

Editorial Introduction

Special Section:

“Islam in Italy Today: Overview and Prospects”

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1. Inaugural Editorial

The launch of the Journal of Islam in Europe and in the Mediterranean World (JIEMW) marks a significant step in the recent history of research on Islam and religious pluralism in Italy and across the Euro-Mediterranean space. This new journal is not merely a fresh editorial initiative; it represents the outcome of a long-standing process of intellectual collaboration and reflection within an academic environment deeply rooted in the empirical and theoretical tradition of the Padua school of sociology of religion.

JIEMW aims to provide an open, international, and interdisciplinary scientific platform, fostering dialogue between the transformations taking place within European Islam and the broader social, political, and cultural dynamics that shape the contemporary Mediterranean world. In this perspective, Islam is both an object and a prism: a field through which to observe societal change, new forms of belonging, the negotiation of religion in the public sphere, and the emerging challenges of cultural and confessional diversity.

The journal seeks to become a meeting ground for scholars from various disciplines who share a commitment to exploring the complexity of religion in the contemporary world. Attention is directed not only toward institutional and political processes regulating the Muslim presence in Europe, but also toward the everyday, biographical, and symbolic dimensions that shape religious experience. The approach JIEMW promotes is that of a reflexive and comparative sociology, capable of connecting local dynamics with transnational logics and of capturing diversity without reducing it to fixed categories or ideological framings.

The creation of JIEMW stems from a long-matured intellectual project within the Padua research group on Islam and religious pluralism. Yet it was the PRIN 2022 research project “Islam and Muslims in Italy: actors, social space, and relations between religious communities and the State” (IsMIta) – CUP H53D23007380006, funded by the Italian Ministry of Universities and Research – that provided the final impulse and the favourable conditions for its realization, offering a collaborative framework and research environment that facilitated its implementation.

At the same time, the journal’s launch is closely linked to the creation of the book series “Al-Qantara” at Padua University Press, devoted to themes of interreligious dialogue, Mediterranean societies, and the dynamics of coexistence. Both the journal and the series share the same inspiration: to build a bridge (al-qantara, indeed) between shores, languages, and perspectives, at a time when scientific knowledge is called to interpret global interdependencies and the evolving challenges of pluralism.

2. The origins of a school

JEMW is rooted in an intellectual and scientific tradition that has profoundly shaped the development of the sociology of religion in Italy: the so-called “Padua School.” Its origins date back to the 1960s with Sabino Acquaviva, whose pioneering studies on secularization gained international recognition and opened the way for a sociology of religion attentive to processes of social transformation.

Alongside Acquaviva, Gustavo Guizzardi and Italo De Sandre helped consolidate a methodologically rigorous and field-oriented approach. Later, with Enzo Pace, the Padua perspective expanded toward religious pluralism, globalization, and new forms of belonging and communication in the sacred sphere. Within this context, the study of Islam gained central importance, becoming a key terrain for analysing modernization, migration, and pluralization in contemporary societies.

This intellectual trajectory has given rise to a new generation of scholars – including Chantal Saint-Blancat, Stefano Allievi, Renzo Guolo, Paolo Di Motoli, Valentina Schiavinato, Francesco Cerchiaro and Mohammed Khalid Brandalise Rhazzali – who have brought the Italian sociology of Islam into dialogue with international debates. The Padua School is thus characterized by a distinctive combination of empirical rootedness and comparative openness, balancing local observation with global interpretation.

Methodologically, it is united by a shared conviction: that Islam can and should be studied through the analytical tools of sociology, not as an exotic or exceptional object, but as a constitutive dimension of social transformation. Religion is thus understood as a dimension of the social, not its residue, and as a field shaped by dynamics of power, belonging, and recognition.

3. Islam as an Actor and Mirror of Italian Pluralism

Building upon this tradition, the contributions gathered in this part of the inaugural issue of JEMW offer a multifaceted view of how religious pluralism takes form in Italy, revealing both its empirical diversity and its interpretative depth.

Through historical, sociological, political, and cultural perspectives, the authors demonstrate that Islam, in its multiple configurations, functions today not only as an actor but also as a mirror of the transformations reshaping Italian society, as it learns to redefine itself in light of diversity.

3.1. Italy as a Laboratory of Religious Pluralism

Within the European landscape, Italy stands as a paradigmatic case of a laboratory of religious pluralism – a context in which the increasing visibility of Islam intertwines with a cultural and institutional model historically shaped by Catholicism. The Italian configuration of pluralism is not merely the outcome of

recent immigration but the expression of a long-standing redefinition of the relationships between religion, society, and the State, which has gradually challenged the traditional coordinates of “Italian-style” secularism.

As Enzo Pace and Mohammed Khalid Brandalise Rhazzali highlight, the growth of Islam in Italy cannot be explained solely by demographic or migratory factors. It reflects a deeper transformation in the symbolic regime through which Italian society processes religious diversity. Within a landscape marked by a still culturally hegemonic Catholicism, Islam has become a mirror of the tensions and negotiations that traverse the country’s religious modernity.

At the European level, as Stefano Allievi shows, this process follows a broader trajectory that has evolved from the paradigm of “Islam in Europe” to “Islam of Europe”, and ultimately toward a genuinely “European Islam.” This evolution, differentiated across national contexts, finds in Italy a peculiar terrain marked by a dual tension: on one hand, the slow institutional recognition of Islam as a structural component of society; on the other, the rapid emergence of autonomous Muslim initiatives, civic participation, and public visibility.

3.2. Pluralism, Governance, and Institutions

The issue of religious pluralism in Italy finds one of its most meaningful testing grounds in the relationship between the State and Islam. As Paolo Di Motoli underscores, the “Islamic question” is not merely juridical or political but above all sociological and symbolic, as it reflects the structure of Italy’s religious field itself. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s perspective, Di Motoli demonstrates that pluralism does not simply denote the coexistence of different confessions, but rather a system of power relations and symbolic competition among actors striving for legitimacy and recognition in the public space.

This results in a form of administered pluralism, often more pragmatic than legal, in which the governance of religion is delegated to intermediate levels of the State and to local mediation practices. Yet institutional “delay” has not prevented the emergence of Muslim self-organization guided by civic logics and claims to citizenship.

3.3. Security and “Delayed” Radicalization

As Renzo Guolo points out, Italy’s so-called “explainable delay” in the emergence of radicalization phenomena is not an exception but the outcome of specific social, territorial, and political conditions: recent migratory histories, dispersed settlement patterns, associative networks, and pragmatic governance of pluralism. Everyday coexistence and forms of civic Islam have thus far functioned as effective buffers against polarization.

However, Guolo warns against viewing this equilibrium as a stable condition. It remains fragile, and its sustainability depends on the capacity of institutions to

transform *de facto* tolerance into full recognition. In this sense, security is not the product of control mechanisms but an effect of social trust and civic participation.

3.4. Mixed Families and Reconstructed Identities

Within the wider framework of Italy's cultural and religious pluralism, Christian–Muslim families constitute a privileged observatory for understanding the recomposition of identity brought about by interreligious encounter. As Francesco Cerchiaro shows, these families do not represent a symptom of loss or secularization but rather spaces of social invention and symbolic negotiation, where religion becomes a relational resource and an affective language.

Their experiences challenge static categories of belonging and demonstrate that pluralism is also constructed in the realm of intimacy, where difference is not denied but rendered livable. They offer a concrete example of everyday integration, inviting us to rethink cohesion not as homogeneity but as reciprocity.

4. Research Horizons

This inaugural issue of JEMW does not seek to close a debate but to open one. The contributions collected here outline a plural map of Islam in Italy, revealing the depth of processes of rooting, hybridization, and religious citizenship currently underway. At the same time, they suggest that the Italian case offers a privileged lens through which to understand the global transformations of religion, their political implications, and the new territories of mediation that arise from them.

At the core of these transformations lies globalization – not only as the movement of people and capital but as the circulation of symbols, practices, and religious imaginaries. Italian and, more broadly, European Islam are part of this system of global interdependence, where religion is reinvented within the transnational space of migration, associative networks, and digital media. Belonging does not dissolve but is re-coded through communicative flows crossing geographical, linguistic, and institutional borders.

In today's world, religions increasingly function as connective systems, their vitality depending on the ability to activate communicative circuits linking individuals and communities on a planetary scale. Islam is no exception: digital platforms, social networks, and online media have opened new arenas of authority, visibility, and religious learning, where relations between knowledge, power, and belonging are redefined.

The internet has thus become a laboratory of religious and identity socialization, a space where faith experiences, conversions, learning processes, and community forms intertwine. Digital expressions of religiosity, online dissemination of religious content, and virtual communities now constitute an essential field for

understanding the metamorphoses of contemporary Islam – and, more broadly, of belief in the global age.

The intersection of globalization and digitalization compels the sociology of religion to rethink its analytical categories. The territoriality of faith merges with mobility; religious authority becomes decentralized; and communities take shape as networks. Within this scenario, research on Islam in Italy and the Mediterranean can make a crucial contribution to understanding how religion today operates between the local and the global, proximity and connection, public visibility and digital interaction.

From an epistemological standpoint, this demands an approach capable of articulating multiple levels of analysis:

- a macro level, where global dynamics reshape belief regimes and models of coexistence;
- a meso level, where institutions and communities negotiate governance and mediation;
- and a micro level, where biographies and everyday interactions reveal the embodied construction of pluralism.

In this perspective, *JIEMW* aspires to become a convergent space for research exploring the intersection of religion, globalization, and technology. Its aim is not to build a new general theory of Islam but to develop a comparative and dialogical field, where local phenomena can be read in light of the global connections that traverse them.

Finally, this issue bears witness to the continuity and renewal of the Padua school of sociology of religion. From the studies of secularization to those on pluralization, and from empirical fieldwork to emerging explorations of the digital and the diverse, this tradition continues to embody a research ethos combining empirical grounding with theoretical openness. In a world where the circulation of religions and information constantly redraws the contours of society, *JIEMW* seeks to offer a critical and connective gaze on the present, grounded in the conviction that to understand Islam in Italy is also to understand the global modernity that shapes us all.