

Muslims in Europe and Italian Islam

Stefano Allievi

University of Padova; stefano.allievi@unipd.it - www.stefanoallievi.it

Abstract

Islam in Europe is both an historical fact and a new social, cultural, and religious presence. This paper traces a short history of the evolution of the relations between Islam and Europe, highlighting the specificities of the presence of Muslims in Italy.

Keywords

Islam in Europe; Sociology of Religions; Immigration

Les musulmans en Europe et l'islam italien

Résumé

L'islam en Europe est un fait historique et en même temps une nouvelle présence, du point de vue social, culturel et religieux. Cet article trace une brève histoire de l'islam européen, tout en soulignant les spécificités de la présence des musulmans en Italie.

Mot-clés

L'islam en Europe ; sociologie des religions ; immigration

المسلمون في أوروبا والإسلام الإيطالي

الملخص

يعتبر الإسلام في أوروبا حقيقة تاريخية وفي الوقت نفسه حضوراً جديداً من الناحية الاجتماعية والثقافية والدينية. يقدم هذا المقال نبذة موجزة عن تاريخ الإسلام في أوروبا، مع التركيز على خصوصيات حضور المسلمين في إيطاليا.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الإسلام في أوروبا، علم اجتماع الأديان، الهجرة

Introduction: The new European Muslims

Islam has become the second religion in Europe – after Christian denominations – in terms of followers, thus making Europe, for Muslims living in it, not an enemy, but a new opportunity, included in religious terms: the European part of the *ummah*¹. But part of European societies, significantly represented in politics, seems to consider Islam more a threat than an advantage: Muslims are an opportunity as workers (even when not perceived as such), not as believers. Both tendencies are verifiable in the field: the fact that millions of Muslims find in Europe a land of opportunity, and the fact that millions of Europeans, for good or bad reasons, fear Islam. Inevitably this process is going through different types of contact and conflicts, some of which, particularly on symbolic terms, are clearly visible in European societies: an example of how cultural and religious conflicts are becoming a contemporary form of social conflict (Allievi 2009a, 2009b and 2017).

The Muslim presence in Europe constitutes in fact a dramatic cultural change for Western European societies, particularly for the countries, like Italy, that only one (or one and a half) generation ago were still mainly exporting labour force: countries of emigration (as they have re-become in recent years: Allievi 2023; Colucci 2018), not yet of immigration – unaware of a religious pluralism induced by the arrival of new populations (Allievi 2014a, Pace 2013). Furthermore, considering the tumultuous history of relations between the Arab (Islamic) world and (Christian) Europe across the Mediterranean, the presence of Islam in Europe effectively represents a historic watershed: many things, in fact, have changed, through history.

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. Despite 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 second, shorter historical phase is that of Europe's penetration of Islam (Europe in Islam). It involves the age of empires and the period of colonization, when Europe directly dominated many Muslim countries, often deciding their fate, form, and borders. It is a phase that partly continues, although in very different

¹ See, as foundational interpretative references, Dassetto 1996; Maréchal, Allievi, Dassetto and Nielsen 2003, an extensive research conducted for the Forward Studies Unit of the European Commission; Nielsen and Otterbeck 2015. A couple of handbooks can be useful supports: for an updated thematic approach, Tottoli 2022; in terms of national cases, Césari 2015.

ways, through contemporary forms of neo-colonization, and processes of economic but also symbolic and consumeristic globalization, and the progressive incorporation of the Muslim world into transnational economic dynamics and political institutions: but in which many Muslim countries play now a different and often leading role.

A third, much more recent phase concerns, in reverse, Islam in Europe, and is characterized by migration processes. In some countries this phase begins 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 the following economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s in north-central Europe, and even later, from the late 1970s onward, in southern Europe.

The fourth phase, that of the Islam of Europe, we see it taking place through the generational transition and a more general cultural mutation, 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, of which it is the fruit: it is in fact an Islam born and socialized in Europe, forced or stimulated to build its own identity and space in the European geopolitical and cultural space.

The natural sequel to this process should be the formation, in a fifth phase, of a European Islam, with its own marked identity, different from that of, for example, Arab or Turkish (or any other) Islam. This Islam is and even more will be characterized by being an autochthonous European product, and to a large extent the fruit of a progressive and substantial process of lived (and formal) citizenship of Muslims residing in Europe, also capable of relevant feedback effects, including religious ones, with respect to the countries of origin of European Muslims.

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 re-starts as new immigrants continue and will continue to arrive. So, while we can identify changes and trend lines, they can never include in their entirety the immigrant Muslim communities. These transformations have cultural and social consequences, but they are also theological, of self-definition of European Islam (van Bruinessen and Allievi 2011). What is absolutely evident is that Islam is no longer a transitory phenomenon whose presence is only temporary and can eventually be sent back 'home'. Its home is where Muslims are.

Nowadays, an increasing population that can be considered 'culturally' Muslim live in Western Europe, with no intention to go back. Among this population

it is already difficult, now, and it will be even more difficult (and, in the end, a simple nonsense) in the future, to distinguish between the Muslims ‘of origin’, the ‘mixed’ populations, like the so-called second generations culturally grown up “between two cultures”, but also those coming from a situation of mixed marriage, and the ‘autochthonous’ Muslims (which include the converts to Islam, but also naturalized people). This presence needs to be considered, in perspective, the new Muslim population of Europe: European Muslims, not Muslims in Europe (Allievi 2020).

1. Data and characteristics of European Islam

The Muslim population in Europe is estimated at around 23-25 million: but it is as high as 50 million, according to certain Islamic apologetic and propagandistic sources, as well as anti-Islamic stigmatizing ones, who have the same interest in statistical overestimation. This phenomenon of over-perception is not surprising, being widely cultivated by political parties and a significant part of media and cultural establishment.

The actual figure attests that roughly 5% of the European population is of Muslim origin.

A 2017 Pew Research Centre survey proposes the following ranking of the European countries with the highest presence, in absolute numbers (in some countries figures have already changed in the meantime): France (5,700,000 - 8.8%), Germany (about 5,000,000 - 6.1%), the United Kingdom (4,100,000 - 6.3%), Italy (2,900,000 - 4.8%) and the Netherlands (1,200,000 - 7.1%). But they are already 11.1% in Bulgaria, 8.1% in Sweden, 7.6% in Belgium, etc. With prospects for growth between now and 2050 – since they are on average a younger population and have a higher fertility rate (although in a generation, or a generation and a half, they tend to equal that of their country of residence) – varying according to the scenario, but conceivable between 7.4 and 14% of the European population (which itself is in decline, causing the percentages of Muslims to increase accordingly). This evolution would mean a double-digit presence in Bulgaria, France, Belgium and Sweden, and not far off in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland, with a zero migration scenario (with a reasonable immigration rate would mean Sweden in 2050 at over 20%, and between 15 and 20% in France, the United Kingdom and Belgium). These are crude estimates, because they are based on national origin, and not on reliable measurements of religious beliefs and practices (sort of like saying there are 60 million Catholics in Italy).

If we move from the national to the local scale, due to the fact that immigrants (and thus Muslims) are not equally distributed in national territories, but are overwhelmingly present in cities, the places with the most Muslims are the Paris metropolitan area (at least 2 million), and the Greater London area (slightly less). Significantly Muslim cities are Bradford (one-third of the population) or some French satellite cities, but substantial percentages of Muslims can be found in other

major cities: one-fourth of the population in Birmingham, Brussels (symbolically the capital of Europe, where the most common name at birth is Mohammed, in its many ethnic-linguistic variants), Marseille and Rotterdam, one-fifth in Malmö and Roubaix, slightly less in Leicester and Antwerp, 15% in Manchester, Paris, The Hague, and Amsterdam, above 10% in Vienna, London, Cologne, Frankfurt and Copenhagen.

This presence evidently has many social, economic and political, as well as cultural and religious, implications. It impacts the daily life of neighborhoods (ethnic stores, Islamic bookstores, associative centers, etc.) as well as urban planning (mosques), schools as well as the labor market, consumption as well as social relations (creating widespread dynamics of inclusion and *mixité* as well as forms of intra-community closure and exclusion). This presence 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 vote; 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. But there is also the progressive 'normalization' of this presence, even in politics: which means that today there are Muslim parliamentarians, city and regional councilors, and mayors, even in large cities (think of the most symbolic case of Sadiq Khan in London, that has won a third mandate). At the same time we observe a progressive 'exceptionalization' of Islam: through internal dynamics (the emergence of forms of jihadist radicalism, but also of broader swaths of cultural contestation, self-sufficiency and separateness, especially of Salafist inspiration) and external ones, due to forms of 'targeting', by the media, politics, and growing parts of public opinion. The most relevant fact about the Islamic presence, however, is not quantitative, but qualitative. Rather than asking how many Muslims there are and how many Muslims there will be in Europe, we should ask ourselves what kind of Muslims they are, and what kind of Muslims they will be, how and to what extent they consider themselves Muslims, what kind of Islam they believe in and practice.

2. Historical roots of European and Italian Islam

Islam in Europe has a history rooted in time, which has left important traces even in its contemporaneity². Nevertheless, it is significant that in many countries (including Italy) it constitutes a forgotten history, to some extent removed – thus, the actual presence of Muslims, is often an unacknowledged presence.

² This paragraph is partly based on a previous chapter, published as Allievi 2024.

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.

Of the former, the best-known example with longer-lasting consequences is that of Islamic Spain. A presence that began at the dawn of the 8th century and ended with the expulsion of the last surviving descendants of the Muslim presence in 1492: more than half a millennium of domination, cultural even before military, that is still remembered as one of the golden ages of Spanish history, as well as Islamic history.

The second historical antecedent of the Islamic presence in Europe 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 with an 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 returns of conflict, as the Balkan war in former Yugoslavia tragically showed.

Going back to the former and best known example of Islamic presence, apart Spain we have to mention the historical presence of Islam in Italy, even though it has been shorter and with less incisive consequences than in Spain. We refer in particular to the Islamic presence in Sicily, but also other areas of the peninsula, especially in the South, with the brief experiences of the emirates of Bari and Taranto (see Metcalfe 2009; Nef 2015; Engel and Jäckh 2022; Tramontana 2014). The first officially documented Arab raid on the Sicilian coast 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, his court substantially Arabic, his probable religious sympathy for Islam (the cloak worn in Rome to receive the crown of the Holy Roman Empire, decorated with inscriptions in Arabic characters, bore the date in the Islamic calendar, as did the coins he had minted). During the following centuries, many raids by Barbary pirates reached the coasts of Southern Italy and the islands, becoming a common threat for the coastal populations: some of them even nearly reached the banks of the Tiber and the city of Rome.

Within Italy, Sicily was to remain the area most influenced by Islam: from Mazara del Vallo, a Sicilian outpost facing Tunisia, the ancient Ifriqiya (from which

we define the entire continent of Africa, but which, for several Arab geographers and historians, is a term which also comprises Sicily), to Palermo, that comes from the Arabic Balarm (it had previously been the Greek Panormos), the court capital, and the “city of three hundred mosques” as it was called by Ibn Hawqal, an Arab traveller of Norman times, in his chronicle of 973. But reference to the Arab-Islamic past, as shown by local place names, is to be found everywhere: from the port, or *marsa Ali* (or Allah), now Marsala, the western cape Trinacria, the gorges of Alcantara (*al-qantara* means “bridge”), to various names such as Caltanissetta, Caltabellotta, Caltagirone, Calatafimi and Calascibetta, which refer to the Arab *qal’a*, a castle, but also a fortress or stronghold, to Canicatti (*al-qattah*), Favara (from *fawar*, a “spring”), Sciacca (*as-saqqah*, a “split” or a “crevice”) and Alcamo (the Arab manzil *al-qamah*). Sometimes the same linguistic derivation serves to denominate a place: like the Latin *mons* or the Arabic *giabal*, both meaning “mountain”, which led to the invention of Mongiabal, now Mongibello, which is simply Mount Etna (Gibellina and Gibilmanna have the same derivation).

Beyond the place names, surnames, and the Sicilian language itself, the presence of Arabo-Islamic traditions and mores remained alive also in the material development (for example, wells and waterwheels, fountains – linked both to practical use and liturgical necessities linked to ablutions – and the import and introduction of the date palm, oranges, pistachios, bananas, myrrh, saffron, cotton and sugarcane), and in folklore (the popular stories of Giufà, for example, that come directly from the Arabic Giuha). This cultural presence of Islam lasted far beyond the two centuries of direct Arab domination, and continued throughout the Norman period, as we have seen.

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.

There are some other and more recent examples of Islamic presence in Italy. By the second half of the fifteenth century, several groups of Ottoman pirates penetrated inland, into Veneto and what is now Friuli. Their arrival had a disproportionate effect: the fear of Turks was widespread. “Mamma, li Turchi!” became a popular alarm cry, while people prayed to be freed from their arrival: “a furore Turchorum libera nos Domine”. This fear of the Turks pervaded the whole of Europe (as Jean Delumeau, 1978, has documented in his history of fear in the West) for good reasons: the expansion of the Ottoman Empire reached its peak in the two sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1683, which risked reaching Italy. But even more recently, in the XIX century, Ippolito Nievo, in his *Confessioni d’un italiano*, a masterpiece of the literature of unified Italy, recalls it in vivid terms (Nievo 2014), as did the writer Pier Paolo Pasolini in his *I Turcs tal Friúl* (Pasolini 1995).

During this long period, which ranged from the Arab domination of Sicily to the abandonment of any possible idea of Ottoman conquest, groups of Muslims came into occasional contact with the Italian peninsula. Prisoners, merchants, travellers, but above all, as mentioned, Saracen pirates and, among them, the first converts to Islam (Bennassar 1989), who sometimes constitute a reference and an example for today's converts (Allievi 1998). Still visible on the Italian coastline are the remains of 'Saracen towers' used for defence and as lookout posts, and 'Saracen jousts' and similar events are still alive in local folklore. And, of course, the country's historical imagery of Islam has been built around the Crusades.

Islam has also left its traces in more recent Italian history through the country's colonial adventures and the attempts to build an Italian 'Empire'. After the war, and before Fascism, a special statute was granted in 1919 (but suspended in 1922 and cancelled in 1928) to the Muslims of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. In the same year of the cancellation of this statute, during the Fascist period, in a speech on the foreign policy on June 5 1928, contradictory Mussolini had declared to the Senate that Italy was "a friend of the Islamic world and conscious of its functions as a great Muslim Power". Symbolically, the most important occasion to show this friendship was the 'spontaneous' consignment of the 'Sword of Islam' to Mussolini, visiting Tripoli on March 18 1937, by some of the local chiefs. Mussolini liked to have his equestrian portrait taken with this gift and had responded to its presentation in rhetorical terms: "Fascist Italy intends to assure the Muslim populations of Libya and Ethiopia peace, justice, wellbeing, and respect for the laws of the Prophet, and also wishes to demonstrate its empathy with the Muslims and with Islam throughout the world" (both quotations in Allievi 2003; see also Mazzuca 2017). Interesting words, except that they were contradicted by ordinary daily practice of Fascist Colonialism. It is anyway interesting to note that some contemporary converts to Islam, particularly those coming from a background referring to a militant engagement in extreme right-wing movements, openly refer to Mussolini's 'sympathy' towards Islam as a model, to contrast anti-Islamic propaganda coming from the same political area at present day.

At the time, Italy did in fact have a true Muslim policy, which did not fail to arouse some concern amongst other colonial powers. Examples were Radio Bari's broadcastings in Arabic, which started in May 1934, even before the BBC's Arabic Service; the support of and penetration into the Arabic press; the important funding allocated to the Istituto per l'Oriente in Rome and the Istituto Orientale di Napoli, which were prominent and represented in that period a point of reference for European Orientalism; the relations with the Mufti of Jerusalem, Amir Al-Husayni (known for his position pro Nazi-Fascist regimes and their anti-Judaism), who spent long periods in Rome before and after the beginning of the Second World War. All this activity refers to relations of strength and spheres of influence with respect to the other chancelleries of Europe, particularly the British, and is openly based on a rhetoric of Italy being a bridge between East and West and, in the

Mediterranean, between North Africa and Europe, and even as a possible “Western school” (still a Mussolini’s quote) for the new Islamic nations which were coming into being. Later, Italy no longer aspired to this role. After the fall of fascism, this policy was abandoned and so, progressively, were the studies, culture, knowledge, and awareness acquired during these years: included for what concerns the reputation and financing of Orientalistic institutes.

3. The return of Islam

It was to give justice to this neglected history that when Felice Dassetto and I conducted the first research carried out on migrant Muslims in Italy during the early 1990s we decided to title it *Il ritorno dell’Islam* (The return of Islam, Allievi and Dassetto 1993, while my Allievi 2003 contained important historical parts on every region of Italy). What was intended to be a recognition of, and a homage to, a forgotten memory, sounded as a sort of provocation, how great the ignorance of this past was widespread. Still, there is much talk and frequent discussion about Italian Islam, but Muslims are still relatively little-known: the debate is about Muslims, but it is not often addressed to them and even less is a conversation with them. And the actual production of research on Muslims in Italy, even from the viewpoint of quantity, cannot be compared with that in countries such as France, the United Kingdom or Germany, or Belgium, Holland, Scandinavian countries and even Spain, that like Italy is a newcomer as immigration country. Because of the later arrival of immigrants and hence of Muslims (compared to other European central and northern countries), and the lack of recognition of their presence, included from the legislative point of view, Italy has not produced a specific model of cultural politics to favour immigrant integration. Instead, anti-multiculturalist discourses created debate in the public space even before multiculturalist policies had been implemented (Allievi 2010 and 2014b), due to the actions of important political entrepreneurs of fear (such as the Lega Nord, and what at present is named Fratelli d’Italia, the party that won the elections in 2022, whose leader, Giorgia Meloni, is, while we are writing, the Italian prime minister). In this sense, Italy may be viewed as a country without an established model of pluralism, and different governments have produced contradictory laws, depending on the majorities supporting them in power. Nevertheless, cultural and religious pluralism has factually flourished in the country. A new and more complex religious landscape has emerged, of which Islam, being more statistically important and more ‘debated’ by mass media than other non-Christian minorities, is an important, if not crucial, part. In fact, unlike other European countries, which already had internal religious pluralism and in which immigration started decades earlier, Italy discovered lately a hitherto unknown pluralism in the presence of Islam. Therefore, pluralism has possibly been perceived as more difficult to understand and being accepted.

Islam itself is characterized by internal pluralism. What emerges from analysis and research is in fact the image of a large ethnic, national and linguistic diversity, to which we must add various traditions and interpretation of religion (Sunnites belonging to different juridical schools or madhab, Shiites and other Muslim minorities), political attitudes and transnational affiliations. This plurality, differently from other European countries (at least in the initial phase of their Muslim presences: Algerians in France, Turks in Germany, Indopakistanis in the UK, etc.), characterized from the beginning the Muslim presence in Italy. The transformations in the demographic stratification, must be added to the figure: we are not talking anymore of young adult males, as in the classic image of the migratory chain. Increasingly, we are now talking of families, women, second and third generations, old people and retired workers who do not return to their countries of origin anymore (on different aspects of Italian islam, among others, see Frisina 2004; Pace 2004; Bombardieri 2010; Rhazzali 2011; Degiorgis 2014; Saint-Blancat 2015; Acocella e Pepicelli 2015; Allievi, Guolo and Rhazzali 2017; Sbai 2021).

Some of these Muslim migrants, as other immigrants, mainly those of the early generations, still hark back to their countries of origin, linguistically but also relationally, keeping a close contact with their enlarged original families for emotional, symbolic, and even economic and political reasons, purchasing houses, investing in land or commercial ventures. Many others definitely aim to integrate (or co-include) in the country they have chosen to live in, or in which they are obliged to live in not having succeeded in migrating further north within Europe (as many try to do: onward migrations increase when they get the Italian citizenship and, with it, the freedom to circulate within the EU). In both cases, the focus for interpretation is change, not continuity. This is not only because living conditions change, but because also opinions and even beliefs and theologies do: all subjected in the same way to the pressures of radical transformations.

Among the various characteristics of Islam in Italy, with respect to other European countries, we can refer to several key aspects. First, the variety of countries of origin prevents identification, also in terms of perception from Italian observers and institutions, with only one Muslim country. Second, Muslims have been able to build their associations and mosques quite rapidly, compared to other European countries, where Muslims have arrived several decades before, but have been slower in the process of visibility and institutionalisation, and Islam has been confined for a long initial period in the private sphere. Third, more recent arrivals are characterised by the fact that even in countries of origin the reference to Islam is much more central to public discourses, and in the construction of public space, on religious, political, and cultural planes (much more than in the 1970s and early 1980s, for example, in which large-scale immigration occurred in central and northern Europe). Fourth, the presence of Islam has become visible in the public space – through mosques and organisations – already with the first generation, in the early years of their migration, when Islamic leadership still had little experience of the

country and a modest knowledge of Italian language and culture: and this has led to frequent conflicts and misunderstandings, that has had a negative influence on the perception of Islam. Fifth, the greater frequency of irregular presence (immigrants without legal permits), partly due to illegal entry but also to current laws, and by the slowness and malfunctioning of the bureaucratic apparatus required to apply them, constitutes a severe obstacle to integration, even in cultural and religious terms. Sixth, the presence of Islam in Italy is marred by the scarcity of people arriving from ex-colonies with pre-existing cultural and linguistic links with Italy, and a tradition of reciprocal knowledge, and thus also the consequent lack of a post-colonial debate. Seventh, the important role played by converts in what we might call the social production and the cultural transmission of Islam (mass media visibility, Muslim press, websites, translations) and the political milieux (lobbying in favour of agreements with state authorities and the promotion of Islam on both local and national scales), with a more general role of substitution for the organisational shortcomings of Muslim immigrants. Eighth, the greater working and residential dispersion, and the weakness, at least at present, of secular ethnic and cultural interlocutors with sufficient claim to representation, which makes the social and religious role played by mosques even more important. The Muslim presence in Italy is in fact scattered all over the country. Unlike other European countries, it cannot be identified only with communities in large cities, although they are mediated almost exclusively. In Italy, Islam (as immigration) is also largely present – even with places of worship, although often small and precarious – in medium-sized and small towns, and in the countryside and rural areas. It is what we could call ‘dialectal’ Islam, locally integrated: in a certain sense more ‘localised’ than ‘nationalised’, but it often shows processes of integration and acceptance which are higher than those visible in some large cities – and, compared to other European countries, lower levels of radicalization: even the number of foreign fighters during the period of ISIS capacity of attractions has been among the lowest in Europe (on this last aspect see Allievi 2021; Guolo 2015 and 2018; Bombardieri 2018; Bombardieri, Giorda and Hejazi 2019; Bernardini, Francesca, Borrillo and Di Mauro 2021).

The picture would not be completed without taking into consideration how Italian society is reacting to the presence of Islam. On the side of Italian society and institutions in fact there are equally interesting changes, and not all of go in the same direction. Going in the direction of greater closure with respect to Islam is the exaggerated if 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 press to the local media. Political Islamophobia is linked to it, with the effect of a lack of respect for individual and collective rights of Muslims (for example, regarding places of worship in some municipalities). There are also cases of a selective application of the law (for example, safety and fire regulations which, in their strictest form can lead to the immediate closure of

Muslim prayer halls), or what we could call Islamic “exceptionalism”, that consider Muslims to be exceptional cases and thus ordinary laws do not apply to them and thus for whom specific conditions are required. All this occurs within a cultural setting that continues to be unfavourable to good relations with Islam. One example could be the pervasive and extremely effective anti-Muslim press campaign initiated by the reporter Oriana Fallaci, whose three long sellers *de facto* set the agenda of Italian politics for many years, from 9/11 until today (to which I answered directly in my *Allievi* 2006; for a contextualization and analysis, Burdett 2015). For instance, the regions of Lombardy (in 2015) and Veneto (in 2016), ruled by majorities in which the Lega, the party of Matteo Salvini, known for his tough anti-immigrant and anti-Islam politics, has passed highly problematic laws on mosques (partly refused by the Constitutional Court), glossing over the fact that the exercise of religion is a constitutionally guaranteed right. The continuous and intentional overlapping with the refugee emergency in the Mediterranean equally pushes towards a confrontational and closed perspective with respect to Islam, producing chain effects at the local level. Yet there is a more general political climate which also consented to the use of a public language towards Muslims (in mainstream politics and journalism), which has no parallel to that used for other religious communities or ethnic groups (and elsewhere is used only by extremist and openly xenophobic groups and newspapers).

On the other hand there is a development in the direction of greater awareness, institutional caution, and the opening of a more in-depth reflection than in the past on the things to be done by the Ministry of the Interior (three or four governments ago...), which activated a Table of Islam (composed of representatives of the various tendencies 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: these institutions are still active, but with no other signs of novelty. The emergence of ISIS and the risk of attacks in Italy as well has therefore led to the need to identify representative instances of Islam and the search for interlocutors in the Islamic world.

At the religious level, too (both on the part of the Catholic church and Protestant minorities), there is a deeper activism and capacity for dialogue, even at the local level. We can observe processes of effective integration due to an averagely positive role, dialogical and inclusive, played by the religions long present in the country, major and minor: the Catholic Church, and actors as the Waldesian (Protestant) Church (very active on migration issues and religious rights), as well as the Lutherans, Adventists, and the Jewish communities. We are far from some premature enthusiasms of the past (usually followed by early disappointments), but also from the aprioristic rejection of parts of Catholic hierarchies, and attitudes seem now more inclined to a daily long-term activity of involvement in discussion,

in fact inclusive, and capable of influencing important parts of public opinion with messages other than those conveyed by the media.

Conclusions

The future of Islamic presence in Italy depends on many different factors and tendencies. But what is absolutely evident is that, between economic integration and political refusal, between tolerance and Islamophobia, between social mixing and mediatic hysteria, between demographic change and symbolic threats, Islam will find its place in Europe, because Muslims will do, and are already doing.

The real problem is not controversies and conflicts, that exists already and will exist also tomorrow, hopefully more in the form of cultural conflict than that of violence: it is the relationship of Europe with Islam, on one hand; and the relationship that the Muslims have with Europe and the West, on the other.

If the conflictual issues are the symptom, the illness is the Western imaginary of Islam: which, like the Islamic imaginary of the West, appears more conflictual now than in a recent past. If Europe wants to solve these conflicts, it has to pass through them, making the reasons of the sentiments and behaviours of significant parts of society, the fears that move them, the drives that they contain, emerge. And Muslims in Europe need to enter these discussions, even when put in unpleasant forms.

It will be necessary to discard the idea of Islamic ‘exceptionalism’, the presumption that Muslims are always different, that they need unique and peculiar instruments. The European approach must remain firmly anchored to the universalism that characterizes the European juridical construction: to the principle that the law is the same for all, that rights are personal and inviolable, that it is not possible to do away with the principle of the universality of the law, which is at the foundation of the idea of the West, the justification of its history, and its legitimate pride.

Reflection on these themes must leave the short term, the agitation of the present – a horizon that for the political entrepreneurs of fear rarely goes beyond the next elections – and enter in the perspective of the middle and long term, shifting from elections to generations. Because the new generations (second and third, and following) of Muslims are already in Europe, and are different from those that preceded them, from their immigrant fathers and mothers; but in the same way the new generations of Europeans are no longer people who have seen Muslims arrive from somewhere, but persons who have always been side by side with them from their birth: in the neighbourhood as at school or at work.

If policies and politics change rapidly, institutions are a guarantee of coherence and duration, or at least slower and more meditated change than that which drives social and political forces. And despite everything, they are more solid than they seem: and they work in the direction of inclusion, integration, universalisation, the extension of rights, and their consolidation, not in the direction of cultural

opposition and social conflict. This process is also taking place on the religious level. There is a common religious grammar that ends up by comprehending and recognizing the religious needs of others and their meaning: praying, also in the community, fasting, having clothing codes, an idea of modesty, specific gender and sexual roles, a sense of pure and impure... In this there is the possibility of obtaining recognition and building alliances, and constructing relations of trust and confidence. But for this Muslims need also to understand that the idea of reciprocity, so often evoked off the point (as when a Moroccan immigrant group who wants to set up a prayer room is crushed by the reply that in Saudi Arabia you could not build a Christian church), has instead a profound and socially significant meaning when it asks to mutually share the pain of an injustice, of a discrimination, of a religiously motivated act of violence, wherever it may take place, in Europe or in Muslim countries, towards Muslims or towards Christians or Jews.

Islam – rightly or wrongly (other diversities are often much more ‘other’) – has recently become the most extreme example of alterity and of the changes that alterity brings to European societies. These changes do not only come from Islam and Muslims. However Islam, because of its symbolic overload and the problematic history that joins it to Europe, because of the striking and formidable aspect of some of its contemporary manifestations (among which obviously the emergence of transnational Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism), but also because of the significant statistical dimension of its presence, is inevitably at the centre of the political and social debate in Europe. And it will be there for a long time. As we have seen, Islam has become the second religion, or the first of the non-Christian minorities, in all European countries. So it will be impossible from now on to understand Europe without taking into consideration its Muslim component; but at the same time it will be impossible to understand Islam without taking into consideration its European and Western component. Islam has become a European fact and its internal component. And Europe an internal fact of Islam. It is not something that is going to happen in the future. It has already happened. We have to begin to understand its consequences.

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