Islam and Religious Pluralization in Italy: Between Cultural Catholicism and the Politics of Recognition

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Abstract

The article examines the pluralization of the Italian religious landscape through the lens of the Muslim presence, exploring how cultural Catholicism and state governance interact in shaping the politics of recognition. Drawing on sociological, legal, and ethnographic perspectives, it traces the historical evolution of Islam in Italy—from the first migratory flows to the emergence of new generations and associative forms—highlighting the tension between visibility and institutional marginality. The analysis situates the Italian case within broader European debates on religious pluralism, demonstrating how Catholicism continues to operate as a pervasive symbolic code that structures public morality and social cohesion. The *Intesa* model, rather than ensuring equality, reflects a differentiated regime of recognition that reveals the limits of Italian secularism and the persistence of a Catholic monopoly in the public sphere.

Keywords

Islam in Italy; Religious pluralization; Cultural Catholicism; Governance of pluralism; *Intesa* between the State and Islamic communities

L'islam et la pluralisation religieuse en Italie : entre catholicisme culturel et politique de reconnaissance

Résumé

Cet article examine la pluralisation du champ religieux italien à travers la présence musulmane, en analysant l'interaction entre le catholicisme culturel et la gouvernance de l'État dans la construction des politiques de reconnaissance. S'appuyant sur des approches sociologiques, juridiques et ethnographiques, il retrace l'évolution historique de l'islam en Italie — des *premières migrations à l'émergence de nouvelles générations et réseaux* associatifs — en soulignant la tension entre visibilité publique et marginalité institutionnelle. Le cas italien est replacé dans le cadre européen du pluralisme religieux, où le catholicisme continue de fonctionner comme un code symbolique structurant la cohésion sociale et l'ordre moral. Le modèle des *Intese* apparaît ainsi comme un instrument de reconnaissance différenciée qui met en évidence les limites du sécularisme italien et la persistance d'un monopole catholique dans l'espace public.

Mot-clés

Islam en Italie ; pluralisation religieuse ; catholicisme culturel ; gouvernance du pluralisme ; Intesa entre l'État et les communautés islamiques.

الإسلام وتعدّد الأديان في إيطاليا: بين الكاثوليكية الثقافية وسياسات الاعتراف

الملخص

يتناول هذا المقال تحوّل المشهد الديني في إيطاليا من خلال دراسة حضور الإسلام، مبرزةً تفاعل الكاثوليكية الثقافية مع أنماط الحوكمة في صياغة سياسات الاعتراف. وبمقاربة سوسيولوجية وقانونية وأنثروبولوجية، تتتبّع الدراسة تطوّر الإسلام في إيطاليا منذ موجات الهجرة الأولى إلى بروز الأجيال الجديدة وشبكات الجمعيات، مظهرةً التوتّر القائم بين الظهور في المجال العام والتهميش المؤسّسي. يوضَع النموذج الإيطالي ضمن النقاش الأوروبي الأوسع حول التعدّدية الدينية، حيث تواصل الكاثوليكية أداء دورها كرمز ثقافي جامع يؤطّر الأخلاق العامة والتماسك الاجتماعي. أمّا نموذج الاتفاق (*Intesa*) فيكشف عن نظام اعتراف تفاضلي يُبرز حدود العلمانية الإيطالية واستمرار الهيمنة الكاثوليكية في الفضاء العام.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الإسلام في إيطاليا: التعدّدية الدينية؛ الكاثوليكية الثقافية؛ حوكمة التعدّدية؛ الاتفاق بين الدولة والمجتمعات الإسلامية.

Introduction

In recent decades, Italy has undergone profound transformations that have reshaped its social, cultural, and religious composition. In a country historically perceived as "monoconfessional," the arrival of diversified migratory flows—beginning in the 1970s—has introduced new religious affiliations and identity models that call into question traditional categories of citizenship, integration, and coexistence (Rhazzali, Schiavinato 2024; Rhazzali, Schiavinato & Di Mauro, 2024).

According to the most recent estimates, the Muslim population in Italy exceeds 2.7 million individuals, confirming Islam as the second-largest religious affiliation after Catholicism (Ciocca, 2023; Caritas–Migrantes, 2023). This growth—driven not only by migration flows but also by processes of naturalization and conversion—has made Islam increasingly visible in the Italian public sphere and reflects a broader process of pluralization affecting Europe as a whole. In this respect, Censis 2024[1] data indicate that 71.1% of Italians define themselves as Catholic, albeit with very different levels of religious practice (from 15.3% regular practitioners to 20.9% non-practicing Catholics). The persistence of a Catholic matrix therefore coexists with unprecedented religious diversification, which challenges institutions and civil society alike.

Within this scenario, Italy is marked by a structural tension: on the one hand, the persistence of Catholicism as the dominant symbolic matrix orienting values, norms, and institutions; on the other, the growing pressure generated by religious pluralization, which calls for new forms of recognition, representation, and governance. The progressive erosion of an identity model grounded in a single religious reference—a process observed globally (Berger, 1999)—intersects, in the Italian context, with the difficulty of institutions in devising adequate instruments to manage diversity (Rhazzali, 2015).

Focusing on the Muslim presence makes it possible to grasp, with particular clarity, the logics that traverse the Italian religious space: rather than a mere set of affiliations, this is a field of forces in which negotiations, conflicts, and alliances among different actors—religious communities, state institutions, local governments, political parties, and the media—are intertwined. In this sense, Bourdieu's perspective (1971; 1979) helps explain how the public visibility of Islam and its legal recognition result from power relations and differentiated stocks of symbolic capital, rather than from a linear, consensual evolution.

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[1] Censis, Italians, Faith, and the Church. A Censis–Essere Qui study for the Synodal Journey (Rome: Censis, November 5, 2024); cited in La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana, "Censis: Italian Catholics are not very observant and very confused," November 6, 2024, https://lanuovabq.it/it/censis-i-cattolici-italiani-poco-praticanti-e-molto-confusi

Empirically, the article draws on a multi-year research project2 conducted by the authors on the configuration of Italian Islam, the processes of institutionalization of Muslim communities, the role of public policies, and the forms of interaction with civil society. The approach combines qualitative and quantitative tools, including ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews with leaders and members of Islamic communities, and an analysis of legislative and institutional transformations over the last three decades.

The aim is twofold: first, to reconstruct the historical and demographic evolution of the Muslim presence in Italy, highlighting its specificities with respect to other European contexts; second, to analyze the challenges associated with governing religious pluralism, focusing on the issue of the *Intesa* between the State and Islamic communities, on the role of Catholicism as a symbolic code, and on public narratives that fuel tensions between inclusion and national identity.

The article is organized into four sections. The first reconstructs the historical and demographic milestones of the Muslim presence in Italy and situates them within the European context. The second analyzes the processes of institutionalization of Islam and the associative pluralism that characterizes Muslim communities. The third examines the symbolic centrality of Catholicism, the legal framework, and the challenges related to the recognition of religious minorities. The fourth and final section explores the dynamics of political and media discourse, showing how they contribute to redefining the boundaries of national identity and to constructing hierarchies of acceptability among different religious presences.

1. Socio-historical evolution and pluralization of the Muslim presence in Italy

The Muslim presence in Italy represents a complex and continuously evolving phenomenon, reflecting a plurality of migratory, political, social, and cultural dynamics that have developed over the last five decades (Allievi, Guolo, Rhazzali 2017; Rhazzali, Schiavinato 2024). Unlike other European countries with a long colonial history—such as France, the United Kingdom, or the Netherlands—Italy experienced a comparatively recent Muslim migration, not resulting from direct postcolonial relations but rather from economic and geopolitical factors and its geographical position at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (Allievi, Guolo, Rhazzali 2017).

The first significant Muslim settlements in Italy date back to the 1970s, with the arrival of seasonal and permanent workers from Tunisia, particularly in Sicily.

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[2]   This includes the ongoing project "Islam and Muslims in Italy: actors, social space, and relations between religious communities and the state," funded under the PRIN 2022 program https://islamitaly-prin-mur.eu/ 2024-2026.

This initial migratory nucleus marked the beginning of a process that, within a few decades, produced a numerically relevant and internally heterogeneous presence. From the 1980s onward, and with increasing intensity during the 1990s, migratory flows expanded to include Morocco, Egypt, Senegal, and other North and sub-Saharan African countries. During this phase, the demand for unskilled labor in the agricultural, construction, and domestic sectors fostered the arrival of Muslim foreign workers, often in precarious conditions and without structured pathways to integration. As Ambrosini (2020) observes, the management of migrant labor in Italy has been based on a logic of "subordinate integration," in which economic regularization does not necessarily coincide with genuine social or institutional recognition.

A further element of complexity is represented by the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers from contexts of political crisis and armed conflict, such as Somalia, Eritrea, and later Syria. Forced migration—unlike economic migration—has not only expanded and diversified the religious and cultural backgrounds of newcomers but has also highlighted the criticalities of the Italian system of reception and inclusion (Perocco, 2018).

From the 2000s onwards, the landscape has become even more diversified: in addition to the continuation of flows from North Africa, there has been a significant increase in the Muslim presence from the Indian subcontinent, particularly from Bangladesh and Pakistan. These communities have established more stable forms of settlement, creating associative networks, mosques, Qur'anic schools, and ethnic enterprises (MLPS, 2023a; MLPS, 2023b; Ambrosini, 2020; Saint Blancat, 2015). Moreover, the presence of EU citizens from Eastern Europe, including Muslim minorities from Bulgaria and Romania, has been facilitated by the 2007 enlargement (Fondazione ISMU/FrancoAngeli, 2008; European Parliament, 2007).

The complexity of the picture is also reflected in the available data. The latest Caritas–Migrantes Report (2023) estimates approximately 1.5 million foreign Muslims residing in Italy. However, this figure does not capture the full dimension of the phenomenon, as it excludes both naturalized Muslims and converts. As several studies have noted, this methodological gap reflects the structural difficulties of measuring religious affiliation in the absence of official confessional data. In this regard, Ciocca's (2023) estimate appears more inclusive and reliable: as of 2021, the overall Muslim population in Italy amounted to about 2,753,000 individuals, thereby positioning Islam as the second-largest religion in the country after Catholicism.

These data are part of a broader European context in which increasing religious plurality intertwines with the attempt by states to redefine the boundaries of collective identity. In Italy, Catholicism remains a dominant symbolic reference, deeply rooted even within the institutional sphere (as evidenced by the presence of chapels and chaplains in public institutions). At the same time, religious minorities—and particularly the Muslim one—have gained increasing visibility in the

public space, contributing to an unprecedented transformation of the national religious map.

Today, the Muslim community in Italy is characterized by extreme heterogeneity in terms of nationality, language, age, gender, and ways of experiencing religiosity. Forms of belonging to Islam are multiple and layered: alongside Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, there are Sufi brotherhoods in which a considerable number of native Italians converted to Islam, following highly diverse individual paths (Allievi, 2017). This internal pluralization challenges monolithic representations of Islamic reality and underscores the need for contextualized analyses attentive to the local and relational dimensions of faith (Allievi, 2009; Cesari, 2014).

In this sense, the Muslim presence cannot be reduced to a mere demographic datum; rather, it takes shape as a dynamic field of social interactions, identity negotiations, and cultural transformations. It engages public policies on integration, citizenship, and religious recognition, demanding analytical and normative tools capable of valuing plurality without succumbing to simplifications, generalizations, or stigmatizations. The internal pluralism of Italian Islam thus represents both a resource for the renewal of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and a crucial challenge for social cohesion in contemporary society.

2.   Governing Religious Diversity: Muslim Presence, Institutional and Territorial

Since the early 1990s, Italy has undergone a phase of profound demographic and cultural transformation, intensified by increasing migratory flows and the growing public visibility of Islam. This historical phase has exposed the structural weaknesses of the Italian political and institutional system in addressing the new challenges posed by the religious and cultural diversification of its population. In particular, the Muslim presence—ever more numerous and internally diverse—has raised fundamental questions concerning models of citizenship, the management of secularism, and the public recognition of religious pluralism (Pace, 2013; Rhazzali & Schiavinato, 2024).

The increasing internal articulation of the Muslim population, composed of migrants from different national backgrounds, converts, and new generations born in Italy, has posed a challenge that is not only cultural but also juridical and institutional. The lack of formal recognition of Islam by the State—in the absence of an *Intesa* (agreement) under Article 8 of the Constitution—has had both symbolic and practical consequences, slowing down integration processes and fostering feelings of marginalization (De Motoli, 2017)3.

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3   See also Di Motoli's contribution in this special issue.

The internal pluralization of Italian Islam manifests itself not only at the theological or identity level but also through spatial and territorial diversification. The distribution of places of worship, the morphology of settlements, and the networks of local associations constitute the concrete vectors through which Islam takes root and assumes form in different social contexts. This territorial dimension reveals how religion becomes inscribed within processes of constructing public space, interacting with local administrations, civic communities, and normative frameworks. In this sense, the geography of Islam in Italy is not merely a demographic datum but an indicator of how religious plurality translates into practices of citizenship and daily negotiations of visibility, legitimacy, and belonging.

At the same time, the territorial distribution of Islam in Italy has acquired a complex morphology: while the industrialized and urbanized regions of the North and Center continue to represent the main hubs of settlement, a growing presence can also be observed in the South and in rural contexts. This pattern is clearly reflected in studies on Muslim places of worship and their local configurations, which highlight the relationship between territorial embeddedness, inter-institutional relations, and processes of social recognition (Rhazzali & Equizi, 2013).

This differentiated diffusion has encouraged the emergence of "local Islams," shaped by the interaction between socio-economic contexts and territorial institutional networks. Settlement and recognition dynamics do not develop uniformly across the national territory but reflect the specific configuration of local powers, urban planning policies, and social sensitivities. In this perspective, the studies of Chiodelli (2014) on "urban Islam," of Allievi (2010) on the so-called "mosque wars," and of Saint-Blancat and Schmidt di Friedberg (2005) show how public space becomes a privileged arena for negotiating the legitimacy of Muslim presence and producing specific religious geographies of visibility.

In analytical terms, the notion of local Islam recalls that of the "territorialization of Islam" and the concept of "local Muslims" elaborated in international literature (Göle, 2011; Cesari, 2014), which highlight the capacity of Muslim communities to root their religious identity within specific socio-cultural contexts, producing situated, pragmatic, and dialogical forms of Islam.

The new generations of Muslims born or raised in Italy represent a key factor of social and religious transformation. These young citizens articulate multiple forms of belonging that transcend the dichotomy between "Italian" and "Muslim," constructing fluid and contextual identities (Frisina, 2007; Rhazzali, 2006). The expression "Italian Islam," increasingly widespread among second generations, encapsulates religious practices and models of citizenship that combine local rootedness and transnational belonging. As more recent studies show, these trajectories are expressed through the reconfiguration of the imam's authority (Rhazzali, 2018) and his training in the Italian context (Schiavinato & Rhazzali, 2024), civic activism, youth and women's associations, as well as cultural production and entrepreneurship,

outlining a religious field in which the dimension of faith intertwines with processes of integration and public participation (Mezzetti & Ricucci, 2019).

The political and civic participation of Muslim citizens, though still limited, has recorded significant progress in recent years. The election of representatives of Muslim origin in some local contexts, as well as activism within social movements and interreligious platforms, signals a growing will to contribute actively to public life. However, the gap between representation and demographic presence remains wide: as Marzouki et al. (2016) observe, populist parties have often co-opted religious rhetoric, limiting the electoral penetration of Muslim candidates. Moreover, in European countries, Muslim representation tends to concentrate in peripheral and municipal institutions rather than at the national level, indicating that full political inclusion remains an objective yet to be achieved.

Structural challenges also persist, linked to the spread of Islamophobia, stigmatization in the media, and the absence of comprehensive policies against religious discrimination. Several contributions collected in the volume "Antisemitismo, islamofobia e razzismo. Rappresentazioni, immaginari e pratiche nella società italiana" (Alietti, Padovan & Vercelli, 2014) show how stereotypes and securitarian narratives continue to shape collective perceptions and political agendas. These dynamics hinder not only symbolic recognition but also the effectiveness of inclusion policies. They further consolidate a vision of Islam as a "problematic" element, shifting public debate from social and juridical issues to those of identity and security, with significant effects on governance strategies and institutional recognition processes.

Despite these criticalities, signs of positive transformation can be observed. The intensification of interreligious dialogue, the adoption of intercultural mediation practices, and the growing visibility of Muslim figures in the fields of culture, art, education, and entrepreneurship attest to a gradual normalization of the Muslim presence in the Italian public sphere. These processes may contribute to constructing an integration model capable of reconciling pluralism and social cohesion.

The evolution of Islam in Italy thus constitutes a privileged laboratory for observing how European societies confront the challenges of religious diversity within a post-national framework. The ability of Italian institutions to respond proactively to these transformations—by elaborating inclusive legal instruments, promoting intercultural education, and actively combating discrimination—will represent a crucial indicator of the democratic resilience and equity of the national system.

3.   Institutional Pluralism and the Muslim Religious Field: The Difficult Path Toward the *Intesa*

Since the 1970s, with the foundation of the Union of Muslim Students in Italy (Unione degli Studenti Musulmani in Italia, USMI), the Islamic presence in the country has embarked on a progressive process of institutional structuring (Allievi

& Dassetto, 1993). This development was marked by the emergence of associations engaged in managing mosques and Islamic centers and in promoting dialogue with local and national institutions. Early sociological analyses highlighted the growing complexity of the Italian Muslim community, characterized by a plurality of religious practices, identities, and relationships with the public sphere (Saint-Blancat, 1999; Gritti & Allam, 2001).

A turning point occurred in 1990 with the establishment of the Unione delle Comunità e Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia (UCOII), which positioned itself as a privileged interlocutor of the Italian institutions for addressing crucial issues such as the legal recognition of Islam, the management of places of worship, and religious education (Rhazzali & Equizi, 2013; Pace & Rhazzali 2018; Rhazzali & Schiavinato 2024). However, the Muslim associational landscape has remained highly fragmented, reflecting internal diversity shaped by different national origins, legal-religious traditions, and divergent conceptions of the relationship between faith and citizenship (Bartolomeo, 2014). This plurality has complicated the establishment of an *Intesa* making it difficult to identify a shared interlocutor.

The creation of the Centro Islamico Culturale d'Italia—best known for the Great Mosque of Rome—and of the Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana (COREIS) represented a crucial step, more than thirty years ago, marking the initial phase of the institutionalization of Islam in the country. However, since the 2000s, the associative pluralism of Italian Islam has intensified further, reflecting the growing internal heterogeneity of Muslim communities and their desire to develop more articulated forms of representation. Within this framework emerged new collective actors, including the Confederazione Islamica Italiana (CII) and the Federazione Islamica Albanese in Italia, which have contributed to redefining the internal balances of Italian Islam, introducing new modalities of interaction with public institutions and civil society (Di Mauro, 2021; Rhazzali & Di Mauro, 2022). These organizations not only expand the organizational spectrum of Muslim communities but also testify to the search for legitimacy and visibility in the public sphere, evidencing an ongoing process of consolidation and differentiation.

This framework is further enriched by youth networks, women's associations, and newly established groups, many of which signed the 2017 National Pact for an Italian Islam promoted by the Ministry of the Interior. The signing of this document—as well as the earlier Charter of Values of Citizenship and Integration of 2007—represented, at least in governmental intentions, a public gesture of adherence to constitutional principles and a step toward constructing a possible *Intesa* between the State and Italian Islam. However, the concrete impact of these acts has been virtually null: although they have contributed to placing Muslim organizations within the institutional public sphere, they have not affected the structural conditions that continue to hinder the full legal recognition of Islam.

The idea—often circulated in political and media debates—that the State requires the existence of a single interlocutor in order to conclude an *Intesa* with

Muslim communities actually constitutes a false problem with no legal basis. Neither Article 8 of the Italian Constitution nor its implementing norms prescribe the identification of a single representative for each religious denomination. As Ferrari (2013) observes, the Italian legal framework explicitly recognizes institutional pluralism under Article 8 of the Constitution and allows for multiple *Intese* with distinct entities belonging to the same religious tradition, provided that they possess legal personality and effective representativeness.

Evidence of this is provided by the two separate intese concluded with the Unione Buddhista Italiana (UBI) and the Istituto Buddhista Italiano Soka Gakkai (IBISG), which concretely demonstrate the possibility of recognizing multiple representative bodies of the same tradition. The insistence on identifying a single interlocutor for Islam in Italy therefore reflects a strategy of political and symbolic simplification rather than a genuine legal requirement. As Naso (2021) observes, Italian Islam is at once "visible but not recognized": it is perceived in the public sphere as a demographically significant reality yet deprived of institutional legitimacy. In this light, the demand for unified representation corresponds to the State's need to reduce the complexity of a fragmented associational landscape, without any grounding in constitutional law. From a socio-legal perspective, the *Intesa* remains a negotiated instrument of differentiated recognition, designed to valorize the organizational autonomy of religious communities rather than a mechanism of uniformity or representative investiture.

The most recent institutional attempt to address this pluralism is represented by the establishment of the Council for Italian Islam (Consiglio per l'Islam Italiano), created within the Ministry of the Interior in 2016 and renewed in 2022. This body brought together many of the major Islamic organizations active in Italy, including the signatories of the 2017 Pact, in an effort to construct a stable platform for dialogue. However, deep internal divisions and the absence of a shared vision have thus far prevented any significant progress toward a formal *Intesa*.

As Allievi (2009) underlines, the process of institutionalizing Islam in Italy is characterized by a constant tension between centripetal forces—seeking to construct a unified representation—and centrifugal forces—nourished by the diversity of Islamic experiences and by the different strategies of engagement with the State and civil society. Within this scenario, Muslim women and the new generations born or raised in Italy play an increasingly prominent role, moving with greater autonomy than traditional associative structures. As several studies have shown, these actors not only claim spaces of religious citizenship but also elaborate new models of self-representation and interaction with the public sphere, contributing to redefining the very boundaries of citizenship (Allievi, Guolo & Rhazzali, 2017).

The failure to reach an *Intesa* between the State and Muslim communities is therefore not merely the product of an institutional deficit but reflects the complexity of an Italian Muslim religious field in continuous transformation. Recognizing and valuing this internal pluralism—by legitimizing diverse forms of

representation—appears today as the key to overcoming the current impasse and promoting a genuinely inclusive governance of religious pluralism.

4. Cultural Catholicism, the Legal Status of Religions, and the Islamic Question in Italy

Italy continues to portray itself as a society culturally rooted in Catholicism, which remains the fundamental matrix of national collective identity. Social customs, linguistic practices, and institutions still reflect this shared self-consciousness. Despite ongoing processes of secularization, the majority of the population continues to identify as Catholic, albeit in increasingly diverse forms and with looser connections to ritual practice (Garelli, 2011; 2020). Within the Western European context, Italy ranks among the countries with the highest levels of self-declared religious affiliation and Catholic socialization: recent surveys estimate that around 70% of the population defines itself as Catholic, though with irregular attendance—figures consistently higher than those of France or Germany and comparable, or slightly lower, to strongly Catholic contexts such as Ireland and Poland (Garelli, 2020; Censis, 2024; Eurispes, 2024). This phenomenon has given rise to a form of "cultural" or "diffused" Catholicism (Garelli, 2016), which serves as an identity reference even for non-practicing individuals.

The encounter with the "other"—identified above all with Muslims and, more broadly, with migrants—has contributed to reinforcing internal cohesion and the perception of Catholicism as a unifying symbolic code (Pace & Rhazzali, 2018). This perception finds confirmation in collective practices and in the dense web of ties to local institutions such as parishes, Catholic associations, and volunteer groups, which continue to maintain a widespread presence throughout the national territory. Italian society, while increasingly exposed to religious diversification, remains marked by a slow and uneven secularization in which Catholicism continues to act as a pervasive cultural framework (Pace, 2013). The persistence of parish networks and Catholic voluntary associations does not simply express religious belonging but embodies a moral infrastructure that organizes social relations and shapes the symbolic geography of everyday life. Within this system, the enduring strength of cultural Catholicism operates as a shared reference—capable of uniting practicing and non-practicing individuals alike—thereby reaffirming the centrality of Catholicism in the construction of national identity (Garelli, 2020).

At various points in Italian public debate, Islam has often been portrayed as poorly compatible with national culture, in contrast with the implicit perception that migrants from Christian contexts are more easily "integrable." A significant example was the 2000 intervention of Cardinal Giacomo Biffi during the seminar

Gospel, Work, and Migration, in which he argued that "the faithful of Islam … for the most part come to us determined to remain strangers to our humanity."4

This perspective has cyclically resurfaced in political discourse: in 2018, Matteo Salvini —then Minister of the Interior—declared that Islam, as a literal interpretation of the Qur'an, might not be compatible with Italian values, freedom, and the national Constitution.5 Similar statements have been repeated by other Italian political leaders, advocating the preferential reception of Christian migrants (particularly Orthodox from Eastern Europe) over Muslim ones, presented as "non-assimilable" (Guolo, 2012; Ambrosini, 2020).

The debate surrounding the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum also reflects this tension. It has reactivated fractures already visible in 2015: several Central and Eastern European governments rejected relocation mechanisms, at times invoking the defense of the continent's "Christian roots" (Hungary). Within the Visegrád Group, some countries explicitly favored the exclusive reception of Christian refugees (Slovakia), while Poland justified its refusal mainly for reasons of security and national identity. Similar cases have occurred in France and Germany, where populist and nationalist parties have built much of their rhetoric on the alleged incompatibility of Islam with national culture, thus fueling polarizing and identitarian narratives (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

The plurality of religious affiliations and practices has therefore not eliminated tensions linked to national identity in a country historically marked by the fragmentation of the "thousand bell towers." In this context, Catholicism continues to function as a "generalized symbolic code" (Garelli, 2020), capable of reducing the complexity generated by religious and cultural pluralism. Religion thus maintains not only a spiritual but also an identity function, serving as a frame of reference even for non-believers or occasional practitioners.

To understand the position of Islam in Italy, it is necessary to analyze the legal framework governing relations between the State and religious communities. The political and institutional transformations from the birth of the unified State to the Republic have progressively redefined the role of the Catholic Church and of religious minorities. The following table summarizes the main milestones:

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4   Giacomo Biffi, speech at the seminar "Gospel, Work and Migration", Bologna, September 30, 2000, quoted in Chiesa Espresso: "The faithful of Islam … for the most part come to us determined to remain strangers to our humanity," September 30, 2000, https://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/7283.html

5   Matteo Salvini, interview reported in La Stampa, "Salvini: 'Islam incompatible with the Constitution'," February 8, 2018, https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2018/02/08/news/salvini-islam-incompatibile-con-la-costituzione-1.33977623

Table 1: Changes in the relationships between the State, the Catholic Church and religious minorities

1848 Carlo Alberto of Savoia Statute (Pre-unification Italian State)	The 1929 Concordat between the Fascist State and the Holy See	The Concordat was incorporated into the Republican Constitution	The 1984 revision of the Concordat (Centre-Left Government)	The 2001 political change
Catholicism was the religion of the State	Catholicism was the only religion of the State	The principle of separation between State and Church was limited by recognition in the Constitution (art. 7) of the 1929 Concordat: Catholicism remained the religion of the State.	Abolishing the formula "Catholicism is the religion of the State", it reaffirmed the centrality of the Catholicism in the national identity	Since the 9/11 2001 many politicians (more from the right-wing, less from left) have encouraged the Catholic Church to play de facto the role of the religion of the State
Other religious minorities (Waldensians, Jews and so on) were recognized by the State	The other religious minorities were recognized by the concordat as cults admitted by the state	Religious freedom was guaranteed but minorities were tolerated	According to the new revision there was an agreement (*Intesa*) between the State and some specific religious minorities granting them similar financial benefits	While the public sphere is exclusively occupied by the Catholic Church which has de facto been re-established. No agreement (*Intesa*) with some religious minorities (Jehova's Witnesses, Buddhists and Muslims)
Source: Ferrari, 2013				

To this day, the Italian Parliament has failed to approve a comprehensive law on religious freedom, which formally does not exist despite the guarantees enshrined in the 1948 Constitution. The initiatives launched over the past decades have not led to concrete results, mainly due to resistance from the Italian Episcopal Conference and parts of the political spectrum. Such a law would, in fact, imply both the equality of all religious communities before the State and the end of

Catholic juridical primacy. Many actors—both ecclesiastical and political—have preferred to preserve the concordatarian framework, which tends to reproduce asymmetries among denominations by: a) guaranteeing the Catholic Church privileged institutional channels and resources (schools, religious education, funding mechanisms); b) consolidating Catholicism as a symbolic code of collective memory, thereby slowing the full recognition of pluralism (particularly of Islam); and c) maintaining a stable intertwining of religion and politics in the governance of the social order (Frisina & Pace, 2011).

Within this context, Islam remains confined to the status of a "tolerated" religion, often perceived with suspicion by what has been termed the WICAT (White Italian Catholic), and subject to restrictions and controls rarely applied with comparable rigidity to other faiths. Two examples are particularly significant: on the one hand, the idea—promoted by the Lega Nord—of submitting the construction of new places of worship to municipal referendums; on the other, regional laws introducing restrictive criteria, especially for mosques and Muslim prayer halls, whereas Orthodox and neo-Protestant communities have often benefited from more flexible treatment (Allievi, 2010).

More broadly, Islam is still perceived as a presence to be monitored and contained, especially in identitarian political discourse shaped by WICAT narratives (Guolo, 2011). This is reflected in both the aforementioned referendums and in urban and procedural restrictions applied almost exclusively to Islamic worship spaces (Ambrosini, Molli & Naso, 2022). Nevertheless, the growing religious diversity and the emergence of new generations of Muslim citizens keep alive the debate on the need for legislative reform capable of ensuring genuine religious pluralism. Like other European countries, Italy thus faces the challenge of reconciling a Catholicism still central to national identity with an increasingly pluralist context marked by tensions around the "selective integration" of migrants.

Conclusions

The analysis carried out in this article has shown that Italy constitutes a privileged laboratory for observing the transformations affecting European societies as they confront growing religious pluralization. In a context historically dominated by the symbolic centrality of Catholicism, the arrival of new religious presences—and particularly of Islam—has reshaped cultural, legal, and political equilibria. This transformation does not follow a linear trajectory but unfolds through tensions, negotiations, and resistances, revealing the ambivalent character of contemporary Italian society: deeply secularized in practice, yet still rooted in a Catholic matrix that continues to function as a generalized symbolic code.

Bourdieu's theory of the religious field allows us to interpret the Muslim presence as the outcome of complex interactions among multiple actors: Islamic associations, state institutions, local governments, political parties, and the media. Within this field, Italian Muslim communities appear internally plural, fragmented

by national, cultural, and theological differences, and traversed by struggles for legitimacy and representation. However, this plurality should not be seen solely as an obstacle; it also represents a resource for rethinking democratic participation and for constructing new forms of religious citizenship.

The persistent absence of an *Intesa* between the State and Muslim communities remains an unresolved issue that reflects not only a normative deficit but also the endurance of symbolic and political asymmetries among religious denominations. The concordatarian regime continues to guarantee Catholicism a privileged role, while Islam remains often confined to the status of a "tolerated religion," subject to controls and restrictions rarely applied with comparable severity to other confessions. This framework fuels a public rhetoric that contrasts the "easy integrability" of Christian migrants with the supposed "non-integrability" of Muslims—a narrative intertwined with identity-based fears and the political instrumentalization of populist and nationalist parties in Italy and across Europe.

Nevertheless, the progressive pluralization of Italian society and the growing visibility of new Muslim generations—born or raised in the country—are redefining traditional categories of belonging and integration. These citizens, together with Muslim women increasingly active in public debate, represent a potential driver of social renewal, capable of transcending stereotypical readings and dichotomous schemes of "us" versus "them."

Looking ahead, the challenge facing Italy lies in the construction of an inclusive model of governance of religious pluralism—one capable of reconciling the recognition of difference with social cohesion. This requires a paradigm shift that both values the internal diversity of religious communities and develops normative instruments ensuring substantive equality among confessions. Only through such a transformation can religious pluralization evolve from a perceived source of conflict into a resource for democratic strengthening and a more mature intercultural dialogue.

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