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RELIGIOUS STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Should I, as a Muslim, join or not Catholics in Churches?” Dilemmas of the Italian Muslim community

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Abstract: Italian Muslims represent 2.6% of the entire population and one-third of all foreigners, constituting a fragmented and pluralistic community. Recently, father Jacques Hamel, a French Catholic priest, was killed by two knife-wielding French men pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. The Muslim French community strongly dissociated from this event. Italian Muslim community heeded this call and also sent delegates to French churches. According to the statistics, about 15,000 Muslims (approximately 1–2% of the Italian community) attended the commemorative event. Using a qualitative approach, we aimed at investigating the reasons that led Italian Muslims to join or not such an event. The following themes emerged: 1) public responsibility and accountability; 2) every murder as a crime to mankind; 3) importance of inter-faith dialogue and initiatives; 4) judging actions on the basis of intention; 5) fear of losing identity and roots; 6) innovation of attending churches even for good purposes; 7) dead peoples of series A and B; 8) useless of the action; and, finally, 9) impact of islamophobia. Our research sheds light on the multiple voices and thoughts of a complex, multifaceted community. We believe that our



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In 2016, a French Catholic priest was killed by two men pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. The Muslim French community strongly dissociated from this event and decided to join Catholics in churches as a gesture of fraternity and solidarity. Italian Muslim community heeded this call but only 1–2% of the community attended the commemorative event.

The current study, using a qualitative approach, aimed at investigating the reasons that led Italian Muslims to join or not to join such an event, with the hypothesis that this decision could be seen as a proxy of integration within the Italian community. The following themes emerged: 1) public responsibility and accountability; 2) every murder as a crime to mankind; 3) importance of inter-faith dialogue and initiatives; 4) judging actions on the basis of intention; 5) fear of losing identity and roots; 6) innovation of attending churches even for good purposes; 7) dead peoples of series A and B; 8) useless of the action; and, finally, 9) impact of islamophobia.

findings could be helpful for policy-makers and stakeholders, in designing inclusive and truly integrative policies.

Subjects: Sociology; Religion; Cultural Studies

Keywords: integration; Islam; Italian Muslims; qualitative research; terrorism

1. Introduction

Italy hasn't chosen a specific model yet for how it wants to deal with Islam. Farian Sabahi, Professor of History of Islamic Countries at the University of Turin (2009)

In the last decades, globalization and migration fluxes as well as the legacy of the colonialism (Guolo, 2017) have brought an increasing number of Muslim subjects in the Western societies, posing new socio-cultural challenges, to which most countries were unprepared (Allievi, 1995; Dassetto & Bastenier, 1988). Islam has arrived in Europe in silence, as an integral components of the immigrants' life and identity but apparently marginal and little visible (Allievi, 1995; Rogozen-Soltar, 2012): the sociologist Allievi has spoken of an "Islamic cycle and flux", analogous to a migratory cycle, that has contributed to the gradual visibility of Islam in the public arena (Allievi, 2000; Hoexter et al., 2012). The establishment of "Muslim communities" in Europe constitutes a paradox: Islam was introduced by immigrants and, as such, vulnerable and frail subjects, generally coming from socio-economically deprived contexts, but has managed to strengthen its presence throughout time, becoming a "strong" stance within the European environment and the second minority faith in terms of number of believers. From being an "external social actor", Islam has become an "internal social actor", with whom Europeans have to dialogue and face every day (Allievi, 2000; Allievi, 2003a; Allievi, 2003b; Allievi, 2005; Allievi, 2014; Di Leo, 2004; Roy, 2003).

In Italy, in particular, Muslims are approximately 1 million and 600,000 people, representing 2.6% of the entire population and one-third of all foreigners. With such a remarkable figure, Italy houses the fourth largest Muslim population in Europe and at least 258 registered mosques (as of 2007) (Rubin, 2010). Furthermore, within 2015 Muslim population is expected to increase, reaching about 3 million people (5.4% of the entire population). By 2030, this figure is anticipated to rise to 10% of the entire population (Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life, 2011).

However, the Italian Muslim community is not a homogenous, but a highly fragmented and pluralistic community. As such, it is represented by different voices and associations (Homer, 2004), including the "Unione delle Comunità Islamiche d'Italia" (the Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations of Italy, or UCOII), the "Centro Islamico Culturale d'Italia" (the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy or CICI, with its seat in the Mosque of Rome, supervised by a council of ambassadors and diplomats from Islamic countries and working in close relationship with the Muslim World League and Saudi Arabia), the "Comunità del mondo arabo in Italia" (Community of Arabic world in Italy or COMAI), the "Associazione Musulmani Italiani" (Association of Italian Muslims or AMI), and the "Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana" (the Islamic Religious Community or COREIS, founded and run by Italian converts, with its main seat in Milan and a secondary branch in Rome, spiritually affine to Sufi Islam), among others (Toronto, 2008).

This plurality is also associated with the different countries of origin: most Muslims are Moroccans (approximately one third) and Albanians, whilst the others come from Tunisia, Senegal (Riccio, 2004), Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Iran, Nigeria, Bosnia and Serbia-Montenegro, Somalia, Turkey, and Ghana. Above 10,000–15,000 are converts to Islam. They are not geographically concentrated, but are rather unevenly scattered and dispersed, differently from other European realities and contexts in which Muslims give birth to large communities or occupy entire suburbs. For example, in Germany the Turkish community is highly rooted in the German society and its establishment has been helped by the *Diyanet*, the Turkish Department of Religious Affairs, which has regularly sent out paid *Imams* (religious and spiritual leaders) and has strongly

helped out with organization (Otterbeck, 2015). In Great Britain, most Muslims are from South Asia (Pakistan and Bangladesh), whereas in France where Muslim individuals are approximately 7% of the entire population North African countries (Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria) are mainly represented. In Italy, on the contrary, according to Spina (Spina, 2010), about 61% of Muslim population resides in the north (mainly, in Lombardy, Piedmont, and Veneto), whereas 25% and 9% are located in the center (Emilia Romagna) and south (Sicily), respectively. As such, the decentralized, nonhierarchical and noninstitutionalized features of Islam (Borell & Gerdner, 2013) are particularly remarkable in Italy.

Another peculiarity that differentiates Italian Islam from Muslim communities in other European countries is that it is still at its infancy, given the high prevalence of first-generation subjects (Toronto, 2008). Public debate about Islam dates back to the 2000s, with the 2000 Lodi mosque conflict (Saint-Blancat & Schmidt Di Friedberg, 2005) and the publication of two books that contributed to the construction of Muslims as enemies, namely “Pluralism, Multiculturalism and Foreigners” (2002) by the academician Giovanni Sartori (13 May 1924–4 April 2017) and “The Rage and the Pride” (2001) by the journalist Oriana Fallaci (29 June 1929–15 September 2006).

Furthermore, Muslim mosques in Italy convey differing cultural tendencies, being an expression of various movements and ideologies, as well as of different national and ethnic identities (Allievi, 2002a, 2002b). As such, until today Italian Muslim community has failed to present itself united and with a single voice in front of the Italian state in the negotiations with the government concerning its official and legal acknowledgment, because of divisions and rivalries between different Muslim groups (Toronto, 2008).

2. The background

Recently, father Jacques Hamel (30 November 1930–26 July 2016), a French Catholic priest in the parish of Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray near Rouen, was killed by two knife-wielding French men pledging allegiance to the Islamic State while he said Mass in his church on 26 July 2016.

The Muslim French community strongly dissociated from this event. The Imam Adel Kermiche refused to bury the jihadists, saying that they are not Muslim and do not represent Islam. The “*Conseil Français du Culte Musulman*” (the French Council of the Muslim Faith or CFCM), together with the prominent French-Moroccan scholar Tahar Ben Jalloun and the French Institute for Advanced Islamic Studies (IHEI), which works closely with the French Interior ministry, have invited the Muslim communities to join Catholics in Church for commemorating such an event and showing solidarity and as a gesture of fraternity.

Italy’s Muslim community heeded this call and also sent delegates to French churches. COREIS delegates were at mass in churches and parishes in several towns, including Agrigento, Bari, Brescia, Bologna, Brindisi, Catania, Fermo, Florence, Genoa, Milan, Naples, Novara, Padua, Palermo, Parma, Piacenza, Rome, Siena, Sondrio, Trieste, Turin, Verona, Vicenza and Ventimiglia. According to the statistics, about 15,000–23,000 Muslims (approximately 1–2% of the Muslim Italian community) attended the commemorative event. The Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Paolo Gentiloni, as well as the Italian Cardinal of the Catholic Church, Archbishop of Genoa and President of the “*Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*” (Italian Episcopal Conference or CEI), Angelo Bagnasco, have applauded to the initiative, appreciating this choral and touching gesture of fraternity and solidarity. All the Church and the Christian community, apart from some isolated priests, have acknowledged the importance of the event. However, despite the symbolic relevance of the initiative, the attendance rate has been quite low.

The current study, using a qualitative approach, aims at investigating the reasons that led Italian Muslims to join or not to join such an event. Our research hypothesis is that decision to join Catholics in churches could be seen as a proxy of integration, accommodation, adaptation, and institutionalization within the Italian community. Besides the contingency of the episode under

scrutiny (the murder of father Jacques Hamel), we wanted to offer a broader vision of the Italian Muslim community. More in detail, we wanted to explore in depth Italian Muslim community in terms of its practices, efforts towards an interfaith dialogue, dynamics of social transformation and acculturation processes, perceived identity and self-representation between modernity and tradition, between democracy and legitimacy of power and the need of making one's own voice being heard (Russo Spena, 2006; Spena, 2010).

As such, we took as a starting point the current findings of our investigation as a “snapshot” for further longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys concerning Muslim community inclusion within the Italian landscape.

3. Material and methods

We performed a thematic field analysis, one of the most common approaches used in the field of qualitative research together with discourse/conversation analysis, grounded analysis and interpretative phenomenological/hermeneutic analysis, among others (Re et al., 2017). This approach leads to the emergence of meaningful patterns (known as “themes”), which can be both implicit or explicit ideas. These are identified by developing proper codes, which are later reviewed to ensure that no other themes are missing and the whole text has been covered and adequately mapped. This implies a complex, iterative process of extensively reading and re-reading texts, familiarizing with them, coding, examining, recording, reviewing and analyzing of themes, and their variations associated with our research questions.

Interviews (lasting on average 1 h) were performed, audiotaped and then transcribed by one of the authors (NLB) and processed using ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software (version 7.0; ATLAS.ti GmbH, Berlin, Germany). Frequency and co-occurrence analyses were carried out. To ensure that no meaning was lost during the process, every transcribed quotation was analyzed and discussed by all authors who were content and methodology experts, sociologists, anthropologists, and theology scholars.

This study was approved by the UNESCO Chair “Health Anthropology, Biosphere and Healing Systems” and was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles proclaimed by the Declaration of Helsinki and its amendments.

Concerning conceptual frameworks, we exploited the tools derived from the social psychology of groups (Hopkins, 2011; Kahani-Hopkins & Hopkins, 2002), interfaith psychology, and the psychology of events (Benckendorff & Pearce, 2012) and the Getz's typology of planned events (Getz, 2007), as well as from the sociology and anthropology of Islam (Guolo, 2017; Marranci, 2008), utilizing a multidisciplinary approach. Briefly, according to these theories, identity is a fluid concept. Special events or planned events are described in terms of “specific rituals, presentations, performances or celebrations that are consciously planned or created to mark special occasions or achieve particular social, cultural or corporate goals and objectives” (Getz, 2007). Among the different types of planned events, commemorations or commemorative events or heritage commemorations are classified and discussed within the category of cultural celebrations, together with festivals, carnivals, and religious events. They should be understood as “memorial services, specific ceremonies or broader events ... designed to honor the memory of someone or something” (Getz, 2007).

Attending (or not) a given event depends on an array of factors, including personality (introversion/extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, conscientiousness and agreeableness), social motivations (the desire/need to belong to a group, to build new social relationships), value assessment, perceived benefits and advantages, perceived barriers, interaction of the attendee (in terms of degree of involvement/engagement) and of the role-played during and outside the event (role conflict—role clashing with one's own expectations, goals and beliefs—, role ambiguity—uncertainty about behaviors—, role distance—rejection of the core elements of a role—, role

Table 1. The questionnaire administered to the participants

- Have you attended the commemorative event, celebrating Father Jacques' death?
- Which were the reasons that led you join/not to join this event?
- How did you take part into this event? Have you joined Catholics at the Mass or did you just go there at the end of the religious ceremony?
- Which is, according to your opinion, the meaning of joining Catholics in Church?
- Did you expect such attendance rate or has it been inferior/superior to your expectations?
- Have you ever taken part into inter-faith initiatives?
- Do you believe that inter-faith dialogue may be helpful for integrating the Muslim community in Italy?
- Have you ever been victim of prejudice, distrust, hatred or bigotry for your faith?

altercasting—reluctance in accepting a role—, and role acceptance—congruence and matching of the role with one's own goals and beliefs), and previous experiences (Page & Connell, 2014).

A sample of 100 Muslim individuals aged from 18 to 35 years from different Italian cities (Trento, Bolzano, Padua, Turin, Pisa, Florence, Prato, Bologna, Genoa, Reggio nell'Emilia, Milan, Rome, Reggio Calabria, and Naples, 75% of second-generation and 60% with Italian citizenship, from Albania, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia) was recruited *via* snowballing from different Muslim communities and associations. We made an effort into including different categories (namely, Islamic leaders, believers belonging to different *madhhab*, that is to say schools of thought of Islamic jurisprudence). After volunteering to take part into this study, Muslim subjects were interviewed with a semi-structured questionnaire. Inclusion criteria were: 1) being ≥ 18 years old; 2) being Muslim; and 3) being able to speak Italian. The questionnaire investigated: biographical data and information about religious creed and practices. For further details, the reader is referred to Table 1.

4. Results

From the thematic analysis, the following themes emerged: 1) public responsibility and accountability; 2) every murder as a crime to mankind; 3) importance of inter-faith dialogue and initiatives; 4) judging actions on the basis of intention; 5) fear of losing identity and roots; 6) innovation of attending churches even for good purposes; 7) dead peoples of series A and B; 8) useless of the action; and, finally, 9) impact of islamophobia.

4.1. Public responsibility and accountability

This theme emerged above all in the interviews with institutional subjects, such as Islamic leaders or representatives of Muslim associations. Few Imams were in disagreement with this. Provided explanations were quite sophisticated and rational, distinguishing between being actively engaged in a given event and just witnessing or attending the event or sharing an experience (that is to say, the degree of engagement/involvement in the event).

Even though apparently mismatching with the Islamic principles, the event was reconstructed as being an important opportunity for crossing boundaries and bridging and linking with the Italian community. Furthermore, normative tenets were reframed as values, in that Islamic practices belonging to a private sphere were re-interpreted as an occasion of social representance and visibility of Islam within the public sphere. Attending the commemorative event was possible because the attendee saw in the event a wide, symbolic and meaningful dimension, with the possibility of sharing publicly his/her own personal narratives and sharing socio-cultural values.

“At the beginning, I was skeptical because I am Muslim and I cannot pray God according to the Catholic tenets. However, after reasoning, I thought that I do represent the community of young Muslims here in Emilia and I felt the responsibility of properly guiding the *ummah*. So I decided to attend the commemoration in Church. We did not pray, we just listened to

the Mass. We did not take part into the event, we just joined it, we shared an experience. It has been a wonderful and exciting experience.” (Subject ID1)

“As religious leader, I have spoken many times with representatives of other faiths. Some priests have told me that, since Muslims rarely attend inter-faith initiatives, people may confound Islam with terrorism. As such, I think is our responsibility to make our voice being heard and known by the public opinion.” (Subject ID2)

“*Qu’ran* says that, as Muslims, we are witnesses to the world. For us, as religious leaders, it is extremely important to go there and to attend. Only in this way, we can publicly demonstrate our values.” (Subject ID3)

4.2. Every murder is a crime to mankind

Many interviewed Muslims constantly referred to *Qu’ranic* verses related to the sanctity of life, in order to show that the Noble Book not only does not inspire violence, but clearly refuses and condemns it.

“*Qu’ran* 5:32 and *Qu’ran* 60:8 invite us to deprecate and condemn any kind of violence. Every murder is a crime to mankind. Father Jacques is our brother, too.” (Subject ID7)

“Inside the church, we recited *Qu’ranic* verses, clearly saying that Islam condemns hate and violence.” (Subject ID1)

4.3. Importance of inter-faith dialogue

Many young Muslims, especially those belonging to the so-called second generation, are particularly active and engaged in inter-faith initiatives. Being involved in inter-faith dialogue was associated with attending the commemorative event and having a positive view of it. Young Muslims, most of which have Italian citizenship, perceive themselves as bridge-builders, engaged in bridging and linking Muslim community with Christian and Italian community. As social actors and producers of social capital, they think of the symbolic impact of the interfaith initiative (Furbey et al., 2006; Rizk, 2012).

“I just went there to speak with some Catholics and saying them that we, as Muslims, completely disagree with such violence.” (Subject ID4)

“I attended the event. I usually visit churches, as well as synagogues, as I am so strongly interested in inter-faith dialogue.” (Subject ID5)

“We decided to enter at the end of the Mass and we began to speak with the people. It has been a wonderful opportunity for building bridges and destroying barriers.” (Subject ID6)

“I attended the event. I think it has been a nice event, being highly symbolic and with a strong impact on the media. I guess it will facilitate relationships between Christians and Muslims.” (Subject ID7)

“It has been a unique, moving moment. An old lady decided to hug me and we cried together: she told me that she knows us, she knows that we are good people and not killers.” (Subject ID8)

“Islam has always protected Christians and churches. For example, it is reported by Ibn Khaldoon (may *Allah* have mercy on him) that ‘Umar ibn al-Khattaab (may *Allah* be pleased with him) refused to pray in the church because of the fear that the Muslims after him might take it as a mosque.” (Subject ID9)

4.4. Islam is not Islamic State and Islamic State does not represent us

A reason for not attending the event was there was no need to dissociate from a set of violent behaviors that clearly were not respectful of Islamic principles and ethics and from a thing termed “Islamic State” that does not represent Islam at all, but, on the contrary, is a “burden” that interferes with the inclusion process of Muslims within the Italian society. The daily life of Italian Muslims is more than enough to dismiss any alleged hypothesis concerning a link between Islam and the so-called Islamic state.

“Unfortunately I had no time to deeply think of it. I think that decisions of this kind must be profoundly elaborated upon.” (Subject ID12)

“I did not know that today they commemorated Father Jacques. However, I would not have attended the event the same, in that I do think the Islamic State does not represent me at all.” (Subject ID15)

“I did not attend the event. I think is unfair for us to bear such a burden to continuously dissociate from Islamic State-linked episodes. We have to show how and what Islam really is, just living our normal lives.” (Subject ID13)

“I, we are really tired to continuously ask forgiveness for deeds and actions of which we are not responsible at all. Those people are only mad and frustrated people.” (Subject ID14)

4.5. Attending that commemorative event is just spectacularization

Few institutional voices claimed that attending that event was just an attempt of turning religion into a spectacular representation and a superficial mass phenomenon, privileging the media attraction and coverage, instead of the human spirit and its relationship with the divine.

“Joining Catholics in Church is just spectacularization of faith. We don’t have to simplify or popularize our creed, by ostentation or becoming prays of demagoguery.” (Subject ID17)

“They are asking us pure sensationalism. They are asking to join them in churches and be as columns, statues, mere decorative elements of a farce. But we don’t want to be scenography, if we attend an event, we would like to be there with heart and mind.” (Subject ID19)

4.6. Christians do not commemorate our dead people, why we should commemorate theirs?

Another reason for not attending the commemorative event was that, as Muslim citizens are citizens of series B, Muslim dead people are of series B, with respect to Christian citizens or dead individuals.

“I did not attend the commemoration. I do not have anything to do with those murderers and, furthermore, I do think that our mosques are not big enough to house all Christians to celebrate all the slaughters of our Muslim brothers in the world.” (Subject ID20)

“For the Western society, there are dead people of series A and series B. Journalists and the public opinion never or rarely commemorate people dying in Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan.” (Subject ID21)

“I did not went there. I am Muslim, not Catholic. Further, I am not touched nor moved by Father Jacques’ death.” (Subject ID22)

4.7. Attending churches is innovation

A reason for not joining Catholics in churches was that this clearly contradicted the Islamic tradition and could not be justified in any way. This explanation was offered by few religious leaders and from first-generation individuals believing to a strict interpretation of the *Qu’ranic* text.

The normative principles represent a nonnegotiable part of the core Muslim identity (the “Muslimness”) and, as such, cannot be reframed or reinterpreted.

“I did not attend the event, because I would have felt out of place and not at my ease. As imam, I prefer to teach. I think this is the best way to do prevention: knowledge. Being victims has no sense. It is absolutely a truism that terrorism has no religion.” (Subject ID23)

“This is what is called *bida’* (innovation). We have to strictly follow the *Sahaba* (Prophet’s pious predecessors).” (Subject ID23)

“Churches are a place of *shirk* (polytheism). I think there are other ways to show fraternity.” (Subject ID24)

“*Audhobillah* (literally, “I seek refuge in God”). I have never entered churches, neither for *da’wah* (proselytizing or preaching of Islam). It is absolutely forbidden by the religion, for any reason.” (Subject ID25)

“I could not attend such events. Entering polytheistic sites is forbidden. ‘Umar b. Al-Khattâb —Allâh be pleased with him—said, “Stay well away from the enemies of Allâh during their festivals.” He is also reported to have said, “Do not learn the speech of the non-Arabs (unbelievers) and do not enter upon the polytheists in their churches during their holidays, for the wrath of Allâh descends upon them then.” (Subject ID26)

4.8. Fear of losing identity and roots

A reason for not attending the event was that it would have meant to forget one’s own past and history. In this case, no hermeneutic reading or interpretation of the Holy text is offered, but an emotional response is, instead, given. Joining Catholics in churches is perceived as a threat to one’s own religious identity.

“I think it has been the worst day in the history of Italian Muslim community. By attending the commemoration for Father Jacques’ death, we have lost our face, our dignity. We have cancelled our faith, roots, and origins.” (Subject ID30)

“I did not attend. I do not have anything to demonstrate to anybody.” (Subject ID31)

“They asked us to become Christians. It is an unacceptable, hypocrite request.” (Subject ID32)

4.9. Attending that event is useless

Some Muslims perceive that their engagement into the public sphere and civil society would be useless since everything has been already decided by politicians, in a reality in which journalists spread stereotyped ideas against Islam.

“I did not went because I do not understand the meaning of attending the commemorative event: nothing would change in our daily life.” (Subject ID33)

4.10. Islamophobia

The impact of Islamophobia is complex and not linear. While some Muslim subjects, because of their very history of discrimination and suffering, have become aware of the importance and the meaning of attending the commemorative event, in other subjects this has led to different aptitudes and behaviors.

“Since I have been bullied at school and I have been repeatedly beaten for my religious beliefs, I appreciate this event, that gives me the opportunity of showing people what really I am.” (Subject ID39)

“In principle, it could be considered as a nice initiative, but I think that Italian Muslims should wake up and realize how they are treated. They cannot bear anymore this burden.” (Subject ID40)

4.11. Decision of not attending cannot be judged

An important element of Islamic principles and ethics is the intention. Decision of not attending is up to the single individual, and of this decision he/she is accountable only to God.

“In my opinion, brothers and sisters should not judge those who have decided to attend/not to attend the commemorative event. According to Islam and Muslim ethics, actions should be interpreted and discussed on the basis of *niyyah* (intention). And only *Allah* know our heart and whether our intention is sincere and pure.” (Subject ID42)

5. Discussion

Contrarily to what commonly thought, a religious identity is not a fixed identity, invariant through space and time, but should be understood, instead, as an array of symbols, conceptual tools, frames and categories, which are actively utilized and manipulated to forge meanings and shape one’s own personal evolving identity (Hopkins, 2011; Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins, 2006; Hopkins et al., 2007; Reszler, 1992). Hall (1982), the father of intercultural studies, classified Islamic society and culture as a low-context culture, relying more on codes and norms than on context and contingency, differently from high-context culture. Religious identity, on the contrary, is not fully assigned (being born Muslim) neither freely selected nor adopted (converting to Islam): it is a work in progress, being constantly discussed, scrutinized and dialectically negotiated, and can shift over space and time (Howard, 2000). Religious identity derives, indeed, both from social and institutional prescriptive norms and from an array of individual processes (Sartawi & Sammut, 2012). Given some *vinculums* and constraints (Howard, 2000)—the core of the Muslim identity, or the Muslimness (Alrasheed Nayel, 2017; Laurence, 2006)—religious identity is represented in a fluid manner. As such, religious identity is a fuzzy concept and construct: more than a mere “bricolage” act, that sometimes encounters hurdles, difficulties, and also pain (Salih, 2004).

Concerning Muslim scholars, Hasan al-Banna (14 October 1906–12 February 1949), the founder and leader of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Jama’at al-Iḥwān al-muslimīn*), individuated three main dimensions of Islamic identity: namely, inclusiveness or comprehensiveness (*shumuliyyat al-Islam*, the normative part, translating into the everyday practice as a way of life and a daily program), adaptability or elasticity (capacity of fitting any spatial and temporary context), and applicability or practicality (the feasibility of a vision and a program, its embodiment into real life) (al-Anani, 2013).

Tariq Ramadan, relying upon the framework developed by al-Banna, has asserted that the identity of a European Muslim should comprehend three dimensions: first, it should be affirmative and proactive, and not reactive in relationship with the other Europeans, but should incorporate broad and universal values. They should practice their worship acts, in that spirituality is an integral component of human life but should understand and, therefore, live their religion as a methodology, that is to say a way of coping with everyday life. As such, situations and context contribute to shape religious identity.

Taking into account all this, the sociologist Peek (2005) does not speak of “being Muslim”, but of “becoming Muslim”.

Muslim Italian community is an extremely multi-faceted and heterogeneous reality (Gritti and Allam, 2001; Saint-Blancat, 1999), being an intricate “tapestry” (Toronto, 2008), a “social puzzle” (Zatti, 2007), a galaxy of sometimes clashing forces (Toronto, 2008) and a “complex constellation” of “ethnicity, nationality, migration, geopolitical history, law and socio-economic status” (Hardy, Mughal, & Markiewicz, 2017). This reflects not only in the increasingly growing number of

associations, which have the ambition of authentically representing the “true” Italian *umma*, in the religious marketplace, but also in the different responses to the appeal of prominent French scholars and religious institutions, after the Normandy church attack. A lot of “*distinguo*” of the basis *versus* the compactness of their religious leaders (despite traditional rivalries) (Toronto, 2008) characterized the Muslim Italian community and their attendance of the commemorative event: from subtle hermeneutical differences (Toronto, 2008) and erudite interpretations of *Qu’ran* verses, which could apparently allow or forbid the entrance of Muslims in churches or from the frustrations and feelings of being a citizen of series B, to the desire and will of actively building an Italian Islam (Mancuso, 2012; Martino and Ricucci, 2015).

The Muslim Italian community appears to be contradictorily suspended between history—a glorious and fascinating past—and the modernity, between activism and engagement and a silence concerning what are considered “externalities” that should not touch or interfere with the common, daily life (Allievi and Dassetto, 1993; Sassi, 2008). However, this “silence” should not be interpreted as a sign of connivance, collusion with the jihadists or ambiguity, but within the framework of what the scholar Tariq Ramadan (2002) has named “silent revolution” and the sociologist Toronto has defined as “external participation” (Toronto, 2008). Different ethical and political conceptions lead Muslims to privilege the inner dimension, rather than the outer, public sphere. This observation is coherent with what found by Toronto, who claimed the coexistence of different strategies and purposes in the Italian *umma*, ranging from isolation (“self” *versus* “the other”, “our culture” *versus* “surrounding cultures”), external participation (or passive disengagement, “keeping one’s feet in Italy, with one’s head and heart in one’s country of origin”), to assimilation (minimization and concealment of one’s own foreignness/Muslimness), and integration (active and full participation in the public sphere), with a prevalence of external participation, as already mentioned (Toronto, 2008).

Some youth organizations, such as the “*Giovani Musulmani d’Italia*” (Young Muslims of Italy or GMI) have taken part into the event of commemorating the French priest and, in the past, have extensively participated in interfaith initiatives, such as the “*Pullman del dialogo*” (the Bus of Dialogue), joining Catholics and the Pontiff (Frisina, 2005; Toronto, 2008). Other significant interfaith events have included the “Catholic marsh to Ravenna”, a 160,00-inhabitant city that houses the second largest mosque in Italy.

The impact of Islamophobia represents a burden for many Muslim subjects: they, indeed, feel constantly under scrutiny (Hankir, Carrick, & Zaman, 2015). After the 9/11 and the 7/7 attacks (Burdett, 2016; Tindongan, 2011), waves of islamophobia have increased both in Europe and in the USA (Sheridan, 2006), leading to radicalization, polarization, and fundamentalism. In Italy, this issue is particularly relevant given the biased and unbalanced media coverage, that divulge, simplify and distort information related to Islam, contributing to the dissemination of a derogatory portrayal, full of prejudices and misperceptions.

In conclusion, there appears not to be a linear relationship between variables such as age, gender, first or second generation, years being in Italy (in case of migrants), country of origin, *madhhab*, marital status, occupation and the choice of attending or not the commemorative event.

Even focused on the decision whether to join or not Catholics in churches for commemorating a priest, this “dilemma” between engagement in the public arena and disengagement, between visibility and isolation, between a “Westernized” hermeneutics and a strict reading of *Qu’ran*, concerns the way and the extent Muslims should and could interact with non-Muslims. In another context, authors have investigated the debate in the United Kingdom’s Muslim community concerning the 1997 General Election (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2004). For some interviewees, engaging actively in civic life constituted a duty, for others something that could have jeopardized or undermined their group identity.

This has important implications in order to better understand the efforts of the Italian Muslim community in reshaping and reframing its identity. The current era is the “fifth stage” of Islam (Allievi, 2009), that is to say the birth of a European and Italian Islam (al-Azmeh and Fokas, 2008), after the Islamic expansion and the crusades (first phase), the European dominance and colonialism of Muslim lands (second phase), the spreading of Islam *via* migration (third phase) and the beginning of the emergence of Islam in Europe and in Italy (fourth phase). Other scholars speak of a third stage (“Islam of Europe and Italy”) after “Islam and Europe and Italy” (first phase) and “Islam in Europe” (second phase). Throughout the decades, Islam has become an integral and fundamental part of the European “geo-religious reality” (Eck, 2000). However, as also the current investigation indicates, efforts towards a full integration are necessary (Tibi, 2003; Branca, 2007; Dassetto, 2004; Klausen, 2005; Migliore, 2013).

If on the one hand, our study has some strengths in that it focuses on a topic so important for the integration of Muslim community in Italy, on the other hand, it has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. These are mainly due to the sampling strategy and to the language. Although conducting interviews with interpreters was possible, we preferred to include only Muslims able to speak Italian since we felt that, otherwise, the presence of the interpreter may have affected the responses. On the other hand, this could represent a further selection bias of the sample. As such we were not able to include first-generation Muslims not able to speak in Italian (Toronto, 2008).

As far as the sampling strategy is concerned, undoubtedly the presence of Muslim subjects in Italy is more complex, multi-layered and heterogeneous, in terms of beliefs, practices and attitudes, among others (Pfössl, 2015).

6. Conclusion

The integration of Muslim community in Italy is a long path, interwoven with misunderstandings and diffidence, as well as with reciprocal esteem and openings. Muslim Italian community has been often criticized of being silent and not to take a net position, conveying a clear opinion and a frank dissociation from the Islamic State and, in general, from the so-called Islamic terrorism.

The commemorative event of Father Jacques Hamel’s death has been an important event, to which only 1–2% of the Muslim Italian community has taken part, in most cases religious leaders and representatives of associations. While this part of the community was compact and, apart from some isolated voices, in favor of the initiative, most Muslim subjects were skeptical and diffident about the commemorative event. A number of reasons, including also personal experiences, were at the basis of deciding where to join/not to join Italian Catholics at Church.

Our qualitative research sheds light on the multiple voices and thoughts of a complex, multi-faceted community. We believe that our findings could be helpful for policy-makers and stakeholders, in designing inclusive and truly integrative policies.

However, due to the above-mentioned limitations and shortcomings of the current study, further research in the field is urgently needed, also assuming a gender perspective.

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