

BUILDING THE ENEMY: ISLAMOPHOBIA IN ITALY¹

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After September 11, graffiti against Islam and Muslims in Italian cities have replaced those on politics or soccer. In bookshops the translation of Huntington's work² on the clash of civilisations is sold out, while studies on the Arab world are selling well. Classics on Islam are dug out and transferred from the highest bookshelves to the window displays, while studies quickly thrown together are popping out everywhere. In bars and on TV exotic words like "jihad" and "mullah" have become common language. Is it a temporary interest, justified by a concern about the present situation, or is there something more deeply rooted? Is this interest stemming from a genuine desire of understanding or, as it seems to be in some cases, it depends also from the need to see one's own prejudices strengthened? In fact, among the general public Islamophobia is increasing. It is not an Italian specificity, but a phenomenon that spreads all across Europe, albeit in different ways. Neither is it something new, but the emergence of a long wave of European identity, the significance and impact of which are presently difficult to evaluate.

Long before the catastrophe of the Twin Towers, in Italy the discourse on Islam at both the national and at the European level was interfering with adjustments taking place between Muslim immigrants and institutions at a local level. This discourse influences the reaction of people against Muslims as well as the self-perception of local Muslim organisations, concealing the complexity and variability of the relationships that are being built between Muslim groups and local society.

1. After September 11

Even if they will not admit to it, European analysts of the Muslim world have been very confused since September 11. In spite of a decade of growing interest in Islam among the public, many scholars have not completely freed themselves from the idea, linked to orientalism, that their field of studies is a *hortus conclusus*, reserved to the few. If today some have chosen to ride the tiger and have offered their services to the media, others prefer to retreat in silence, saying that these events are too recent for a level headed analysis or that their magnitude prevents a quick one.

Both attitudes hide an inner uneasiness towards their object of study. Analysts suspect that what is expected from them is not help for a better understanding of the facts, but rather the expression of a value judgement and the elaboration of a world view: Is Islam good or bad? Do Muslims hate us? Will there be a clash of cultures? It is precisely this type of dichotomies and Manichean questions that make them feel deeply inadequate: what is the point of having studied Arabic, Farsi or Urdu for so many years, or having spent weeks and months in a village in Sudan or Pakistan, if these are the questions? In fact, if the acquaintance with an environment or a society brings the observer to feel that these questions are absurd, it does not necessarily entail that he has been able to convey this sense of absurdity to those who do not have the same experience. Moreover, this feeling of inadequacy is increased by the sense that these questions are not completely illegitimate, nor totally meaningless. Even if they should be formulated differently, all in all they are in urgent need of an answer.

Analysts of Muslim societies are conflicted and shared between two impulses: the first is to join the hawks,

¹ Part of the content of paragraph 3 and 4 have already been discussed in our "Being Muslim in the Italian Public Sphere: Islamic Organizations in Turin and Trieste", *Religious Freedom and the Neutrality of the State: The Position of Islam in the European Union*, International Congress in Leiden, 14-16 December 2000, forthcoming.

² Huntington, 1996.

those who say that Islam is the enemy of modernity and western democracies, what the events of September seem to attest to. Considering the gravity of the events, distinctions or specifications are just superfluous quibbles (the fact that all Muslims are not violent, that the majority refuse terrorism and may well be its victims, as much as the followers of other religions, etc.). The second is the strategy of the ostrich, that involves continuing as if nothing had happened, offering a cold and neutral analysis, “politically correct”, of the Muslim world. It is obvious that if the first choice is scientifically and morally unacceptable and does not help to clarify things, the second for its detached and frigid approach leaves public opinion profoundly dissatisfied and doubtful.

What is lacking is a theoretical unprejudiced and innovative frame of analysis into which to interpret facts. Meanwhile, public opinion is left on its own, prey to political and ideological recuperation, while the need for explanation and solid frames of reference is pressing.

2. Islamophobia in Europe

Islamophobia, as we know it today is a recent phenomenon. If we leave aside its progenitor in colonial times, or its elder sister, Judeophobia³, and if we avoid hazardous historical jumps to the time of Mediterranean piracy or the battle of Lepantus or the Crusades, we notice that in Europe during the Seventies, prejudice was mainly directed against Arabs (in France) or Turks (in Germany) and not against Muslims. Even the terrorist attacks instigated in the Middle East did not lead to stigmatize religious belonging as much as the “ethnic”⁴ origin of the terrorists.

The turning point was the Khomeinist revolution that broke out in 1979 imposing “Islamic fundamentalism”⁵ as a form of government, while the assassination of Sadat (1981) revealed the vulnerability of the Arab states. By that point, however, the Europeans had come to regard Islam no longer as an “external” or international issue but as an internal one because of the settlement of immigrants. The *fatwa* (1989) against Salman Rushdie and the media coverage of the bonfire of his books by groups of Indo-Pakistanis in the United Kingdom, represented the first highly symbolic and evocative event, that were soon followed by others, like the affair of the veil in France (1989).

These facts of different importance and relevance are contemporary to the radical transformation of the immigrants’ way of living in Europe. Before the mid seventies, European borders were open and immigrants didn’t need to settle in Europe. By their frequent coming and going they could keep relations with their family in their home country. The border closure obliged them to choose whether to stay or to go. And among the majority who chose to stay (at least for a while), there was a propensity to have the family join them. Islam - set aside or temporarily forgotten, when they were on their own, only concerned with work - became essential again once they found themselves settled in Europe and with the responsibility of educating their children there. We assist then to the gradual “re-islamization” of immigrants in Europe, with the establishment of local prayer rooms, Islamic butcheries, etc. At the same time, the crisis of Left ideologies that had been a rallying force among workers, was replaced among Maghrebis by a return to Islam. That is why, at the beginning of the eighties, the Islamic prayer in front of a Renault plant, when trade unions started to address the cultural needs

³ On the relationship between Judeophobia and Islamophobia in Italy see Trevisan Semi, 2000.

⁴ This did not prevented people to consider as Muslim the Palestinian Christian George Habbash, an (in)voluntary oversight recently re-proposed by Oriana Fallaci in her long letter from New York to the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (September 29, 2001), subsequently published as a pamphlet and translated in other European languages.

⁵ We do not intend here to address the complex debate on the more appropriate terminology to be used to define the different streams and branches of the political movements referring to Islam (in English: fundamentalism, political Islam, radical Islam, Islamism, etc. In French: intégrisme, Islam radical, néo-fondamentalisme, etc.).

of their workers, in majority Maghrebis was most shocking to the French. This image brought the people to the full realisation that what had been a silent and inconspicuous presence, had in reality its own peculiar needs. In the same period anti-Arab and anti-immigrant feelings started to change into anti-Muslim feelings.

A second phase, corresponding to the rooting and strengthening of these feelings, is linked to the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. At the beginning of the nineties, the breaking out of the civil war in Algeria in all its brutality, the first *intifada* (1987-93) and the Bosnian war (1992-95) brought Islamic fundamentalism on the front page of the newspapers. In Europe, Right-wing parties started to stigmatize certain individuals as Muslims rather than as immigrants or aliens. The emphasis on cultural identity – national or local– re-evaluated cultural-religious belonging as a way to exclude others, as in the case of the *Lega Nord* party⁶ in Italy, or in the Danish case, where Lutheran Christianity is retained, against Muslims, as an ingredient of “danishness”. As Zolberg and Litt Woon (1999: 5) point out, many Europeans consider Islam as an illegitimate intrusion into “Christian” Europe. This can have strong repercussions, for instance, the claims made by German politicians about Turkey’s ineligibility as a member of the EU on the ground of its Muslim culture⁷.

Among the moderate majority, it is above all the lack of respect of human rights, the question of gender equality and of the relationship between politics and religion that have aroused high concern and perplexity towards Islam. Both European public opinion and a significant, albeit silent, number of Muslim aliens are worried about the degree of social control on Muslim immigrants that may be exerted by some Islamic organisations settling in Europe⁸.

If these positions are sometimes based on solid grounds, it is their “absolutory function” (we are democrats, they are not) that is highly unconvincing. Moreover, it may lead to xenophobic policies and justify authoritarian drifts. Gender equality is often reduced and simplified to the veil (*hijab*) affair, whose symbolic valence takes on the form of a manifesto, preventing more sophisticated and levelled analysis. The mosque is described as a hideout for terrorists, as a place for unhealthy and wild practices against women and animals⁹.

On the other hand, Right-wing radical public opinion refuses Muslims as culturally different foreigners, and it is not concerned by “how” and “which” Islam is implanted in Europe¹⁰. We may add that the notion of the clash of civilisation is thriving not only among the Right-wing nationalist European parties, but also among radical Islamists, among whom we find quite a few admirers of Huntington.

In the United Kingdom, where the term Islamophobia was first used in the eighties, the question of discrimination has become such a crucial issue that it has led to the publication of a report¹¹ whose purpose was to define and to quantify it, as well as to offer solutions to curb it. Of course, discrimination is not necessarily violent and obvious and can be even subtle, insidious and polymorphous, as in a case denounced by CRE (Commission for Racial Equality), of a software that could recognise Muslim names and answer negatively to job applications¹².

⁶ The *Lega Nord* is a Northern Italian party that stress local identity values - the “Po river valley culture” - asking for federalism and autonomy from Rome and rejecting both Southern Italian and alien immigrants. At present it is in the government coalition. See S. Allievi, 1992, *Le parole della Lega*, Milano: Garzanti; I. Diamanti, 1993, *La Lega: geografia, storia e sociologia di un nuovo soggetto politico*, Torino: Donzelli; R. Biorcio, 1997, *La Padania promessa. La storia, le idee e la logica della Lega Nord*, Milano: Il Saggiatore.

⁷ See Amiraux, 2000: 512.

⁸ See Allam, in *Commissione per le politiche di integrazione degli immigranti*, 2000: 345.

⁹ Many articles and letters to the press associate the mosque with violence to women, female circumcision and slaughtering. When they realise this, Muslim readers are usually shocked and deeply hurt.

¹⁰ Cf. Said: “Today Islam is defined negatively as that with which the West is radically at odds, and this tension establishes a framework radically limiting knowledge of Islam. (1997: 163).

¹¹ The Runnymede Trust, 1997.

¹² They sent identical curricula, some with British names some with Pakistani names. The first were accepted and the senders invited for an interview, the latter refused on the ground that the professional profile proposed

Today we are in the third phase of what looks like a more complex issue than could be expected initially. The catastrophe of the Twin Towers only contributed to intensify anti-Islamic feelings, while the exhortation – coming from different sides – not to confuse terrorism, Islamism and Islam, sound to many people artificial and irrelevant. In many countries - and especially in Italy and Spain - the stigmatisation by the media of the “quiet, hard-working, family-oriented, smiling Muslim neighbour” as the potentially ideal disguise for terrorists deeply worried many people who were relying on their own experience and not on stereotypes to build an opinion on Muslims.

If among public opinion intolerance and refusal of Islam and Muslims has grown, the number of verbal and physical attacks against Muslim people and belongings is on the rise, we also perceive, among the main propagators of Islamophobia (some nationalist parties, xenophobic groups, some religious groups, opinion makers, etc.), a gradual local reformulating of prejudice, that may vary greatly, depending on the context and on the local political objectives it thrives on. For example, unlike the Italian *Lega Nord* and to the Italian President of Council Berlusconi, Le Pen's *Front National* in France that had used anti-Arab and anti-Muslim slogans abundantly in its electoral campaigns, was careful to stay away from such a discourse after September 11, lest he should be accused of instrumentalising the catastrophe of the Twin Towers for the purpose of internal politics. In the UK, the British National Party launched a joint anti-Muslim campaign with groups of Sikhs and Hindus, in order to highlight the distinction between Islamophobia and racism¹³. Less known, the situation in Eastern Europe is none the less serious. In some countries, where the democratic tradition is not yet fully consolidated, the risk of xenophobic drifts is real, as shown by some recent events in the Czech Republic and in Croatia, and Muslims are one of the targets.

3. Islamophobia Italian-style

During the seventies and the eighties, Italy was largely free from anti-Muslim sentiments. Italians had just begun to recover from the shock of discovering that from a country of emigration they had turned into a country of immigration. As a matter of fact, at the centre (Giulio Andreotti, of the DC party), as well as on the Left, but also on the Right (Piero Rauti, of the MSI party) were spreading more or less mild pro-Arab feelings by way of support to the Palestinian cause. With the arrival of immigrants, the situation did not immediately change. A casual *laissez faire*, accompanied sometimes by a militant Third-World-ism (of Catholic or leftist origin) served to include also immigrants (Muslim or not) into the well-known Italian friendliness and positive image of foreigners. Moreover, in the South and especially in Sicily, references to the Arabic heritage¹⁴ in opposition to the dominant north-western culture was not infrequent.

In Italy the discourse on Islam and the discourse on immigration are closely linked. During the nineties, growing unrest against immigrants, especially illegal ones, and the first racist attacks, targeted the more visible, among whom Maghrebis. However, the passage from xenophobia to Islamophobia was not immediate.

With the civil war in Algeria, the first sentiments of rejection started. This occurred not only in the North, where the *Lega Nord* has its strongholds, but also, if differently, in other areas. Anti-Muslim feelings remain largely linked to anti-Arab feelings, while very often people from Senegal or Nigeria are not perceived as Muslim, even though their dress style and behaviour may display their religious belonging.

By the end of the nineties (and long before September 11), Italian Islamophobia was well established. More than an increase in the number of those with anti-Islamic feelings, it consists in the surfacing of discourses that until

was not answering to the needs of the company.

¹³ See www.bnp.org.uk (December 2001).

¹⁴ Historians usually consider the Norman and Swabian period as the golden age of Sicily. They stress also the Arabic cultural heritage that preceded and was included in this period (X-XI century).

some years ago had been considered ethically and politically incorrect¹⁵.

Today Islam is the second religion in Italy in terms of number, the majority of which are aliens¹⁶. Article 8 of the Constitution makes it possible for religious groups to sign a concordat (*intesa*) with the State, provided they fulfil certain conditions¹⁷. The major Islamic organisations in Italy presented a joint draft proposal for an *intesa* in 1998¹⁸, but its acceptance did not seem likely even before September 11. The signing of an *intesa* is not only a legal act, but also a political one. As such, it is influenced by the political climate of the moment which is not favourable to Muslims. Therefore, we cannot consider the State as neutral towards Islam, but more correctly we can speak of the neutrality of the legal frame¹⁹ and of the reluctance of the government to take sides in a question that is bound to cause trouble and to have very low political returns.

After September 11, the generalised prejudice against Muslims increased, often reacting, within institutions, in an indirect and legalistic way. For example, in the Bergamo area (Lombardy) some Muslim prayer rooms were closed on the ground (very likely perfectly true) that some safety requirements were not respected. Islamophobia displayed itself fully during the year 2000 for reasons that have less to do with the behaviour of Muslims in Italy than with Italian internal social and political balances.

Islamophobia Italian-style has three trends that interact and feed into each other: the first is the visceral and popular trend, incarnated by the *Lega* in the North, while in Latium or Tuscany, it is sometimes linked to soccer clubs²⁰. A second one is the secular liberal-reactionary trend represented by some editorialists and political scientists. The last one is the Catholic-Crusade trend, headed by some editorialists and by some exponents of the local Church.

The first trend of Islamophobia finds expression above all by radio talks and newspapers²¹ connected to the

¹⁵ Cf. Said: “The idea that Islam is medieval and dangerous, as well as hostile and threatening to “us” (...) has acquired a place both in the culture and in the polity that is very well defined: Authorities can be cited for it readily, references can be made to it, arguments about particular instances of Islam can be adduced from it – by anyone, not just by experts or by journalists. And in turn such an idea furnishes a kind of *a priori* touchstone to be taken account of by anyone wishing to discuss or say something about Islam.” (1997: 157)

¹⁶ As elsewhere in Europe, in Italy statistics on religious belonging are the object of constant discussion. See Leveau and Schmidt di Friedberg, 1994; Schmidt di Friedberg, 1993 and 1998; Allievi e Dassetto, 1993. Estimation are based on nationality (i.e. Moroccan = Muslim, Peruvian = Catholic). Caritas di Roma, 2000: 227, estimate a total of 544.000 Muslim aliens, corresponding to 36.5% of the total number of aliens, to whom are to be added around 50-60.000 Italian Muslims.

¹⁷ Among other conditions, to represent at least a relevant portion of the people (if not all) belonging to the religious group in question. Relations between the State and the Catholic Church are regulated by the 1985 Law that revised the Concordat of 1929. Article 8 was applied for the first time to other creeds in 1984 when the Waldensian Board (*Tavola Valdese*) signed an *intesa* with the State, followed by the Last Day Adventists, the Assemblies of God in Italy, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Italy and the Union of Jewish Community in Italy.

¹⁸ Previously three draft proposals of *intesa* were presented to the government: the first by the *Union of Islamic Communities and Organisations in Italy* (UCOII) in 1990, the second by the *Italian Muslims Association* (AMI) in 1993 and the third by the *Italian Islamic Religious Community* (COREIS) in 1997. See Tedeschi, 1996; Berlingò, 1998; Ferrari, 2000. For a comparison between the different drafts, see Osservatorio delle Libertà ed Istituzioni religiose – Università degli Studi di Milano, *Sinossi delle bozze d'intesa* (edited by A. Ferrari and C. Chinni), www.giurisprudenza.unimi.it. The models of *intesa* proposed are largely modelled on the Church model: “(...) there is a tendency (...) to treat Islam as if it were or could become organized along the lines of a centralized Christian church, with a hierarchical ministerial bureaucracy endowed with authority over the faithful. This has led to intra-Muslims conflicts over the privilege of representing the community vis-à-vis the host authorities.” (Zolberg and Litt Woon, 1999: 19).

¹⁹ Even though this juridical framework leaves the Catholic Church in a privileged position, especially on the matter of religious education.

²⁰ Trevisan Semi, 2000.

²¹ See, as an example of their discourse, *Quaderni padani*, Speciale: Padania Islam, 1999, V, no 22/23, March-

Lega Nord, and in a series of practical actions²², some of which found an echo nation-wide. For instance, the call for mobilisation against the opening of a mosque in Lodi (Lombardy)²³ summoned by the *Lega* (October 2000). The *Lega* regards fighting immigrants²⁴ and preserving local identities as its mission. Islam and Muslims - perceived as invaders - are one of its targets.

The second trend finds expression, among others, in the writings of the political scientist Giovanni Sartori, whose book (Sartori, 2000a) had an impact both in Italy and Spain. He claims that Muslim immigrants are a separate category, an “invasive” presence that will bring “disorder and desegregation”. He acknowledges European xenophobia against Muslims as a “cultural-religious refusal”, due to the fanaticism and lack of secularism of Islamic culture, pointing out what he considers to be the problem deriving from their settlement in Italy²⁵.

The third trend is represented most prominently²⁶ by the Cardinal of Bologna, Giacomo Biffi, who considers that Europe should go back to Christianity in order to resist the “ideological assault of Islam” (Biffi, 2000: 26). Like Sartori, Biffi considers Muslims as a threat to Italian cultural identity and as posing legal and social problems²⁷. Among these problems, he mentions Muslim's “theocratic” world vision and their different customs

June, pp.117. The first article (pp.3-4), “Contro i tre peggiori morbi della storia” (Against the three worst pests of history), signed “Brenno”, starts by saying that the three major disasters of history are Imperial Rome, Communism, and Islam, Islam having the disadvantage of being still healthy and alive. It continues to a crescendo of insulting and wild metaphors (*belve ferite, branco rabbioso*) against any kind of dialogue or opening towards Muslim immigrants, considered as the Epigones of an invasion started (and constantly checked by the “Padani”, the people of the Po valley) since the eighth century. Most of the other articles are of the same tone. See also Baget Bozzo, “Contro l’Islam”, in *La Padania*, September 6, 2000, where the author says that the task of the *Lega* is to defend the “Padania” (i.e. Northern Italy) from the historical enemy of Christianity, Islam. For a comparison with the British National Party, see *The Truth about Islam*, www.bnp.org.uk. For a comparative critical view see Trevisan Semi, 2000.

²² For recent developments in Italy, see Zincone, in *Commissione per le politiche di integrazione degli immigranti*, 2000: XVIII: “Public xenophobic manifestations became at the same time indecent and ridiculous. During the holy year 2000 we may recall the Lodi march against the concession of land to build a mosque (...), the Mayor of Rovato asking non-Christian to stay away at least 15 Mt. from the major church (...).” (my translation)

²³ In the town of Lodi (Lombardy), Muslims asked for an area to build a mosque. They obtained it from the City Council (Left), but the Right wing parties started a campaign against it (October 2000). This fact had a wide echo and involved the media, various politicians and intellectuals, the representative of Islamic organisations from Milan, etc.

²⁴ “Italian Right wing parties, that until recently were considered on the whole as an example also by foreign scholars for their attempts towards openness and their respect towards immigrants (...), are in the year 2000 shifting the positions of religious intolerance and xenophobic aggressiveness from the fringes and margins of their coalition to its core. The *Lega* has now an important and sometimes leading role.” (Zincone, in *Commissione per le politiche di integrazione degli immigrati*, 2000: XVII, my translation). See also idem p.XXII.

²⁵ His position may be resumed as follows: Muslims are asking for “concessions” and “privileges”. They are suspected not to ask for infibulation and polygamy just for contingent and tactical reasons. Their presence will lead to the formation of closed communities that will refuse integration (Sartori, 2000b). The following are lines from his book by which he casually dismisses Muslims: “(...) European xenophobia concentrates on Africans and Arabs, especially if and when they are Islamic (sic). This means that it is over all a reaction of cultural-religious refusal. (...) Islamic culture is not secular. And even when there is no fanaticism, still *Islamic world view is theocratic* (author’s italics) and do not accept the separation between State and Church, between politics and religion. (...).Coranic law does not acknowledges human rights (...) as individual universal and inviolable rights (...)” (Sartori, 2000a: 48-49, my translation). For a critical view see Dassetto, 2000, Zincone, 2001. As a comment see, for example, *La Stampa*, September 26, 2000, p.23, a full page.

²⁶ For another example see Conferenza episcopale dell’Emilia Romagna, 2000.

²⁷ His point of view as it emerges from the press may be summarised as follow: Muslims are a threat to Italian identity because they have a different religion and culture; they are a threat to Catholic Italy because they have a different and challenging religion; they are a threat to secular Italy because they do not know nor accept the

(gender relations, polygamy, etc.). It is interesting to note that some of these remarks are the same as those that were made in the twenties, when Muslims were not allowed to settle in Italy because their religion was considered as going “against common morality”²⁸.

Biffi's *Nota pastorale* (Biffi, 2000), like Sartori's book, found a wide echo in the press and caused a great stir and a major debate both among Catholic exponents and among wider Italian secular and Catholic public opinion which shows the plurality of the positions activated by the local Church. Until fairly recently, it had sided mostly with the “pro-immigrant” and often openly pro-Muslim camp, today it is answering to other political and ideological needs as well. Biffi may be considered as a “niche Cardinal”, meeting the needs of a part of the Catholic audience, dissatisfied with the Third-Worldist and ecumenical stands of mainstream Church thought. The *Nota* appears to have been written to gain consensus among those ideologically near to the *Lega Nord*. Declarations of exponents of the *Lega* on the issue that Catholicism is part of Italian identity and culture (forgetting their previous libations to the Po sources, a very awkward effort to re-invent a supposed pre-Christian local religion) and frequent quotations from the *Nota*, seem to support this.

Both Biffi and Sartori are often on the front page of the major national and local newspapers. Discussion on the press of Biffi's *Nota* went on continuously for two months after its publishing (September 2000). Sartori's and Biffi's statements, amplified by the press and the media, have taken many people by surprise, disrupting local adjustments that were taking place between immigrants (Muslims) and society. These adjustments are mostly based on face-to-face and everyday interaction. Anti-Muslim statements appear as coming down from above, that is, they are not stemming from the interaction between Italians and Muslim immigrants, but from the discourse of Italian opinion makers. These statements had the function of legitimising for a wider public the expression of xenophobic feelings in the public space. While for a part of secular Italian public opinion, Islam is a threat to democracy and secularism, for others it is a threat to Italian Catholic identity. It is interesting to note that often both arguments are used together and people do not seem to consider it contradictory or, at least, are not worried by it²⁹.

4. Muslims coming out

The spread of anti-Islamic sentiment and the action of some Right-wing parties (*Lega Nord*, *Forza Italia*, *Alleanza Nazionale*) represent an opportunity for the more vocal members of different Islamic organisations to stress the unequal application of constitutional rights³⁰, the increase of prejudice in the public mind, the lack of

separation between religion and politics. The State should prefer Catholic (or at least non-Muslim) labour-immigrants to Muslims because they integrate more easily in society being less culturally different.

In the *Nota*, Biffi says that the two challenges that the city of Bologna will have to meet in the near future are the arrival of people coming from distant and different countries and the spreading of a “non-Christian culture among Christian populations” (p.21). The following are the passages most problematic concerning Muslim immigrants (my translation): “(...) the case of Muslims must be considered with special attention. They have (...) a different feast-day, a family Law that is incompatible with ours, an idea of women very remote from ours (...). Overall, they have a decidedly fundamentalist view of public life. So, the perfect identification between religion and politics is part of their indubitable and unrenouncable faith, even if usually they wait prudently to proclaim it and assert it to be the majority.” (p.24)

“(...) Catholicism - which is no longer “the official religion of the State” - remains nonetheless the “historical religion” of the Italian nation, the major source of its identity and the inspiring principle of our more authentic greatness. For this reason, it is totally incongruous to assimilate it to other cultural or religious forms (...).” (p.24).

²⁸ Francesco Scaduto (*Il diritto ecclesiastico vigente in Italia*, vol. 2, Turin, 1984), one of the founders of Italian Ecclesiastic Law, considered Islam (and Mormon) among the creeds that could not be admitted in Italy (Musselli, 1992: 624). The *ratio excludendi* was polygamy.

²⁹ See Biffi, 2000.

³⁰ Cf. Zolberg and Litt Woon: “Living in the context of a secularized Christian Europe, many Muslims experience European claims of religious freedom as a contradiction since they receive little public facilitation and in fact face many practical difficulties in trying to live according to Islam. From the immigrants' perspective,

accurate information about Islam and the responsibility of the media³¹. Muslims are constantly required to show their democratic credentials to prove that they can be integrated into society instead of the reverse, i.e. waiting for something in their behaviour to happen that may prove or may not that they cannot be integrated.

In Turin, for example, the *imam* Boubriki Bouchta³² replying to Cardinal Biffi, follows an already well tested pattern of discourse among Italian (and European) Muslims, asking for individual rights to be respected and for the Constitution to be fully applied to Muslims³³.

At the same time, some mosque leaders underline the task of social control taken on by the mosque, saying that many problems arising from the immigrant population are due precisely to a lack of social control. If this kind of control might sometimes be useful to some Italian (and not only Italian) institutions, it definitely does not go in the direction of personal freedom.

The majority of Muslim alien residents in Italy are by and large unaware of the debate that is taking place over Islam; most of this debate does not take place with them but is about them and as a result it passes largely over their heads. What they perceive is growing hostility against them in everyday life. They resent it because they do not understand the reasons for it. Their view of Islam (a religion of peace, order and morality) is not the same as that of the Italian public (a religion of wrath, violence and opposition to the West).

The leadership of Islamic organisations reacts to media campaigns and to political positions, as in the case of the Lodi mosque affair, and in reply to political scientist Giovanni Sartori's and Cardinal Biffi's statements. However, so far they are far from successful in counter-balancing information and sometimes even contribute by their statements to strengthen prejudice. Generally, we notice a lack of tuning between Muslim leadership in Italy and Italian society. Part of it is due to the lack of commitment to translate a Muslim worldview to non-Muslims, not paying sufficient attention to the questions that are crucial for the latter (gender relations, freedom of faith) and using unfamiliar forms of discourse, not favouring either comprehension or friendly feelings towards Muslims.

Growing opposition to Islam within Italian public opinion and some authoritarian statements by various organisation leaders induce some Muslims who had kept silent (often letting Italian non-Muslim democratic militants and/or intellectuals fight for them³⁴) to take sides. For some Muslim intellectuals of a secular background, it is precisely the existence of prejudice against Islam that forces them to "come out"³⁵. They have sometimes built very sophisticated and wide-ranging social networks and they are deeply rooted in the local

the hosts' positions appear quite remote from the pluralist pole that prevails in the religious sphere with regard to the varieties of Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Judaism. (...) Muslims widely believe that legislation and administrative regulations and practices are not being extended equitably to their own religious community and that there is extensive ignorance and insensitivity regarding minority religious matters more generally. Muslims commonly suspect that there is a hidden policy to discriminate against Islam." (1999: 19)

³¹ See Soravia, 1999; Marletti 1995.

³² Recently known for his public stand in favour of Bin Laden, disavowed by other leaders of Italian Islam.

³³ See especially an interview to Boubriki Bouchta by Martinengo (*La Stampa*, September 14, 2000, p.7), where he says that 1) he is surprised by Biffi's statements, 2) Muslims in Turin have good relations with the local representatives of the Church, 3) Practising Islam is a guarantee of honesty. 4) Criminality is not only due to immigrants, people of all creed and origin should join forces to fight against it; 5) Muslims only ask for the Constitution to be respected, nothing else. Again Bouchta on *La Stampa*, September 15, 2000, p.34. See, for an earlier example, *Il Messaggero dell'Islam*, editorial, n.80, dec.1990-jan.1991. Cf. Soysal, 1997.

³⁴ See, as examples, the answers to Sartori's book by Dassetto, 2000 and Zincone, 2001.

³⁵ See Allam, 2000a and b. "Never would I have thought of using my religious origin as a political carrier before. But the present political climate obliges me to come out in the public sphere. As a scholar, I fully realise the peril of the present drift which, on the European side, is magnifying the negative stereotype of Muslims, while on the Muslim side is pushing towards a neo-communitarian attitude of withdrawal into oneself." Personal communication, Khaled Fouad Allam, Trieste, March 6, 2000.

environment. Today they perceive the national discourse against Islam as a threat to a lifetime of adaptation, learning and compromise. They react by suddenly activating their religious identity and by using it to re-negotiate their position within their Italian social network³⁶.

As Said (1997: 150) points out, the chance of Islam peacefully taking roots in European societies depends also on the capability of its members to produce information, to counter-lobby information³⁷, by becoming “interlocutors”. That is, by building a Western Muslim civil society that shares most of the views and of the interests of its fellow citizens, while at the same time “translating” for them their understanding of Islam. This means ceasing to treat Islam as something exotic, a subject for eccentric specialists or a belief for unfriendly aliens; in a word, to render it local. At the same time, it means having a group of competent Muslim citizens who will not allow public discourse to go beyond the lines of solid common sense to cross into the area of self-created myths and nightmares.

To summarise, if the present situation in Italy for Muslims is not worse - and sometimes better - than in other European countries, this is not due so much to a solid social and political frame of “equal opportunities” and justice, but to the relationship that single Muslims or groups have succeeded in establishing within local society.

Even before September 11 it was difficult to try to disconnect the process of construction of Islamophobia from today immigration policies and security issues by opposing a more politically correct form of discourse and a more balanced understanding of Islam. Today this appears highly unrealistic. Islamophobia feeds into a series of long-term references and is related to the building of the Enemy. Islamophobia is acting on European most crucial concerns and values (freedom of faith, gender relations, secularism, security). It is a useful and flexible tool that can serve different purposes. We have seen that in Italy this purpose is mainly short-term internal politics but it can also be international politics (maintaining good relations with other states). The only positive data in the present scenario is the higher level of knowledge on Islam that is being disseminated among the public and the coming out of a Muslim public opinion. This does not necessarily mean that prejudice will be reduced, but rather that it will evolve, becoming more complex and articulated.

³⁶ One of them run for elections in the Green Party.

³⁷ Very likely Sartori would not have fallen into making such patently out of the context, a-historical and casual remarks about Judaism or Christianity as he did about Islam, because it would have prejudiced his reputation as a scholar both among his peers and the wider public.

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