



European Islam and the Italian case. Tendencies and specificities

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Abstract

In the second half of XXth century, the processes of secularization, privatization, and pluralization of the religious offer, have completely changed the European religious landscape. These processes have accelerated enormously with the arrival and progressive stabilization of ever larger waves of immigrants. The presence of Muslim immigrants (statistically, culturally, and geopolitically, the most significant and the most debated of these new religious presences) brought Islam to Europe: and this has been the beginning of a modern European Islam. The processes of integration are nevertheless different in every European country. The case of Italy has its own peculiarities: because the Islamic presence is more recent, and because it follows different paths. The article will describe these specificities.

Keywords Islam in Europe · Muslim communities · Italy · Integration · Dialogue · Islamophobia

Introduction: comparing imaginaries

The presence of Islam in Europe is part of a broader transformation of the religious landscape.

For a long period of its modern history Europe has been characterized by a “post-Westfalian” situation (Nielsen & Otterbeck, 2015). The dominant interpretative principle, *cuius regio eius religio*, has survived, de facto, until a few decades ago, in both Catholic and Protestant countries (and even more strongly in the Orthodox countries of Eastern Europe): to each state corresponded, at least officially, a dominant religion, or rather a specific majority Christian denomination. The only exception has been

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the few European countries that have already been born as religiously plural, even though the principle was often simply transferred at a regional, cantonal or *länder* level.

In the second half of 20th century, the processes of secularization¹, privatization of the religious dimension², and pluralization of the religious offer (Allievi, 2020; with reference to the Italian case Allievi, 2014), have completely changed the landscape. These processes, already visible within the European religious field and the native populations, have accelerated enormously with the arrival and stabilization of ever larger waves of immigrants, and the processes of inclusion of second (and subsequent) generations, that differently from most of their parents were granted citizenship. If secularization and privatization of religious belonging have set the conditions for the decline of religious monopolies, they have also paved the way for the pluralization of the market of religious goods. Immigrant populations entered the market with the religions they brought with themselves. For statistical but also cultural and political reasons, Islam emerged among them in terms of visibility, making Muslims the second largest religious group in every European country, if Christian groups are seen as one. An historical turn, that happened silently and unforeseen.

This new presence (the wider pluralism, and the specific relevance of Islam) does not only constitute a quantitative change: more religions are present in society and public space. It constitutes a qualitative change, prefiguring a different kind of society, in which pluralism is constitutive: not a pathology, but the new physiology, the new state of normality, which also becomes norm, explicit recognition. A society quite different from the one prefigured by the constitutions and social contracts of most European countries, as they have been imagined and as they were perceived. The fundamental constitutional principles of European countries include, in fact, the recognition of religious freedom, equal rights, and other democratic and liberal principles, that make them open and plural societies. But in their history, in their social evolution, in their urban landscape, in their own self-perception, they have, like every society, a history marked by specificities rooted in time, which include some form of ‘preference’ or privilege for the dominant religion (as it happens in other politico-religious contexts, in other parts of the world – and not always in recognizably democratic forms).

Not all examples of pluralization on the religious level (symbolically, perhaps, the most decisive) have the same impact, in the public space. For statistical, strategic, and geopolitical reasons, one religion in particular, Islam, brings with itself, in its relations with the West, and with Europe in particular, an overload of ‘cultural redundancy’ (Pace, 1995), historically and symbolically marked, that cannot be underestimated: on either side. Both on the northern shore of the Mediterranean and on its southern shore (without forgetting the specificities of the Balkan shore) there is an overload of selective and self-serving interpretation of history: from the

¹ A wide literature has elaborated on the concept, starting from Weber’s pioneering reflections, up to those who have explicitly thematized the concept: among others, in different periods, Wilson (1966) and Taylor (2007), which both opened huge debates, in different fields.

² From G. Davie’s pioneering reflections on “Believing without Belonging” (1990) to N. Luhmann’s (1977) reflection on the fact that while in the past unbelief was a private affair, today faith has become one.

more distant in time, which nevertheless has very contemporary repercussions (the reciprocal conquests concerning Jerusalem or Istanbul, or the Islamic presence in al-Andalus, passing through the Ottoman expansion and the Crusades), to the age of Empires and colonialism, that in some countries has left extensive neo-colonial after-effects. Immigration in recent decades has only revived, and in some cases strengthened and radicalized, these opposing imaginaries: including through a process of progressive ‘Muslimization’ of immigrants (Allievi, 2005), part of a more general ‘over-Islamization’ (Al-Azmeh, 2004) of Muslim populations, which has made them experience a process of double stigmatization: as immigrants in general, and as Muslims specifically.

Islam in European history

The Islamic presence in Europe is almost always perceived as a historical novelty, unusual and unpredictable, when not unnatural. But the Islamic presence in Europe has a history rooted in time, which has left important traces even in contemporary times. If anything, in many countries (including Italy, as we shall see) this heritage constitutes a forgotten history, sometimes explicitly cancelled: of which it is worthwhile to highlight the cultural continuities, but also the profound social discontinuities that characterize it. Ironically, the same idea of Europe as a homogeneous entity, with common internal traits, is partly a consequence of (or is in relation to) the military threats coming from external and internal Muslim forces, in different ways.

There are at least two important historical precedents that have marked the Islamic presence in Europe: the first concerns Mediterranean Europe, the second Central and Eastern Europe (Allievi, 2018).

In Southern Europe, the main example of presence, with longer-lasting consequences, is Islamic Spain. A presence that began at the dawn of the 8th century and ended with the expulsion, in 1492, of the last surviving descendants of the Muslim settlers: more than half a millennium of domination, cultural even before military, that is still remembered as one of the golden ages of Spanish history, but also of Islamic global history. This legacy is still visible today through the architectural wonders of al-Andalus (Cordoba, Granada, Sevilla), but is deeply rooted in cultural traditions and philosophical speculation: an important heritage of religious tolerance and dialogue, in some respects even mythologized in modern historiography.

A briefer presence, with less incisive consequences, and (unlike in Spain) essentially forgotten, affected Sicily³, and other areas of the peninsula, especially in the south (Metcalfe, 2009; Di Branco, 2017; Panetta, 1973; Cilaro, 1992), with the brief experiences of the emirates of Bari and Taranto, and the colony of Lucera (Taylor, 2005; Feniello, 2011)⁴. The first officially documented Arab raid on the Sicilian coast

³ The classical reference is Michele Amari’s detailed *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia*, written in the mid 19th century, recently re-printed in 4 volumes by Le Monnier, its original publisher (2002). See also Rizzitano (1975), Giunta and Rizzitano (1991), Maurici (1995), and more recently Tramontana (2014), Nef (2015), Engl and Jäckh (2022).

⁴ But the whole Italian peninsula has been influenced, in different ways, by the Islamic presence: in the form of commercial flows, as it has been particularly the case for Venice (Coco, 1993; Pedani, 2010),

dates back to 652, but it was substantiated by effective domination between the 9th and 11th centuries, and a cultural influence that would last into the Norman era as well, in the courts of King Roger, William II, and especially embodied in the figure of Frederick II, whom the Arabs remember as al-Imbiratur. In his court Arabic was a known language, and he probably had a cultural (if not even religious) sympathy for Islam: at the point that the cloak worn in Rome to receive the crown of the Holy Roman Empire was decorated with inscriptions in Arabic characters, and bore the date in the Islamic calendar, as did the coins he had minted (Hunke, 1960). Despite the Arab artistic and architectural heritage in the island, as well as in the language, toponymy, and onomastics, to end with customs and habits, characters and sayings of popular culture, the Islamic period of Sicilian history has nevertheless been almost erased from widespread memory, and is beginning to be recovered today, not coincidentally in conjunction with a new Islamic presence, due to immigration. But the historical and cultural discontinuity between the presence then and now is complete.

The second historical antecedent of the Islamic presence in Europe, however, is more recent: it begins in the 13th century, first with the Mongol invasions and then with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire and its aftermath. Groups of Tatars will settle in Poland, while beginning with the conquest of Sofia in 1386 and the victory in Kosovo in 1389, Turkish populations will begin to move, in significant numbers, into Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece (and in smaller numbers into Romania, Austria, Hungary). To these must be added the converted populations of Albanians, Greek Pomaks, Bosnians. Together, these populations constitute a peculiar Islamic presence whose characteristic feature, on the other hand, is historical continuity: in fact, they have remained present in their areas of residence ever since, characterizing them culturally and religiously (and, as far as Turkish-speaking populations are concerned, also linguistically). They are thus not the result of recent immigration, but of historical persistence, recognized and even institutionalized, albeit not without contrasts and conflict resurgence, as the Balkan war in former Yugoslavia tragically showed.

However, Europe, and Western Europe in particular, had another important historical occasion of encounter with Islam and knowledge of Muslim populations: the age of imperialism and colonization. It is during that period that, in modern times, several European countries have produced the first regulations related to their then internal Muslim minorities.

The current Islamic migratory chains in Western Europe are in some countries consequences of the respective areas of colonization, which explains the prevalence – initially encouraged, including with the guarantee of citizenship – of Indo-Pakistanis and people from other Commonwealth countries in the United Kingdom, the strong Maghrebi and particularly Algerian presence in France, the Indonesian and Moluccan component in the Netherlands, up to the Muslims of Africa present in Portugal. The Turkish dominant presence in Germany is partly the consequence of different logics: the signing in 1961 of a labor import agreement with Turkey, a few months after

but also Pisa (Mascitelli & Pepicelli, 2023) and other maritime cities; as military threats, as it happened in Friuli (Tirelli, 1998), to which the young Pasolini dedicated the drama *I Turcs tâl Friûl*; or in the form of piracy and privateering (Bono, 1993; Bonomo, 1996) and slavery (Bennassar, 1989; Bono, 1994 and, 1999).

the erection of the Berlin Wall, sanctioning the impossibility of immigration from Eastern Europe. But these agreements were a step further in a long-lasting collaboration: Prussia and then Germany had been involved in Ottoman military modernization (under Abdulhamid II, across 19th and 20th century, Germany invested in the construction of the Berlin-Baghdad railway and paid state visits) and the Ottoman Empire and Germany were allied in the Triple Alliance at the outbreak of WWI⁵.

Islam and Europe: stages of a relationship

When talking about immigration, opinion leaders – and thus the public opinion – essentially have in mind the so-called first-migrants: newcomers, with little knowledge of the arrival context, at the first steps of the integration process, still strongly characterized by the departure context. But things are more complex: and it is easily seen when we take a longer-term historical framework, which from the roots of the past projects us into a future that to some extent is already our present. We can go through different stages of the relationship between Islam and Europe: concepts – as those of Islam and the West – obviously not comparable in themselves. When we use the word Islam we usually refer to a religion, but also to a civilization, historically visible in different forms, while Europe refers to geographical concept, but also, as well, to a civilization, characterized by a different dominant religion (Christianism, in different forms, for a long part of their history conflicting with each other), but also to a set of values that are not related to religion.

In a long first historical phase, that of the relationship between *Islam and Europe*, the two entities perceived themselves as self-sufficient, mutually impermeable, and self-centered. In spite of a history of deep cultural reciprocal influences (from philosophy to science, from technologies to the arts, from medicine to astronomy, from trade to cultural fashions, from food to clothing), the mutual perception is all about closure and conflict: a typical example is that of the Crusades (even though they are read very differently, on the theological and practical levels, if we compare the Christian reading of it to the Arab historians of the Crusades), but also piracy and privateering that will leave ample trace in the collective imagination of Mediterranean Europe: the Saracen towers, “Mamma li turchi!”, folklore, prayers such as “a furore Turchorum libera nos Domine”.

A second, shorter historical phase is that of Europe’s penetration of the lands of Islam (*Europe in Islam*). It is the age of empires and the period of colonization, when Europe directly dominated many Muslim countries, often deciding their fate, conformation and borders. It is a phase that continues, in different forms, in terms of

⁵ We cannot go into the complex historiographical debate on the relationship between Islam and the West, that counts large academic frescoes and synthetic but diffused superficial pseudo-analysis. Not even on the presence of Muslims in Europe, on which the literature constitutes already a vast repertoire, that goes from historical, sociological, and anthropological essays, to political and polemical approaches, from theological reflection to journalistic description and even fiction. For the historical debates, we can refer to Dakhliia and Vincent (2011) and Dakhliia and Kaiser (2013). As an introduction to contemporary sociological European Islam we can quote a few texts that may serve as guidance: the first major comparative research on the topic, commissioned by the Forward Studies Unit of the European Commission (Maréchal et al., 2003); and a couple of handbooks that can offer a general draft, with their respective large bibliographies (Tottoli, 2022; Césari, 2015).

spheres of influence, in contemporary neo-colonization attitudes, through processes of economic domination and cultural globalization. But they also produce specific migratory chains, and ways of managing relations with Islam and certain Muslim communities.

A third, much more recent phase, on the other hand, concerns, in reverse, *Islam in Europe*, and is characterized by migration processes. In some countries this phase begins as early as the period between the two world wars, with some numerically modest antecedents as early as the nineteenth century in Europe's major colonial powers, but for the most part we see it substantially at work beginning with post-war reconstruction and then following the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s in north-central Europe, and even later, from the late 1970s onward, in southern Europe. Islam did not arrive in Europe at the point of the sword, as it did in the domination in Andalusia or the Ottoman expansion in the Balkans, or even with the attempted siege of Vienna, but it arrived, as an unforeseen effect of the sum of millions of individual choices for economic betterment, through migrations, which had nothing to do, originally, with religious motives.

The fourth phase, that of *Islam of Europe*, we see it taking place through the generational transition and a more general cultural transformation, which takes place mainly at the individual level, and to which other social actors, in addition to immigrants and their descendants, such as converts, also contribute. It is a mutation that does not come from outside, but takes place within the European continent, being a direct fruit of this context: it involves in fact an Islam which is born and socialized in Europe, formed and confronted in it, and forced or stimulated by it to build its own identity and space.

The natural sequel to this process should be the formation, in a fifth phase of which we see for now only the beginnings, of a *European Islam*, with its own marked identity. An Islam which is different from, to quote an example, Arab (or Moroccan, Egyptian...) or Turkish Islam. This Islam is and will be characterized by being an autochthonous European product, and to a large extent the fruit of a progressive and substantial process of citizenship of Muslims residing in Europe, in prospect in the fullness of rights, on an equal footing with other Europeans, with whom they share a common destiny, and also capable of relevant feedback effects, including religious ones, with respect to the countries of origin of Muslim populations in Europe. Of this phase, not yet completed, and indeed barely outlined, not much can be said, except that its contents and outcomes will depend as much on the internal evolutions of Muslim communities, in turn also influenced by the dynamics of global Islam, as on the reactions and policies adopted towards them by Europe, or rather by the different European countries.

Today, most European countries are between the third and fourth stages, although there are some hints of a beginning of the fifth, which will be more visible in the coming years and decades, as the process of detachment from the origins, de-ethnicization and ultimately cultural and linguistic Europeanization of Muslim communities consolidates.

It should be kept in mind, however, that the cycle continually begins again as new immigrants continue and will continue to arrive. So while we can identify changes,

even majority trend lines, they can never include in their entirety the immigrant Muslim communities of Europe.

These transformations translate into cultural and social consequences, but they are also theological, of self-definition of European Islam: visible in fatwas (individual legal decisions on the correct behavior to take in a given situation), in the transformations of *fiqh*, of Islamic jurisprudence, produced on European soil, by intellectuals and theologians born or trained in Europe (including some influential converts), by institutions such as the European Council for Fatwa and Research, and through the many online fatwa production sites based in Europe (van Bruinessen & S. Allievi, 2011). Not to mention the role of global Islamic networks in producing new education, contents, ideas, forms of training, and concretely places of worship (Islamic centers, mosques, etc.), associative networks, Islamic institutions, etc., with important effects of transformation also in the European context.

The Islamic presence in Europe clearly has many social, economic, and political implications, as well as cultural and religious ones. It impacts the daily life of neighborhoods (ethnic stores, Islamic bookshops, association centers, etc.) as well as urban planning (mosques), schools as well as the job market, consumption as well as social relations (creating widespread dynamics of inclusion and *mixité* as well as forms of intra-community closure and exclusion). But it also touches on the issue of intercultural and interreligious dialogue or conflict, and has strong political consequences. On the one hand, because of the presence – in countries where immigrants, and all the more so their descendants, are citizens – of voters and elected officials who are expressions of ethnic and religious communities, and thus of an Islamic public opinion; and on the other hand, because of the growing presence of an anti-Islamic vote, which has given rise to political forces in which the rejection of Islam is the main *raison d'être*, or at least one of the main objectives, with a very noticeable impact on the political, social and cultural agenda around the Islamic presence.

Trends in European Islam

In a sense, Islam has shifted from the status of ex-enemy, positioned elsewhere than Europe, to that of co-inhabitant, destined to share land, relations, political systems, social practices and cultural history of the countries in which Muslims are present as a minority. And because of this, for some, it has also become the neo-enemy. Conflicts, however, are a minimal part of the encounters (which for the most part do not turn into clashes at all): as always, we hear the sound of the tree falling, but not of the forest growing, which does not enjoy the same visibility and forms of mediatization.

The Islamic presence in Europe constitutes one of the most culturally relevant historical novelties of recent decades: in a couple of generations Islam has become the main non-Christian religious component in all European countries.

It is a phenomenon that at first is intertwined with migrations to the Old Continent, to which the Islamic presence is a child and a debtor, but which gradually takes on its own logic, going through processes of progressive 'autochthonisation', as a result of processes of citizenship, of generational transition, of forms of conjugal and familial (and thus cultural) mixedness, of conversion processes, and also as a

result of complex interrelationships with the surrounding, non-Muslim society, its institutional and constitutional landscape, its cultural manifestations, and the changes at other levels that it is going through. This explains why the ‘Islamic question’ has taken on a progressive autonomy of its own within the migration phenomenon as a whole, a form of cultural and religious ‘specificity’. Not least because, while it is interpreted as being in continuity with the Islam of the countries of origin, it is often placed in a position of rupture. Among other reasons, because of the internal plurality of European Islam. In European countries, national and ethnic origins of Muslims are differentiated, plural, but so are cultural costumes, traditions, ways of dressing and behaving, legal schools (madhab) of reference, as well as the dominant languages in the various communities. There is, for immigrants and their Muslim descendants, no single place of origin, and therefore no single origin of religiously based normative power, recognized by all (Muslim migration is not, therefore, technically a diaspora: eventually, there are national diasporas). Muslims, then, are forced to construct forms of normativity directly in Europe. And they are obliged to do so starting not from their unity, but from their internal diversity (among others, Sunni Muslims, Shiites, Ismailis, Alevis, etc.). Even within the Sunni world alone, which is, moreover, vastly in the majority, there are believers, in the same mosque, who refer to all four main legal schools, from the most liberal to the most traditionalist and literalist; there are also Muslims belonging to Sufi brotherhoods of the most diverse experience, people belonging to religious and politico-religious movements that interpret Islam in very different ways, and people with no obvious and clear positioning.

Being in a minority status, together with a very strong internal pluralization, become in itself – contrary to a widespread perception by non-Muslims – a powerful accelerator of further change, which we can consider the interpretative cipher of European Islam compared to that of the countries of origin: not (only) continuity, but (also) discontinuity; not (only) tradition, but (also) innovation; not (only) static attitudes, but (also) dynamic ones; not (only) immobility, but (also) change. In fact, the Islamic population in Europe is traversed by various trends, which we can summarize in the following three, the most prevalent (Allievi, 2011).

- (a) The *traditionalism* of a part of the first generations, which in part has a trickle-down effect on the second generations, with the help of TV programs, websites, frequent return trips to the countries of origin, close relations with the extended family, including through combined marriage strategies. The practices of ‘import’ of imams from the countries – when not the villages – of origin is a sign and an example that can help to justify the reproduction in a different context of traditional social practices, and a certain intra-community closure: resulting in propensity for endogamy, and leading to frequent intergenerational conflicts, often – among others – over female clothing issues, and more generally related to gender issues. Typically belonging to this group are those who remain attached to their language and customs of origin, and tend to live, marry, consume and reproduce within their home community. This does not mean that the dimension of change is absent: even a tree, transplanted into different soil and a different climate, grows differently. But this dimension of change is more of a secondary and unexpected effect than a voluntarily sought goal. These traditionalist positions

are also supported by certain forms of transnationalism: which not necessarily has innovative effects, but can simply be a new channel for conveying traditional content. A process that is visible in certain satellite TVs, Internet sites, much neo-traditionalist theological literature, but also through the role of transnational organizations and theological elaboration centers of traditionalist inspiration, which play an important role, within Islamic communities and populations, in identity definition and construction, as well as in the processes of visibility and perception of Islam itself. It is with this part of the Islamic population that interpretative disputes, hermeneutic incidents, semantic and symbolic conflicts are most frequent.

- (b) The processes of *secularization*, very similar to those traversed by other religious communities, being them majority or minority, of substantial numbers – more substantial as the generational transition proceeds, but already present among the first generations – of only culturally, but less and less religiously, Muslim individuals. They simply want to live as best they can, enjoying the advantages and opportunities of the societies they belong to: not putting their ‘Muslimness’ – if it still exists – at the center of their processes of identification, and eventually limiting it to the private sphere. These are people who individually integrate into the environments in which they live through the same behavioral indicators as the society in which they fit.
- (c) The *innovation*, in theology and religious practices, of Muslim believers, active as such, who from the European context rethink their role and the forms of their presence in the European public space. These are people and groups who neither simply adapt to the processes of secularization nor tend to live in Europe as if they were elsewhere, but produce innovative forms of elaboration. Where innovative (new and not existing before), means original, in discontinuity with traditional interpretations. Examples of innovation are the centers and debates through which Europe’s ‘fifth legal school’ is being built, and where the production of minority jurisprudence (fiqh), takes place: through the texts of many intellectuals and theologians (and in particular their efforts at hermeneutics and Qur’anic exegesis), the sermons of prominent preachers, many websites and online chats based in Europe and the United States, the discourses proposed in associative milieux, and in many other ways, even atypical, included pop culture. A significant example of theological innovation is visible in interpretations and social practices related to gender issues. But not necessarily innovation has a progressive hint. Taking deliberately its more extreme case, an example of innovative interpretation and social practice has been produced, in recent years, in some currents of jihadism, and among foreign fighters based in Europe and eventually fled to the so-called Islamic State. Contrary to widespread opinions, they have little in common with a traditional affiliation to Islam, which is also absent from their biographies: for them, adherence to a new interpretation and form of Islam constitutes a radical discontinuity – a novelty, then – with respect to a previous, often non-Islamic way of life.

The Italian specificity

Islam in Italy partly follows the paths highlighted for European Islam. But from other points of view the modern Muslim presence has been for a long period of time an unacknowledged presence (Allievi, 2024). As we have seen, historically, in Italy the presence of Islam is not a novelty: that is why the very first research carried out on Muslims in Italy was titled *Il ritorno dell'islam* (*The return of Islam*, Allievi & Das-setto, 1993; see also Allievi, 2003), emphasizing the dimension of historical continuity. But in reality, and particularly in the perception of society, differently from what happened in Spain, the Islamic presence in Sicily has been forgotten.

Islam also left some modest traces, equally conveniently forgotten, in the period of Italian colonialism. When the Fascist dictator Mussolini liked to declare himself and Italy, as he did in a speech to the Senate in 1928, “a friend of the Islamic world and conscious of its functions as a great Muslim Power ...”. Or when he arranged for Libyan tribal leaders to hand him “spontaneously,” in 1937, during a visit to Tripoli, the “sword of Islam,” with which he liked to have himself portrayed⁶. The only positive consequence of this relationship was the urge to take an interest in the knowledge of the Arabic language and Islam (through the creation of the *Istituto per l'Oriente*, which produced a prestigious school of Orientalists and Arabists), and the attempts to connect and possibly influence the Arab world through the Arabic-language radio broadcasts of Radio Bari, which began broadcasting in 1934, even before the BBC's Arabic service (Allievi, 2003; Mazzuca, 2017).

In common with other European countries, Italy has an Islamic presence with a very wide ethnic, national and linguistic variability. However, this variety is accentuated from the very beginning, since there has not been – not even transiently – a strong identification with a single nationality, typically from a former colony (as it happened with Algerians in France or Indo-Pakistani in the United Kingdom) or from a country with which specific labor import agreements were signed (as between Germany and Turkey). Moreover, there is not, unlike in other countries (and the Italians' perception of their own situation), a strong presence in specific segregated places, such as the French banlieues or certain neighborhoods in Birmingham or Brussels, often enclaves in which several generations of specific communities have succeeded each other, effectively segregated and sometimes, in part, self-segregated. This is also because the first arrivals in significant numbers, in Italy, date back to the 1980s: in a completely different phase of the economic cycle than that of post-war reconstruction and economic boom, characterized no longer by mass industrialization with high labor intensity and strong urban concentration, but already in a phase of decreasing weight of industry, and insertion mainly in the tertiary sector, small trade, agriculture - and not only in large cities, indeed with a strong component in medium and small cities and in rural areas.

Among the specificities of insertion of Italian Islam, compared to that of other European countries, we can mention several additional aspects. The first, characterizing one, is the aforementioned diversification of countries of origin, which effectively

⁶ This image is so powerfully descriptive that stands on the cover, for instance, of a book on Fascist Mediterranean (Bessis, 1981).

prevents identification, both institutionally and in terms of perception, with a single country. Also relevant is the greater speed of entry and settlement, compared to other European realities, where Muslims have been arriving for several decades already: which has certainly also had an effect on the perception on the level of ‘dramatization’ of the phenomenon. Also relevant is the more recent arrival, in a situation in which even in the countries of origin Islam is central to the construction of public space, religiously, politically and culturally (far more so than in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, for example, in which the bulk of immigration to central and northern Europe took place, before the recent waves of asylum seekers). The Islamic presence thus became visible in the public space already with the first generation, when the experience and knowledge of the reality of emigration was minimal and the organizational processes within Islamic communities still embryonic: misunderstandings and misinterpretations were therefore frequent - even, trivially, due to issues of linguistic knowledge. Second generations have been much less visible and studied, even if they are becoming relevant.

A significant role, however, has been played by the more widespread condition of irregularity of immigrants: partly due to entry without a visa, but partly also produced by the regulations in force in Italy, and by the slowness and dysfunction of the bureaucratic apparatus called upon to apply them, what constituted and still constitutes, in itself, a heavy obstacle to integration. The scarcity of provenances from former colonies, with a pre-existing link (e.g., cultural and linguistic) with Italy, and a tradition of mutual acquaintance has instead had a counter-deductive effect compared to other countries: that is, the lack of a serious and courageous debate on Italy’s colonial legacy, acknowledging its wrongdoings, but also of post-colonial claims by Muslims themselves.

Given the presence, especially in the first phase, of first generations with little ability to lay the groundwork for a cultural debate on Islam in Italy, and perhaps even on its earliest history, an important role was played by converts: in the ‘social production of Islam’ (in the associative world), but also in the cultural production (media visibility, magazines, websites, publishing, translations), and in the political action (lobbying in favor of an agreement with the state and more generally promoting Islam on the local and national level), with a more general role of filling in for the organizational shortcomings of immigrant Islam. Converts were and are also advantaged by possessing full rights, being Italian citizens, thus not susceptible to potential blackmail in case of activism unwelcome to the authorities (Allievi, 1998).

The greater labor and residential dispersion, which we have already alluded to, and which does not favor the establishment of ‘ethnic threshold’ phenomena, and the relative lack or weakness, at least for now, of secular associative (ethnic and cultural) interlocutors of any weight and representativeness, has instead made the social and religious role played by the fabric of mosques as a fundamental place of recognition and representation, as well as visibility of Islam, even more relevant: much more so than other factors and components of the Islamic presence. Mosques, in short, and what is around them (also in terms of commerce: halal stores, etc.), seem to play a more important role, partly because emphasized by the lack or weakness of other interlocutors, than in other European countries. There is little in short, as a place of socialization, in between secular meeting places (such as cafés or gyms) and the

mosques. Although, it must be remembered, associative places and more or less identifiable hubs of gathering do not exhaust the totality of behavior, and the emphasis on them may distract the observer from the perception of that significant but silent share of individuals who carry out their path of insertion on the margins or outside their respective communities of reference, or those we consider as such.

Overall, we are presented with the image of a fragmented, divided, dispersed Islam: nationally, linguistically, religiously and even locally⁷. Also because, unlike in other European countries, as we have seen, it is not identifiable only with the communities in the big cities, even if they are the ones that are mediatized, almost exclusively. It is what we might call a ‘dialectal’ Islam: more ‘local’ than ‘national,’ in a sense, but one that often manifests higher processes of integration, and acceptance, than those visible in some metropolitan realities.

Hermeneutic accidents: the discovery of the other through conflict

Many factors influence the evolution of Islam in different European countries: both internal to Islam, such as national origin, its articulation and plurality, the period of entry into the country, trends in transnational Islam, ongoing transformations in its social practices, the evolution of gender relations and related debates, etc.; and external, such as economic cycles, changes in immigration legislation, integration policies, state-religious relations, public opinion reactions, political mobilization on (against) immigration and Islam, and more. When Muslims speak, they also speak to non-Muslims; when non-Muslims speak about Islam, they are also heard by Muslims – and their behavior, their very self-understanding, takes these inputs into account, and vice versa. Against the intrinsic, often underestimated strength of integration processes – in schools, in the job market, in neighborhoods, but also through forms of inclusion in the institutional (including legal) landscape and of symbolic recognition – lies an obvious and growing conflicting perception: which is not found at the same level with respect to other ethnic and religious communities of immigrant origin. Muslims, in short, share with other minorities advantages and disadvantages, processes of inclusion and stigmatization, as foreigners and immigrants, but receive specific treatment (not infrequently discriminatory), on the religious level, as Muslims.

It is no coincidence that in recent years we have witnessed the emergence in the political and social debate of the interpretative category of Islamophobia, different and specific from the more generic xenophobia, with its own dynamics and its own laws of operation, capable of producing mobilization mechanisms, specific forms of interpretation, and of becoming the main *raison d’être* of numerous social and intellectual actors, as well as specific political parties, capable in many countries of dictating the agenda on this issue to other political forces, also directing legislative activity (Allievi, 2012). This conflicting perception has meant that almost always

⁷ Most of texts only concern Sunni Muslims: on Shiites, Mirshahvalad (2020 and, 2025). Among the local researches that have shown this diversity (even if in their titles they claim an Italian perspective), see on the Veneto region Saint-Blancat (1999), on Piedmont Negri and Scaranari Introvigne (2005), on Rome Ciocca (2018), on Lombardy Ambrosini et al., (2022).

the consideration of Islam as an object of reflection, and even more so of controversy, has occurred through hermeneutic accidents and communicative short-circuits. Islam, and specifically Islam in Europe, is not perceived for its ‘normal’, acceptable, or perhaps interesting aspects, and for some fascinating ones, which are also there, and are predominant in people’s daily lives (after all, most Muslims spend most of their time not conflating with others nor within their respective communities; and so do non-Muslims in their ordinary interaction – at school, at work, in meeting places, from cafés to stores to stadiums – with Muslims). And thus, it inevitably becomes – or rather as a result of the powerful thrusts of a not infrequently hysterical media and the interest of the political entrepreneurs of Islamophobia – a conflict element in itself: even when those who create the conflict are those who fight Islam. And also keeping in mind that often the conflicts are not necessarily between Muslims and non-Muslims: but, often, between natives with different views *about* Muslims and Islam.

In the Italian case, some of the debates about the presence of Islam presented themselves as tough media and political stances even before such phenomena happened in Italy, but simply because they presented themselves elsewhere, and were imported in the Italian mediasphere, so to speak. In a sense, and somewhat paradoxically, in Italy we had the debates on multiculturalism even before any multicultural policy was implemented (Allievi, 2010). And so for the debates on the veil and others: almost always introduced in the wake of controversies that arose in other European countries (Allievi, 2017).

Some considerations, in this regard, need to be advanced on the other side of the integration process, that represented by what is often called - with some optimism - the host society. Islam, in fact, does not develop in a pneumatic vacuum, and integration processes are determined to a large extent, in addition to internal dynamics, by the environment in which they take place. To put it simply, integration – whether one likes the word or not – is, like a marriage, an equation with two factors (and many unknowns...): it does not work, if the will to make it succeed is present by only one of the two actors involved. Here the analysis becomes complex.

For on the one hand, long processes of substantive integration are at work, passing through school, the job market, neighborhood life, interpersonal ties (sharing activities: sports, cultural, recreational) and intimate relationships (friendships and mixed couples – which only to a small extent, because of the social disapproval surrounding them, become marriages; producing, incidentally, a counterdeductive result for religions: the increase of ‘non-regularly’ married couples). This is also thanks to an averagely positive, dialogic and inclusive role of the religious communities that have been historically present in the country (majority and minority: the Catholic church, but also the Waldensian church – very active – the Lutherans, the Adventists, and to some extent the Jewish communities).

On the other hand, there are deep trends in society that go in the opposite direction: that of conflict, non-acceptance, hysterical mediatization, political Islamophobia (with a side dish, at the local level, of a policy of punitive ordinances against Muslim places of worship, in particular, xenophobic and ultimately unconstitutional), disregard for individual and collective rights (above all, that relating to religious freedom), selective enforcement of laws (safety and fire regulations at the local level, which

are nevertheless enforced - at least to a certain extent: going as far as the immediate closure of venues - only to Muslim places of worship and to no one else), or of what we can call Islamic 'exceptionalism', that is, of considering Muslims always as an exceptional case, to whom existing regulations do not apply, and for whom special and specific conditions are demanded, or perhaps a 'selective (and stricter) application' of ordinary laws (as happens with regard to representative bodies of Islam, and of course with regard to everything related to issues of suspicion of terrorism).

All this happens within a cultural climate certainly not favorable to the relationship with Islam, which has had several inspirers and effective *maîtres à penser*: the main one of which, in the Italian case, was the journalist Oriana Fallaci⁸.

The problems raised are visible: from honor killings to forced marriages, from collateralism with respect to anti-Westernism (and, in the worst cases, radicalism and terrorism) to serious forms of intra-community closures, most serious for the weakest subjects (women and minors), to the still precarious leadership formation and stances in public debates, on issues such as women's rights and homosexuality. But it is different to raise them only for polemical purposes, with no intention of resolving them but only to profit from the consensus that raising them entails, or to try to address them constructively, and in collaboration with the Islamic communities themselves. While the former mode of approach is rife in the media and politics (not only, though more frequently, on the right side of the political spectrum), traces of the latter can be seen only in some local administrations and in the role of Christian religious communities. As a matter of fact, what has happened is that in Italy, through Fallaci's books and the mainstream media system, especially in the decade following 9/11 (but to a good extent even now) a language about Muslims (and a specific targeting) that is problematic in itself has been legitimized: to the point that many sentences of articles or political speeches would be considered unpublishable and unspeakable if, in the same sentence, the word Muslims were replaced by the word Jews. Which gives some idea of the seriousness of the problem.

⁸ Oriana Fallaci's is a resounding publishing case: by far the best-selling nonfiction books in Italian history. Her anti-Islamic trilogy has very largely exceeded three million copies sold, and her books continue to be reprinted, even sold with newspapers, quoted, evoked. Associations, streets, buildings are named after her, and she continues to be cited as a reference by the Italian political world (not only on the right, although all the leaders of the right-wing parties currently in government have had occasion to magnify her praise, and from the more moderate Berlusconi to the more radical Salvini have explicitly named her as their interpretive reference for understanding Islam), at virtually every critical event - particularly, terrorist attacks - that concerns Islam. The texts are *La rabbia e l'orgoglio*, first published as a very long article in the "Corriere della sera" in the aftermath of 9/11, Italy's leading newspaper, and immediately as a volume (2001), *La forza della ragione* and *Oriana Fallaci intervista sé stessa - L'Apocalisse*, both published in (2004a, b). For two very different critical readings, Allievi (2006), a direct answer to Fallaci's books, and the assessment in Burdett (2016). See also Bosetti (2005) and D'Angelo (2011).

What will happen to Italian islam?

On the Islamic side, the most interesting phenomena are the following: the gradual emergence, even in the public space of the second generation and their social and cultural protagonism⁹; to a lesser extent, the greater visibility of women's Islam; the partial decline in representativeness of the traditional social actors of organized Islam and the emergence of new social actors of a certain dynamism; some (slow and partial) leadership turnover; the greater presence - financial but not only - of transnational or governmental bodies, capable of affecting, in various directions, the evolution of Italian Islam (from the charities of Qatar to the government of Morocco); a greater ability to organize and also to react to what is happening or what is talked about in the media; greater activism in the production of Islamic culture, in various forms and declinations; a greater awareness of the need to form leaderships that are also professionally better equipped than in the past, to respond to the needs of the community but also to the challenges of radicalism and terrorism.

On the side of Italian society and institutions there are equally interesting changes, not all of which go in the same direction. Going in the direction of greater closure with respect to Islam is the exaggerated when not hysterical mediatization of issues concerning Islam (which continues to have few parallels, in this form, in other European countries): from TV talk shows to the national newspapers and to the local press. Equally very heavy-handed are the forms of political instrumentalization in anti-Islamic terms by prominent political parties and representatives, especially – but not only – in the world of the center-right part of the political spectrum: in particular the League, whose leader Matteo Salvini often expresses anti-Islamic identitarian policies, but also Fratelli d'Italia, the party that while I write - August 2024 - expresses the president of the council of ministers, Giorgia Meloni, and governs in a majority with the League and with Forza Italia, the party founded by Silvio Berlusconi, also a great admirer of Oriana Fallaci. The continued and intentional overlap with the refugee emergency and landings in the Mediterranean equally pushes toward a confrontational and closed perspective with respect to Islam, producing ripple effects at the local level.

For few years, it seemed to go in the direction of greater awareness the institutional caution and the opening of a more in-depth reflection by the Ministry of the Interior, which activated a Table of Islam (composed of representatives of the various components of Italian Islam, in 2015) and a Council for Italian Islam (composed of experts, in 2016): which led to the signing, in 2017, of a Pact with Italian Islam, by Interior Minister Minniti and the organizations that are part of the Table, which are the most representative ones¹⁰. Signs that seemed encouraging, at a difficult time for relations with Islam, throughout Europe. But this was only an occasional awakening of interest: in fact, the activities of the Council (of which I was also a member), as well as those of the Table of representatives, have been 'suspended', as a result of the change of government following the September 2022 general elections, which

⁹ On second generations in Italy, Frisina (2007) and Acocella and Pepicelli (2015).

¹⁰ On the legal status of Muslims in Italy, see Ferrari (2000), Spreafico and Coppi (2006), Ferrari (2008) and Alicino (2023).

brought the center-right (or perhaps, more appropriately, right-center) coalition into government, and the clear lack of interest, if not open opposition, of the new Minister of Interior, which led all the members of the Council to collectively and publicly resign in 2024.

At the religious level, on the other hand (on the part of both the Catholic church and Protestant minorities), there has been a deeper activism and capacity for dialogue, even at the local level: far from some of the easy enthusiasms of the past (usually followed by early disappointments), but also from the aprioristic rejection of part of the ecclesial world, and more inclined instead to a daily and long-term activity of confrontation, in fact inclusive, and capable of influencing important parts of public opinion with messages different from those conveyed by the mainstream media (it should be kept in mind that in Italy even the reception of asylum seekers, including those from Muslim countries, is managed in significant part by religious organizations).

In this sense, the fact that Italy had not yet made time to elaborate a strong model for the integration of Islam (or even of immigrants, it must be said), identifying itself neither with the French-style assimilationist and ostentatiously secularist model nor with the Anglo-Saxon-style multiculturalist model, could for once prove to be a competitive advantage, allowing the country to avoid the mistakes or extremes of either, learning some useful preventive lessons. However, some form of institutional recognition of Islam through the form of the *Intese* (Agreements), which is the legal system that Italy (like other concordatarian countries, e.g., Spain) has given itself to manage relations with religious minorities (while the majority religious confession, the Catholic Church, has signed a Concordat with the state that protects it more, for example with respect to such decisive issues as religious instruction in compulsory schooling), remains very far away. Other religious minorities (from Protestant denominations to Jews, from Orthodox Churches to Buddhists) have signed *Intese* with the state. Islam (unlike in Spain, which also has a very similar regulatory framework) is still a long way from formalizing this process.

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