



Religion and the city: A review on Muslim spatiality in Italian cities



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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the spatial impacts and characteristics of the Muslim presence in Italy. The centrality of religion for many migrants has significant consequences on the morphology of the Italian cities. This is especially the case of Islam, which is now the second most important religion in Italy – and the prevalent religion among immigrants.

After examining facts and figures about the Muslim presence in Italy, the paper focuses on two aspects of the Muslim urban presence. First, it analyses the residential patterns of Muslims, with reference to the case of Milan. The tendency towards a sprawled pattern is highlighted. The paper then analyses the four main 'landmarks' of the urban presence of Muslims in Italy: places of worship, *halal* butcheries, burial-places, and forms of public life. A discussion of the evolutionary prospects of Muslim spatiality in Italian cities over the next few decades follows these analyses.

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Introduction migrations and religions in Italy

When analysing the recent evolution of Italian cities, research has often focused on the impact of migrations. However, the urban impact of immigration in Italy has usually been studied by considering migration as a unitary process, or by disaggregating it according to ethnic characteristics. Seldom has it been analysed with reference to religion – contrary to other countries, where this is a quite well-established field of research: consider for instance, the case of Great Britain, and the works of Claire Dwyer, John Eade, Richard Gale and Ceri Peach, among others (Dwyer, 1999; Dwyer, Gilbert, & Shah, 2012; Eade, 1996; Gale, 2005, 2013; Gale & Naylor, 2002; Peach, 2002, 2006; Peach & Gale, 2003). Indeed, for many migrants, religion plays a fundamental role in terms of identity references (Warner, 2000) – in Italy as elsewhere (Lucà Trombetta, 2006). As Ceri Peach argues, it is even possible to maintain that "Religion is the new key to unraveling ethnic identity in the west. [...] As globalization has proceeded and the sources of migrants to the developed world have extended further into the developing world, the revolution in supply has not led simply to ethnic variety but to minority ethnic populations who sometimes conceive of themselves more in terms of their religion than of other ethnic markers" (Peach, 2002, p. 255).¹

As I will argue in this paper, the centrality of religion for many migrants – and, in particular, of religions different from the majority Catholic religion – has significant consequences on the

morphology of Italian cities. For instance, it induces the appearance of new places with a religious characterisation, and the appearance of new forms of expression in the public space (for instance, ways of dressing), which impact deeply on the Italian urban space. Hence, since these phenomena have been only partially investigated with reference to Italy, it seems interesting to analyse the forms and characteristics of 'Muslim spatiality' in Italian cities. (With 'spatiality' I refer to the places, forms, and modes in which Muslim migrants settle in Italian cities and characterise their presence.) Indeed, deeper knowledge of the characteristics of the Muslim urban presence is very important, not only for fact-finding purposes but also for a policy reason: Italy has intentionally ignored the growth of religious pluralism for a long time, so that the country lacks a systematic national policy for dealing with the different aspects of migrants' religious specificities. However, given to the increasing weight of immigrants in Italy, this lack seems no longer sustainable (Cususcelli, 2009; Chiodelli, 2014; Guolo, 2011).

The analysis presented in this paper rests mainly on a literature review of works on diverse aspects of the Muslim presence in Italy; insights on these aspects with regard to the case of Milan are provided.

It should be noted that Islam is obviously not the only 'alien' religion that has settled in Italy in recent decades as a consequence of migration, for Italy is characterised by the presence of a high number of minority religions (Pace, 2013). However, the analysis focuses on Islam because the presence of Muslims is quantitatively larger than that of other minority religions – moreover, it is also the most 'problematic' religion, for instance in terms of its relations with local institutions and population.

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¹ On this topic, see also Williams (2004), Gale (2013).

The rest of the paper is divided into five main sections. After a section which presents reflections and data about the Muslim presence in Italy (Section ‘Muslims in Italy: Facts and figures’), the spatial aspects of this presence are examined. First, analysis is conducted of the residential patterns of Muslims, with reference to the case of Milan (Section ‘Residential patterns of Muslims in Italy’). Then, the main spatial landmarks of Muslim spatiality in Italy are examined (Section ‘Main landmarks of Islam in Italy’). Before concluding, some considerations concerning the prospects of development of Muslim spatiality in Italian cities are discussed (Section ‘Discussion on prospects of the evolution of Islam in Italian cities’).

Muslims in Italy: Facts and figures

When analysing the extent of the Muslim presence in Italy, it is necessary to recognise that no accurate surveys on the spread of religions exist in Italy – for instance, the Italian census does not survey individual creeds. Data, such as those provided by Caritas and Migrantes’s annual report or by CENSUR (Center for Study of New Religions), are indirect and are obtained by considering the spread of a certain religion in the origin countries of migrants. As a consequence, they refer to *persons from Islamic countries, or from countries where there is a significant presence of Muslims* [henceforth ‘Muslim countries’]. Obviously, not all people from a Muslim country are necessarily worshippers or Muslim worshippers; moreover, among people who declare themselves to be Muslims, there are different levels of intensity in practising the religion. For instance, according to Dassetto, Ferrari, and Maréchal (2007), Muslims in Europe who are active worshippers are about one third of all migrants from an Islamic country² – the rest are non-active observers or agnostics; some of them consider themselves to be Muslims from only a cultural point of view, even if they pay little attention to religious precepts. (Note that a large part of the analysis that follows is not concerned with active believers alone, but, broadly speaking, with anyone who has some sort of identity relation with the Islamic religion.) Bearing these caveats in mind, data on migrants from Islamic countries are nonetheless relevant to gaining an idea about the order of magnitude of the Muslim presence in Italy.

The origins of contemporary Islamic migration to Italy can be traced back to the mid-1970s. But it was in the 1990s that immigrations from Muslim countries began to increase (Allievi, 2002; Allievi & Dassetto, 1993; Dassetto, 2008). In 2012, there were about 1,650,000 persons originating from Muslim countries, about one third of all foreigners in Italy³ (Caritas & Migrantes, 2012). The largest groups of migrants from Muslim countries were Moroccans (513,000), Albanians (498,000), Egyptians (124,000), Tunisians (121,000) and Bangladeshis (114,000) (ISTAT, 2013a).⁴ A few thousand Italians who have converted to Islam should be added to these data (we lack precise and independent data on Muslim converts: according to the Union of Islam Communities in Italy [Unione delle Comunità Islamiche in Italia], they amount to around 70,000).

As a consequence of these data, we can affirm that, today, Islam is probably the second most important religion in Italy (as in a

large number of other European countries) and among immigrants (Allievi, 2002; Caritas & Migrantes, 2012; Introvigne & Zoccatelli, 2013).⁵

Also to be emphasised is that the great majority of Muslims are not temporarily in Italy – for instance for a temporary period of work. They have come to Italy with the intention of staying for the rest of their lives. Hence the Muslim presence in Italy is not a reversible fact; on the contrary, it must now be considered an internal and enduring feature of the Italian socio-cultural landscape – despite the fact that Islam is still perceived by the ‘native’ population as a foreign and transitory element of the Italian socio-cultural setting (Allievi, 2000a, 2000b).

The significant and permanent Islamic presence in Italy has major consequences on the urban space, as we will argue in the following sections.

Residential patterns of Muslims in Italy

The role of religion in residential choices

For a significant number of migrants from Muslim countries, not only ethnicity, but also religion is a central pillar on which they build their own individual and collective identity as migrants (Allievi, 1999a, 1999b, 2010a; Peach, 2002, 2006; Saint-Blancat, 2002). There are many reasons for this. One of them is certainly the hostility of numerous European host countries, which is without parallel for other religions (with the partial exception of Judaism). This also holds for Italy, where this hostility strengthened particularly after the events of September 11, 2001, even if it had already appeared some years before (Allievi, 2010a). Such hostility generates in Muslim migrants a defensive reaction which traverses ethnic or origin boundaries to reinforce their religious identity: “the common experience of Islamophobia creates a unique community of suffering, which conflates ethnically disparate communities as Muslims and creates an assertive Muslim identity politics. In this sense, Islamophobia provokes the constitution of assertive Muslim identities in the hegemonic public sphere” (Birt, 2009, p. 217) – see also Voas and Fleischmann (2012). As a consequence, it is possible to state that, from a certain point of view, the Islamic religion is an identity reference point that transcends the ethnic or origin differences among migrants.

These considerations should not induce hasty conclusions: we must not assume Muslimness as an all-encompassing identity (Henkel, 2007, p. 64). As Holloway and Valins (2002, p. 7) state: “emphasizing the importance of religion and faith in the spatial (re)production of socio-cultural identities does not mean ignoring how religiosity intersects with, is transformed by, or even supports other topologies of identity organized around, for example, gender, ethnicity and age”. Muslims in Italy have highly differentiated geographical origins: they come not only from countries in the Middle East or Northern Africa, but also from Sub-Saharan Africa, from some countries in the Balkans (for instance Albania), and from South-Eastern Asia (Pakistan and Indonesia). Language, traditions, and ways of practising the faith may differ greatly according to the country of origin. Hence, there is often a high degree of social encapsulation among different Muslim sub-groups (Peach, 2006). “It is easy to see that Muslims [...] are members of religiously defined communities, yet that much of the social life by which they perform and re-create their culture relies upon the mutually independent cleavages of language, regional background, national loyalties, class and other factors that cut across the boundaries of all

² See Gale and Hopkins (2009, p. 10) for data on active worshippers in the United Kingdom.

³ According to the Italian National Statistics Bureau (ISTAT, 2013b), foreigners regularly residing in Italy amounted to 4,387,721 (7.4% of the overall population) on 1 January 2013. Some 500,000 illegal immigrants should be added to this figure (Caritas & Migrantes, 2012).

⁴ Consider that the spread of Islam in these countries is different. According to the Pew Research Center (2012), Muslims account for 99.0% of the total population in Morocco, 94.9% in Egypt, 99.0% in Tunisia, 89.9% in Bangladesh. Data on the spread of Islam in Albania are more controversial: according to the Pew Research Center (2012), they comprise 80.9% of the total population; according to the 2011 Albanian census, they make up 58.8%.

⁵ According to Caritas and Migrantes (2012, p. 192), 32.9% of migrants in Italy are Muslims, 29.6% Orthodox Christians, 19.2% Christian Catholics, 4.4% Christian Protestants, 2.6% Hinduists, 1.9% Buddhists.

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