthermore, I understand their process of self-transformation as a biopolitical moment that results not just in shaping the lives of ex-prostitutes, but also in reshaping the lives of those who ‘save.’

Returning to Sister Tina’s words, working to rehabilitate victims conjures a sense of reciprocity, a give and take that occurs between them and the women. In the end, the aim of the program is to show women that outside of the logic of exploitation, other relationships are possible. For the nuns, reciprocity stands as a synonym for emancipation and the opposite of, as well as antidote to, enslavement. Reciprocity also applies to the logic of conversion: through the transformation of socially unacceptable subjects into autonomous beings, the nuns undergo a similar process of purification and, more broadly, society’s sins are disclosed as something that can be excused by the religious performance of forgiveness.

In this reciprocal framework, on the one hand, the women are given a cathartic role by the nuns, who experience them as a means for their own expiation of sins. On the other hand, the nuns, inasmuch as they are engaged in implementing the state’s integration policies, become the gatekeepers of state rules and the mediators for the women. In this sense, they themselves occupy the position of a particular kind of role model that embodies spiritual, moral, and political powers to convert and transform the other. But the women embody a confessional power that enables purification and conversion in the nuns. “I support you, you support me.”

## Conclusion

I have argued that state and Catholic groups develop different understandings of redemption, but through similar routes of confession and transformation. The state is concerned with uprooting criminality from society and securing the safety of citizens and residents. Redemption thus revolves around the recognition of foreign others through categories that are intelligible to the state (the ‘victim’), and therefore controllable. Catholic groups, too, appeal to the category of the victim as a way to restore cleanliness in the community, but are mostly concerned with redeeming the victim’s body and soul.

Both the state and the Church translate the body of the outlaw into a victim, and thus insert it within the purview of a population that needs to be cared for. In Italy, the legal model for rehabilitating victims of human trafficking is avowedly secular yet also deeply shaped by a Catholic urge to purify sinners. At the same time, Catholic groups involved in rehabilitation programs develop a secular idea of redemption that is in line with the biopolitical project of transforming and preserving lives. This overlapping of religious redemption and political inclusion in programs for victims becomes clear in Catholic nuns’ emphasis on leading by example as a way to implement the biopolitical effort of the state to turn victims into agents of their lives and possibly citizens. While I argue that the nuns’ use of norms and rules transcend the scope of the law and of the state’s biopolitical project of rehabilitating victims—thus, potentially, providing a break with that form of power—they continue to understand the foreign woman’s sexuality and the body through the victim/agent paradigm. In this way, the example as a practice that could potentially rupture the biopolitical urge to directly intervene to create better health, sanitation, and general life conditions, becomes a particular Catholic instantiation of this form of politics without undoing it.

## Notes

1. The names of all individuals and organizations have been changed to ensure confidentiality.
2. The main mission of the Sisters of Charity, founded in 1799 by Saint J.A.T. in France, is to serve those most in need. The order has a long tradition of caring for prisoners, the sick, and those in need of medical and social assistance, as well as fostering youth education. Other religious orders are involved in the rehabilitation program for victims of human trafficking, each with a slightly different focus in their missionary work with marginal populations. Another shelter where I conducted research was run by the Salesian Sisters of Saint John Bosco. Founded in 1872, this order's main missions are to run shelters for the homeless and schools for at-risk youth, provide charity to the poor, and facilitate schooling for children.
3. At the national level, 54,559 people reached out to projects of rehabilitation for victims between 2000 and 2007. Of this number, 13,517 filed criminal charges and entered the rehabilitation program. Only 6435 found employment after finishing the program.
4. In 1958, Italy passed the Merlin Law—still in force today—to regulate the issue of prostitution. This law states that sexual exploitation, brothels, and trafficking for the purpose of sex work are to be condemned, but prostitution in and of itself is not considered a crime. Prior to this law, prostitution had been illegal.
5. While shelters are managed by both Catholic and lay associations, in this article I focus on the former because at the time of my research, 90% of them were made available and run by Catholic groups.
6. Although I am aware of the different connotations of terms such as 'prostitute' and 'sex worker', I use the term "prostitute" to talk about foreign women who worked in the sex industry and later entered the program of rehabilitation for 'victims of human trafficking' because this is the term that most of my interlocutors in the field used. Members of the Italian Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes such as Pia Covre also use this term to talk about sex work.
7. Since Italy became a state in 1861, the Italian state and Catholic Church have shared in governing each other's domain. This legacy continues as the state relies on the Church's resources to implement social policies, typified by the process of rehabilitating foreign prostitutes. In Italy, the religious and secular spheres have historically been deeply enmeshed and hard to separate from one another. Whereas Protestant Europe crafted an ideal of a secular state that relegated the religious sphere to the private space of conscience and morality, in Italy the language and values of Catholicism have long been part of the juridical and political languages of the state. The effects of this relationship can be seen, for example, in the Church's opposition to any attempt to go against the Catholic ethos of the family as heterosexual and reproductive. Just a few examples can be found in 1970, when the Italian state passed a law that legalized divorce, or in the 1990s when the Parliament discussed laws affecting gay marriage. Catholicism has been able to play a hegemonic role in the political sphere by shaping it through what in Italy Gianni Vattimo (1996) has called a "politics of collateralism," while at the same time claiming autonomy from state interference. For Vattimo, 'collateralism' underscores the weight that the Catholic Church was able to exercise in Italian electoral politics through the Christian Democratic Party, which maintained the majority of seats in congress until the early 1990s. The end of collateralism marked the end of Catholic Politics, namely, the dissolution of the bond between the expression of the Catholic faith and the obligation to vote for one single party (Vattimo 1996:27).
8. For more details on the Committee, see [www.lucciole.org](http://www.lucciole.org).
9. Of the number of denuncia filed each year, between 75% and 85% result in residency permits. The number of permits issued tends to increase 2% to 10% each year (Barberi 2008).
10. Certificato di Costituzione dell'Associazione Utopia 2000, February 2000.
11. Here I am paraphrasing the shelter's mission statement, which women read and sign upon entering the facility.
12. In her study of Catholic postulants in a Mexican convent, Rebecca Lester (2005) explored the intersections of theories of the self with theories of the body.
13. Elsewhere I reflect on the women's voices and experiences of the rehabilitation program (Giordano 2014). In this article, I have focused primarily on the nuns' perspective and implications with the state practices of recognition.

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## Notes on contributor

CRISTIANA GIORDANO is assistant professor of Anthropology at University of California, Davis. She works on foreign migration, mental health, and cultural translation in contemporary Italy. Her research addresses the politics of migration in Europe through the lens of ethno-psychiatry and its radical critique of psychiatric, legal, and moral categories of inclusion/exclusion of foreign others. She is the author of *Migrants in Translation. Caring and the Logics of Difference in Contemporary Italy* (2014).

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