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## Islam *Italiano*: Prospects for Integration of Muslims in Italy's Religious Landscape

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JAMES A. TORONTO

### *Abstract*

*Despite daunting political and social challenges to the insertion of Islam in Italy's spiritual geography, there is much evidence to suggest that integration is already underway and will move slowly but steadily forward to realization. Factors that impede the efforts of Muslims to achieve integration in the Italian religious landscape include the diversity and divisions found within the Muslim community itself, deep-seated mistrust of Islam in Italian society, media coverage that tends to be biased and inaccurate, and ambivalence on the part of the Catholic Church hierarchy toward Islam and other religious minorities. Among the factors that portend eventual accommodation of Muslims in Italy are the relatively tolerant attitudes among Italians toward immigrants and religious minorities, the increasingly effective measures adopted by Muslims to promote their cause in the public arena, the role of second-generation Muslims in reconstructing Islamic identity for the Italian context, and examples from the history of religion that illustrate how religious minorities in other societies have been successfully integrated.*

### Introduction

Starting in the latter half of the nineteenth century and continuing through the present time, mass movements of people across geographical space and national boundaries have marked one of the watershed changes in human history. Unprecedented in their scale and frequency, these migrations have brought about a mingling of racial, ethnic, and religious groups—a “marbling of civilizations and peoples” that has brought about “a new georeligious reality”, as one scholar has aptly observed<sup>1</sup>—generating conflict in the public arena and inducing new debates about national identity, human rights, and the nature of civil society.

Following World War II, the countries of Western Europe began to experience dramatic demographic and cultural transformation as they shifted from being a source of emigration to North and South America to being a destination for immigrants. Growing economic prosperity attracted large numbers of immigrants, initially from Eastern Europe and later from Southern Europe. During the last four decades of the century, however, Western Europe began to receive for the first time a steady influx of non-European immigrants originating primarily from newly liberated colonies in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.

As a consequence of this transplantation of populations from primarily Muslim majority countries, Islam has become the second largest religion in Europe, making it “the new frontier of Islam”.<sup>2</sup> As one scholar has pointed out, this gradual and irreversible insertion of Islam in Europe represents a significant development in view of the historically adversarial relationship between Muslim and European countries: “In the past, one

talked of Islam *and* the West; now, one increasingly speaks of Islam *in* the West and, eventually through the role of second- and third-generation immigrants and converts, of an Islam *of* Europe, if not yet of a European Islam. Islam is no longer a transitory phenomenon that can be eventually sent back ‘home.’”<sup>3</sup>

This paper explores the realities and implications of the dynamic process of social transformation currently underway in Europe, focusing on Italy as a case study. I will examine the social, political, and religious conflicts and accommodations that mass immigration of Muslims has generated in Italian life. I discuss the internal and external challenges to and prospects for Muslim integration in Italy’s public sphere in an effort to shed light on how modern pluralistic societies and new religious minorities encounter and adapt to each other. My central argument is that a historical dialectic of encounter, adaptation, and integration is slowly but relentlessly underway in Italy to accommodate a variety of new religious minorities, including Muslims. Despite formidable political and social obstacles, both inside and outside the Italian Muslim community, to the integration of Islam in Italy’s spiritual geography, there are reasons to predict that such integration will gradually occur and that Italian society will both shape, and be shaped by, its emerging Islamic component.

### **The Demographics**

Accurate estimates of the number of Muslims in Italy are difficult to obtain but currently range between 800,000 and one million (as of 2005). This represents about 33% of the immigrant population in Italy and 2% of the total Italian population. These numbers do not provide a clear picture, however, as they are based primarily on estimates of how many immigrants (both legal and illegal) originate in Muslim majority countries, added to the number of Muslims who have become naturalized Italian citizens (about 40,000) and Italians who have converted to Islam (about 10,000). The important question of how many of the Muslim immigrants actually consider themselves Muslim, whether due to cultural identity or religious observance, also remains unclear and virtually unexplored. By far the largest population of Muslims in Italy come from Morocco (about one third), followed in order by Albania, Tunisia, Senegal, Egypt, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Algeria, Bosnia, Iran, Nigeria, Turkey, and Somalia.<sup>4</sup> As one might guess from the variety of countries represented, every major sect of Islam—Sunni, Shiite, and Sufi—and many derivative orders, movements, ideologies, and schools of thought can be found in the tapestry of Italian Islam.

Some features of the Muslim community, or *ummah*, in Italy are reflected in these figures and provide a useful basis for comparison to Islamic communities in other Western European countries. First, the Islamic community in Italy is, comparatively speaking, in its infancy. Even though Italy has a long and fascinating history of Muslim presence on its shores, the steady influx and permanent status of Islamic immigration began only 15–20 years ago, and the related issues forced to the forefront of debate in Italian public life represent a relatively new phenomenon. The vast majority of Muslims are, therefore, first-generation, although a second generation is just beginning to appear and play a significant role. By contrast, major immigration to countries such as Germany, France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands has been underway for up to 50 years, and the proportion of Muslims to total population is therefore much higher than Italy’s 2% (France is at about 7%, and the average in Europe is 4%). The process of identity construction and integration in these countries involves at least two to three generations of Muslims and is at a more advanced stage of evolution.

In Italy, we find still a predominance of first-generation Muslims who prefer to speak a non-Italian mother tongue and have “their feet here but their head and heart in another country” (as several informants put it).

Allievi points out a second feature of the Muslim experience in Italy: a relatively rapid insertion of the first generation into the public sphere, with attendant consequences. Although Islam in Italy is still “facing backwards as always happens with the first generation of immigrants”, phase two of its presence—the state of sedentariness, stabilization, and institutionalization—is beginning to emerge. In his view, the initial stage of Muslim immigration in Italy has taken place with “greater speed of admission and settlement” than in other European countries, with both positive and negative impact. Because Muslim immigrants have arrived fairly recently, imbued with the ideological orientation of countries in which Islam is viewed as a vital cog in public and social life, “the Islamic presence already makes itself visible in the public domain with the first generation”. But this development comes with a political cost: a more rapid insertion into public life has occurred “when the experience [of immigrants] is less, the organizational processes are embryonic, and possible misunderstandings are more frequent”.<sup>5</sup>

A third dimension of Islam in Italy, again in contrast to other European countries cited above, is the diversity of the Muslim population that has resulted in dispersion of Islamic presence around the country and fragmentation of purpose and activity. Muslim communities elsewhere tend to be identified with particular geographical areas in the Islamic world that have prior historical, linguistic, and economic ties developed during Europe’s colonial period: e.g. the predominance of Maghrebis (Algerians, Tunisians, and Moroccans) in France, of Turks in Germany, and of South Asians in Great Britain. While Muslim presence in these countries has typically been concentrated in immigrant neighborhoods in or around major urban centers, the more heterogeneous Muslims of Italy have not congregated as much in ethnic urban neighborhoods but have dispersed more evenly throughout the country in search of economic opportunity. Thus, one finds Islam well represented by its fledgling places of worship and cultural organizations not only at the national level, but at the regional and local levels as well, in both urban and rural settings. The geographical distribution of Muslims in Italy and their ethnic, national, and ideological diversity inhibit efforts to mobilize and unify the Islamic community in order to achieve common political and social goals, as we shall see below.

### **Internal Issues Facing the Muslim Community**

The data collected for this study suggest that a constellation of political, social, and ideological forces within the Islamic community impinges on Muslim efforts to achieve an equal footing in Italy’s religious marketplace. Many of these factors are associated with the question of authority in the contemporary *ummah*. As many scholars have pointed out, the issue of who speaks for Islam—of how to find an authoritative, legitimate means of defining Islamic positions and fostering greater unity in the community—remains one of the major challenges facing Muslims worldwide. And the Italian *ummah* is no exception.

In my interviews with Muslim leaders and Italian scholars and my participant observation in the Islamic community, I have noted four general views of Islam’s role in Italy’s public sphere. The terms isolation, assimilation, external participation, and integration represent competing visions of how to construct an Italian Islamic identity and to interact with the surrounding political and social reality.

*Isolation*

Isolation is an approach characterized by exclusivist views of the “self” and the “other” and of the surrounding culture. Muslims who adopt this approach tend to be extremely conservative and literalist in their interpretation of Islamic texts, holding to traditional teachings that divide the world into two spheres: *dar al-islam* (“house of Islam”) and *dar al-harb* (“house of war”—the domain of the non-believers or *kuffar*). According to this view, it is a religious duty for all Muslims to live only in the former, while shunning and working to overcome the latter. While one may live for a time in the house of war, it can be only a temporary situation necessitated by factors such as economic hardship or the activity of calling (*dāwa*) Muslims or non-Muslims to the straight path of Islam. A Muslim subscribing to this view while living out of necessity among the non-believers (i.e. in a European country such as Italy) will engage in the bare minimum of interaction in society required to provide life’s basic needs: e.g. food and lodging. These attitudes and practices often lead to a ghettoization of Muslim life as the believer seeks simply to transplant her/his identity and experience from the home context to the foreign context. Little if any effort is exerted, therefore, to learn the language and customs of the new environment or to even set foot in the public sphere.<sup>6</sup>

I encountered isolationist tendencies and attitudes at several locations, but most prominently in the mosque on Viale Jenner in Milan that is widely known (though adamantly denied by mosque officials) to have had contacts with militant anti-Western groups like al-Qaeda and Egypt’s al-Gamāa al-Islamiyya. Upon entering the mosque door, located in the courtyard of a nondescript garage, one is transported away from Europe to another world: the sights, sounds, and smells of a traditional Muslim neighborhood in Egypt. Qur’anic recitation is playing, Egyptian fast food is being prepared and consumed, long beards and white robes are common, and Arabic is the preferred language of communication. In that setting it came as no surprise that the Egyptian *imam* at the mosque, Abu’ Imad, felt more comfortable speaking Arabic with me, even after having lived in Italy for more than a decade. His responses to my questions concerning his views on relations between Muslims in Italy and the Italian state revealed that he was virtually unaware of the whole issue and uninterested in discussing it (although he openly discussed the social challenges, like housing and education, facing Muslims in Milan). My conclusion, one to be emphasized, is that this extreme, isolationist view is not widespread among the Muslim population of Italy. After all, the vast majority of them are voluntary emigrants who left their home countries of their own volition to seek a higher standard of living and (in many cases) greater political and religious freedom.

*Assimilation*

Assimilation is the approach embraced by immigrants, usually in the first and second generation, who want to minimize the painful experiences inherent in immigrant life, such as prejudice, harassment, and bigotry in various forms. Rather than transplanting one’s environment and retaining identity at all costs as in the case of the isolationist, this approach seeks to *shed* the former identity and blend in seamlessly to the new environment. This requires concealing or casting off completely all semblances of foreignness or Muslimness—e.g. language, clothing, cuisine, and religious symbols and practices—and becoming as “Italian” as possible. One does not have to go very far on the streets and public transportation of Italy to find many immigrants from Muslim countries who have assimilated effectively by donning a kind of cultural camouflage that permits them to avoid easy detection in the Italian social landscape.

### *External Participation*

External participation represents the approach of a large proportion of immigrant Muslims in Italy. As mentioned before, the Muslim community is comprised primarily of first-generation immigrants who retain strong linguistic, economic, and emotional ties to their country of origin. The desire of many is to have the best of two worlds without affecting either one: to enjoy the economic and political benefits of life in the West without compromising or changing in any way one's ethnic identity or loyalties to Islam. For many Muslims in this category, a delicate balancing act is the daily challenge: keeping one's feet in Italy, while one's head and heart are in Morocco or Senegal or Bangladesh. This approach is often marked by participation in civil society, though of a rather reluctant and partial nature ("middle of the road", as one young Muslim put it), mostly for the advantages such involvement might bring in ensuring or expanding observance of religious and cultural traditions. For example, some of the major Islamic organizations were formed, at least initially, for the express purpose of achieving a formal agreement, or *intesa*, between Muslims and the Italian state that would secure various rights for Muslims, including the right to have their own cemeteries, prison and military chaplains, and *halal* markets; and religious holidays and prayer times legitimated in the workplace and schools. While it is natural and right that Muslims would seek to ensure these basic religious freedoms in the public sphere, participation that is limited to this narrow scope of interests lacks the depth and vision to bring about a more comprehensive, enduring change of status. This approach involves few if any of the risks and compromises characteristic of full engagement in liberal society and will therefore fall short of the goal of achieving equal standing for Islam in Italy's religious economy.

### *Integration*

Integration embodies an attitude that seeks an equal place for Muslims in the religious landscape through full and vigorous participation in Italian civil society. Those who espouse this approach—primarily second-generation Muslims, Muslim intellectuals, and Italian converts to Islam—are generally willing to immerse themselves in the rough-and-tumble of democratic life and to take risks involving the reassessment of traditional Islamic epistemology and the construction of an alternative Islamic identity congruent with full participation in liberal Western society. At this early stage in the process of immigration and implantation (even though it is taking place more rapidly than in other European countries, as noted above), the number of Muslims advocating full engagement and integration in Italy's public life is relatively small. The integrationists in the *ummah* are often viewed by first-generation immigrants as misguided youth or newcomers who do not understand "true" Islam. Their liberal reinterpretations of the sacred texts and law, *shariah*, represent a threat to traditional Muslims and an unacceptable "watering down" of Islam in order to accommodate Western norms of conduct and belief. The idealism and risk-taking inherent in the impulse toward integration often creates tension in immigrant Muslim families between first-generation parents whose religious identity is well formed and their second-generation children who have been raised in Italy, whose identity is multifaceted, and who therefore desire a more complete involvement in Italian life.

### *Other Factors*

In addition to these four contrasting visions of Islam's role in the public sphere, several other internal factors influence the efforts of Muslims to solidify their place in Italy's

social geography. The complexity and geographical diffusion of the Italian *ummah* (mentioned above) has made it difficult for Muslims to act in concert to achieve common goals. Clashing ethnic and national identities, ideological and hermeneutical differences, personal rivalries, and competing claims to authority as official representatives of Italian Islam—all of these represent fault lines in a fragmented Muslim community. A particularly thorny issue is the latter one—which Islamic organization has the right to represent all Muslims in their relations with the Italian government. At least three major organizations have assumed this exclusive, self-proclaimed authority and evinced unwillingness to cooperate in power-sharing with other Islamic groups. The Islamic Cultural Center in Rome, supervised by a board of ambassadors from Islamic countries and closely associated with Saudi Arabia and the Muslim World League, views itself as the most viable representative of Muslims in Italy because of its official high-level contacts in Rome. The Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy (UCOII), on the other hand, dismisses the Cultural Center in Rome as an entity created and funded by outsiders who know little about the Italian context and have minimal contact with the masses of Muslim immigrants. A third competitor for sole representation of the *ummah* is the Islamic Religious Community (COREIS) located in Milan. This organization was founded and continues to be run by Italian converts to Islam who adhere to a highly spiritualized brand of Sufi Islam. Regarded with contempt by immigrant Muslim groups as espousing a pale imitation of true Islam, the COREIS leadership argue that all other organizations lack the language and cultural skills necessary to counteract Islamophobic attitudes in Italian society and to negotiate effectively through the Italian political system.

Besides these organizational rivalries, the specter of radicalism continues to haunt the Islamic community. A number of outspoken Muslims in Italy who espouse extreme views have succeeded, through their publications and appearances on national TV, in reinforcing the already negative image of Islam that prevails in Italy. One of these, Adel Smith, who is an Italian convert to Islam, has published several diatribes against the Christian West and Catholicism and recently sued in the Italian courts to have all crucifixes removed from Italian schools. Moreover, many Italians are of the opinion that the real loyalties of Italian Muslims lie beyond Italy's borders: that they have contacts with and are heavily influenced by foreign governments and radical Islamist organizations.

In sum, I would say that the vast majority of Muslims view some degree of peaceful integration in Italian civil society as a desirable end. However, a combination of disunity, rivalries, and competing claims for authority within the Islamic community itself impedes this effort and arouses alarm and suspicion in the minds of the Italian public. This in turn fosters opposition in the political system and renders more problematic the process of integration in the religious landscape.

### **External Constraints to Integration of Muslims**

Contrary to what one might expect, given its status as the home base of one of the world's largest and most influential religions, Catholicism, Italy boasts a civic order that is remarkably open to the exercise of religious freedom. Studies of the Italian legal and social context place it among the leaders in Europe in promoting and protecting the rights of religious minorities. As one legal scholar observed:

Italy provides one of the friendliest environments in continental Europe for new religious movements. While France, Belgium, and Germany have legitimized religious stigmas and placed restrictions on both old and new religious

movements, Italy has become a trendsetter in creating laws and procedures that foster religious liberty in the increasingly pluralistic society. Italian courts have struck down the application of laws enacted before the fall of fascism, and they have reported opinions favorable to movements like The Family, the Unification Church, and the Church of Scientology. Despite the strong influence of the Catholic Church, anti-cult movements in Italy are small and have no significant influence on government policies.<sup>7</sup>

Several developments in post-World War II Italy brought about a process of deregulation and liberalization in the religious arena. Italy, like Spain and Portugal, operates under a “*concordat*” legal system based on the signing of agreements that govern relations between the state and religious groups.<sup>8</sup> A liberal constitution signed in 1947 recognized the previous (1929) privileged *concordat* with the Roman Catholic Church, but also abolished vestiges of religious discrimination and stipulated that all religions would have equal legal standing. In 1984 the *concordat* with the Catholic Church was renegotiated, removing Catholic clergy from the state payroll, requiring all Italian citizens to pay 0.8% of their taxes (the so-called “*otto per mille*”) to a religious or cultural organization of their choice, and opening the way for the first-ever official agreement (*intesa*) with a non-Catholic church, the Waldensians, that same year. Agreements with other religious minorities soon followed: the Assemblies of God and Seventh-Day Adventists in 1988, the Union of Jewish Communities in 1989, and the Baptists and Lutherans in 1995. Another milestone in the liberalization of Italy’s religious economy occurred in 1994 when the first national elections were held following the collapse of the long-dominant Christian Democratic Party, allied closely with the Catholic Church, that had held an iron grip on Italian politics and society for half a century. Introvigne suggests that these political and legal developments, together with the heavy influx of immigration from non-Catholic countries (discussed before), began to sway public attitudes about religion in Italy. More and more Italians were persuaded “that theirs was now a multi-religious society. . . . Italian religious economy was becoming fully deregulated.” Although this expansion of religious pluralism was “more apparent than real . . . the *perception* of pluralism changed dramatically”.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that Italian society is a comparatively tolerant and increasingly pluralistic religious environment is reflected in published studies and in interviews with Muslims that indicate a generally positive experience for the Islamic community (detailed discussion follows). However, as Introvigne points out, changes in attitudes toward pluralism take time and are more perceived than real. Though legal structures and attitudes may be evolving favorably, implementation of laws and actual behavior in the streets and workplaces and schools often lag behind.

In other words, there remain a number of formidable obstacles to full integration of Muslims in Italy’s social space. This is due in large measure to Italy’s history as a racially and religiously homogeneous population, unaccustomed to the necessity of accommodating new religious and ethnic minorities in the public square: “The significant presence of a Muslim community in Italy and the request for access to the *intesa* advanced by some [Muslim leaders] has stirred up a stagnant scene. . . . For the first time since the end of World War II, our country has had to confront a demand for religious liberty to which no one was equipped to respond: neither the jurists, nor the sociologists, nor the politicians.”<sup>10</sup> Nor, I might add, the general public.

Muslim efforts to achieve full legal recognition by signing an *intesa* with the Italian government have repeatedly foundered on the rocks of Italian *realpolitik* and Islamic disunity.



Although the legal framework provided by the 1947 constitution and subsequent legal reforms would seem to guarantee the right to full status for the Islamic community, juridical theory has not been translated into political practice. It should be pointed out that the absence of an *intesa* with the Muslims (or with other religious groups like the Buddhists, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses who have also been unsuccessful in this regard) does not preclude them from exercising their right to worship, buy and sell goods and property, rent and (in some cases) build places of worship,<sup>11</sup> receive donations from members, wear religious clothing (like the veil, *hijab*, for women), display religious symbols, and propagate their faith in public. It is also true, however, that other vital religious benefits of a symbolic and practical nature can be secured only through the conclusion of the *intesa*—an outcome that is *not* guaranteed because the process is highly politicized and ambiguous.<sup>12</sup> Symbolically, signing this accord represents a badge of authenticity and legitimacy—a public affirmation that the religious community has attained an equal standing in Italy's public space. For this reason, the question of the *intesa* involves a significant psychological dimension: the achievement of this ultimate level of recognition boosts the self-esteem and prestige of a religious minority, while lack of this legal imprimatur brands the group as second-class citizens in the religious economy. Practically speaking, a religious community with an *intesa* in hand enjoys important material advantages, e.g. benefiting financially from annual taxpayer contributions and teaching its religious precepts in the public schools during religion class. In addition, a formal agreement helps facilitate access to rights already provided under general Italian law: having the right to observe religious holidays and prayer times; providing chaplains in prisons, hospitals, and the military; conducting funerals and marriages with full civil recognition; and building private religious schools.<sup>13</sup>

Several factors have contributed to the Islamic community's failure, after repeated attempts (at least five), to reach an accord with the Italian state:

#### *Disunity in the Islamic Community*

As discussed before, divisions and rivalries between the various Muslim groups have made it impossible to present a united front in negotiations with the government. Since the Italian government requires that negotiations be conducted with one legal entity representing the interests of the entire religious community, failure to overcome personal and ideological differences will continue to block progress toward the goal of signing an *intesa*.

#### *The Influence of Historical Attitudes*

Because the *intesa* system is based primarily on an ambiguous political process (as opposed to a straightforward legal procedure), public opinion heavily influences government decisions about which religious groups will be allowed to sign an accord. The harsh reality for the Islamic community is that the image of Muslims remains negative and feelings of Islamophobia run deep in Italian society. Allievi has proposed that this could be connected to the long history of raids along the coast of Italy carried out by Saracens (Muslims) that left an indelible impression of fear in the "collective unconscious" of Italians.<sup>14</sup> This long-standing association of Muslims with danger and terror in the Italian psyche was, of course, only confirmed and deepened by the events of 9/11. Adding to this image of Muslims as aliens is the fact that relatively few Muslims are

Italian citizens and the strong perception (with some grounding in fact) that most Muslims retain strong loyalties and cultural ties to foreign countries.

*The Impact of the Media on Public Opinion*

The treatment of Islam in the Italian media has also exerted an extremely adverse impact on opinions in the public sphere. As in other countries, coverage of international events related to Islam and portrayal of the lives of Muslims often lacks balance or careful analysis, thus perpetuating biases and misperceptions. For example, Oriana Fallaci's books about Islam, written after the events of 9/11 and full of invective, half-truths, and false allegations, have been popular in Italy and widely discussed in Italian political circles and TV talk shows. Much to the dismay of Muslims and social activists in Italy, she recently has been the recipient of several awards (*Medaglie d'Oro*) for outstanding citizenship and contributions to Italian life. Many journalists and scholars, however, have taken her to task for her shoddy research and lack of professionalism. The inflammatory anti-Christian writings and public comments of the Italian convert, Adel Smith, have also raised the ire of the Italian public and embarrassed the Muslim community. Despite attempts by Muslim leaders to disavow association with Smith, his denunciations of the Catholic Church and efforts in the courts to have crucifixes removed from all public buildings have been highly publicized in the media and have reinforced all the long-held stereotypes in Italy about Muslims.<sup>15</sup> An Italian scholar, Zincone, concludes that the national media fixation on crimes committed by foreigners, while ignoring positive aspects of immigration, adversely impacts public perceptions: "The fact that the majority of information in the media regarding immigration concerns crime and its repression is certainly of no help in the attempt to establish low-conflict relationships and a climate of positive interaction". She applauds the effort of the Italian government, in its comprehensive report on integration of immigrants, to combat media bias by providing empirical data that confirms the positive contribution of foreigners to Italy's economy.<sup>16</sup>

*Opposition by the Far Right in Italian Politics: La Lega Nord*

The right-wing political party, La Lega Nord ("The Northern League") sponsors a well-financed, highly organized campaign that is nationalistic, xenophobic, and separationist in orientation. Their ideology advocates the division of Italy into two countries: the prosperous northern part (referred to as *Padania*) and the less developed southern half. In an effort to garner political support for their agenda, they employ anti-immigrant, racist language to prey on Italians' latent fear of foreigners, defined as non-Europeans and non-Christians. The presence of a large and rapidly growing community of Muslim immigrants in Italy has provided a convenient scapegoat for ultra-conservatives (as has also been the case with Le Pen in France and other right-wing politicians in Europe), and the Lega has not spared its resources in denouncing Muslims and defaming Islam. Reference is often made to a distinction between "us" and "them", and images equating Islam to terrorism and abuse of women frequently appear in the party's publicity. The Lega has not openly called for violence against the Islamic community, and its actual numbers are relatively small. But their rhetorical and political clout continues to impact the lives of Muslims at both the local and national level. In northern regions where the party is strongest (the "Deep North" as Italians sometimes say, referring to northeast Italy), there have been numerous instances of discrimination against Muslims: e.g. refusal of local governments

to allocate space for worship or accommodate religious holidays, closures of mosques and prayer halls for flimsy excuses, imposing illegal requirements that Muslim women remove their *hijab* for ID photos, and sponsoring demonstrations to disrupt academic conferences involving Muslim scholars.<sup>17</sup> In the halls of political power in Rome, the Lega wields significant influence having managed to win several key cabinet positions, including Minister of Justice, in Prime Minister Berlusconi's center-right coalition.

### *The Position of the Catholic Church*

To decipher the current attitude of the Catholic Church toward Islam and its impact on events in the public arena, one must be aware of the church's multifaceted organization and take into account various levels of interpretation, including official attitudes reflected in formal statements and documents; Church officials who have served in the Islamic world; and hard-line bishops and parish priests in the Italian church.<sup>18</sup> By doing so, one concludes that the Church's position continues to evolve over time and is somewhat ambivalent in nature. The documents published following the Vatican II Council (1962–1965) marked a turning point in Catholic-Muslim relations. These official statements, in contrast to prior statements, describe the Church's position as one of openness to dialogue with other faiths and a desire to emphasize shared theological and moral truths in order to promote common goals for humanity. Islam and other religions are represented, not as alien or inimical to Catholicism, but as potential allies in the struggle to improve the quality of life around the world.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, an attitude of tolerance and respect is evinced by many officials in the Catholic hierarchy who have lived in the Islamic world for extended periods, learned to speak Arabic and other languages spoken by Muslims, and come to know Muslims first-hand.<sup>20</sup> Tangible evidence of this ecumenical spirit *vis-à-vis* Islam is the Vatican's support for the donation of land and construction of the Monte Antenne mosque in Rome, despite controversy and opposition from many Italians.

However, not all Catholic clergy are in agreement on how far the church should go in interfaith cooperation, fearing that the message of Catholicism's place as sole repository of Divine Authority might be lost or compromised in the rush to find common ground. Most prominent among these voices of the church in Italy have been Bishop Biffi of Bologna and Bishop Maggiolini of Como whose rhetoric is similar to that of the Lega in portraying Muslims as undesirable aliens whose way of life represents a grave threat to Christian European identity and whose beliefs are wholly incompatible with Christianity. Biffi's views, widely circulated in the Italian press, include advocacy of a ban on Muslim immigration and admonition to Catholics to avoid marrying Muslims. Pope John Paul II evinced a certain empathy towards the Islamic world that attenuated the influence of these harsher voices in the Catholic hierarchy. But some observers feel that, under the new leadership of Pope Benedict, these voices might have freer reign.

I personally observed the discrepancy between official church positions on Islam and the attitudes perpetuated at the local level by parish priests. Walking in downtown Florence near the main tourist attraction, the Duomo, I stopped on a busy street to visit the Santa Maria de' Ricci cathedral and was stunned to see an elaborate display of virulent anti-Islamic propaganda prepared by the church's priest. On large posters by the main entrance were, among other things, a color photograph of a Sudanese Catholic boy allegedly crucified by Muslims and diatribes like the following: "Let's be aware of the behavior of Islam in comparison with Christianity, and of the indifference of European Christians, not only because it is a religious problem, but a human and social problem as well.

Europeans, believers and non-believers, don't be deceived: cultural integration with Islam is a project that has already failed." The ambiguities inherent in deciphering the Church's position on Islam became even more apparent when I learned from the *imam* of the Islamic Center nearby that this priest has sponsored several interfaith events in his cathedral with Muslims and Jews as his guests.

Despite the demise of the Christian Democratic Party in the 1994 elections, the Catholic Church continues to influence the public debate on religion in Italian society. As we have seen, the evolving and ambivalent position of the church on relations with Islam leaves ample room for a variety of interpretations and grist for just about any ideological mill. While the official declarations of the Vatican advocate respect for Islam and its place in society, some of the Catholic hierarchy in Italy are influenced by historical attitudes of Italians, the media, and public opinion, often adopting anti-Islamic positions intended to protect the interests of the Church in Italy's political system.<sup>21</sup>

### Prospects for Adaptation and Integration

A historical dialectic of encounter, adaptation, and integration is slowly but relentlessly underway in Italy to accommodate a variety of new religious minorities, including Islam. Despite formidable political and social obstacles, both inside and outside the *umma*, to the integration of Islam in Italy's spiritual geography, there are reasons to predict that such integration will gradually occur.

There is mounting evidence, corroborated by empirical studies, that in general Italy provides a hospitable environment for religious and ethnic minorities and that Italian public opinion about integration of immigrants is softening. Zincone's analysis of the first government report on immigration in Italy identifies "light" and "dark" areas of the immigrant experience. The light or positive areas include marked increases in the number of family reunifications (meaning that entire families are settling in Italy, an indicator of stabilization in the immigration cycle), foreign students in Italian schools, membership in trade unions, and access to decent housing and health care. Open-minded and tolerant attitudes about integration of minorities prevail in Italian society: nationally, only 17% of Italians would object to having an immigrant as a neighbor (although the figure rises to 28% in the conservative Northeast); 69% support laws to make it easier for foreigners born in Italy to acquire citizenship; 73% are in favor of legalizing immigrants who have jobs; and a vast majority (84%) believe that minorities should not feel obligated to abandon their culture in order to be accepted in Italian society. On the economic front, the report found that, overall, "immigrant labor appears to serve a complementary rather than a competitive role in relation to native Italian labor" and is "becoming crucial to the survival of [the Italian] economy."<sup>22</sup> These findings support the oft-heard refrain of Muslim immigrants that "we are needed here" and that economic demand for immigrant labor will in time lead to improved social status, just as it did for southern Italians who migrated *en masse* to northern Italy during the 1950s and 1960s. A scientific survey conducted during May 2006 in eight Western countries confirmed that Italian public opinion on immigration has improved over the past decade, with nearly half of those polled (45%) viewing immigrants as a positive presence in their society.<sup>23</sup>

Another factor that will facilitate integration is the growing sophistication of Italian Muslims in making effective use of the institutions of Italian civil society: the courts, the educational system, and the media. Groups such as the Islamic Anti-Defamation League-Italy, associated with UCOII, have adopted a more aggressive stance in confronting bigotry and libelous speech in the public sphere. For example, in January



FIGURE 1. Billboard Equating Islam with Terrorism.

2006 the IADL brought charges of defamation against the Lega Nord for having put up large billboards in the Bologna area equating Islam with terrorism (see Figure 1).

The lawyers for the Lega argued that the message was directed only against radical Muslims outside of Italy and intended to combat the infiltration of radical Islamist ideologies and groups. They framed the case in terms of free speech, asserting that they have the right to propagate their point of view even if it is offensive to Muslims. The legal team for IADL countered that the intent of the billboards was clearly slanted toward portraying all Muslims as terrorists and a threat to society that must be eliminated. Because this assertion is patently false, they asserted, it falls under the heading of defamation and libel which are banned by the Italian constitution. Although the judge in this case ultimately ruled in favor of the Lega's position, it illustrates the more aggressive tactics that Muslims have adopted in recent years to combat prejudice and hate speech in Italy.<sup>24</sup>

A recent study conducted by a team of European researchers drew the optimistic conclusion that the trend toward interfaith cooperation and dialogue "is growing both locally and nationally" in many European countries.<sup>25</sup> This certainly appears to be the case in Italy, where an increasing number of Islamic organizations sponsor interfaith activities and educational and cultural outreach programs to help dispel stereotypes about Muslims. The *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia* (GMI) hold conferences in various parts of the country that engage Christian, Jewish, and Muslim youth in dialogue about religious, social, and political issues. Following the death of Pope John Paul, they rented a bus and joined with Catholic youth representatives to drive around Rome expressing sorrow at the Pontiff's passing and solidarity with Catholics during their period of mourning. The bus tour, called "*Pullman del Dialogo*", was widely covered in the Italian media.

The *Associazione Donne Musulmane in Italia* (ADMI), headquartered in Milan and affiliated with UCOII, has a network of Muslim women who visit schools to talk about Islam and answer questions from students and teachers. An innovative outreach initiative in the Milan area provides after-school lessons in Arabic and Islamic studies for immigrant Muslim children (though the classes are open to any faith and attended by some Catholic and Jewish students). Operated by Dr. Paolo Branca of the Catholic University of Milan and some Muslim volunteers, the program is designed to encourage Muslim families to send their children to Italian public schools where integration can occur more easily, rather than establishing their own private schools that isolate the students,

retard their integration, and create legal entanglements with the Italian Ministry of Education.<sup>26</sup> One of the most unusual and effective outreach efforts is the Dar al-Hikma Cultural Center in Turin, founded by Dr. Younis Tawfik. The center houses a library, an auditorium with a stage, an Arabic restaurant, and a traditional Turkish bath, and offers an ambitious program of lectures, courses, and exchanges designed to promote dialogue and mutual understanding.

#### *Exposure through the Media*

Muslims have made some strides toward shaping Italian public opinion about Islam through involvement in Italian cultural and political life and resulting exposure in the media. Islamic internet sites in Italy have proliferated in recent years, providing Italians with much wider access to information about the Muslim community. Muslim groups have organized letter- and email-writing campaigns to counteract negative articles that appear in newspapers, magazines, and internet sites. Italian scholars, activists and other citizens who advocate increased human rights and civil liberties have often raised their voices in the media on behalf of Muslim causes and in rebuttal to negative stereotyping of Islam. Two Muslim personalities who have received high acclaim in the Italian press are Feras Jabareen, *imam* of the Colle Val d'Elsa mosque near Siena, who is a regular participant on the popular TV talk show, *Porta a Porta*; and Khalid Chaouki, a young Muslim of Moroccan descent who was formerly president of GMI. His candor, charm, and eloquence in Italian have been exhibited during appearances on TV and radio shows and in his own publications.<sup>27</sup> Today there are several Muslims who have been elected to Parliament and participation in political parties spans the liberal–conservative spectrum. Muslim activism in trade unions has become particularly noteworthy. Increasing involvement of Muslims in government, the military, sports, and media will continue to improve the image of Islam and favorably influence public opinion over time.

#### *Political Participation*

Many Muslim activists and Italian pundits have looked forward to the April 2006 national elections and a predicted shift to a center–left coalition in Italian politics. The expectation has been that a new left-leaning government will increase prospects for liberalized laws on citizenship and religious liberty and for clarification of the *intesa* process. Several Muslim informants stated that opposition political leaders have made specific promises to the Muslim community that reform of laws on immigration, citizenship, and religious liberties will be a high priority in their legislative agenda. Optimism among religious minorities was bolstered during the inauguration ceremony of the new Italian President, Giorgio Napolitano, when he publicly expressed his hope that all *intesas*, currently approved or in course of being approved, be completely honored.<sup>28</sup>

Other recent developments reflect growing willingness in government circles to address Muslim concerns. The Ministry of Interior, under the supervision of local prefects in each province, has initiated a series of meetings designed to increase public understanding of the Muslim community. On 10 September 2005 the Interior Minister Pisanu issued a decree establishing the *Consulta Islamica*, a national consultative body comprised of 16 prominent Italian Muslims representing a cross-section of Islam's organizational and ideological branches in Italy. The avowed purpose is to give Muslims a stronger voice in government and to promote greater political cooperation in the Islamic community.<sup>29</sup>

Recent judicial rulings have challenged the legality of the harsh deportation measures imposed on some Muslims suspected of terrorist ties.<sup>30</sup> There is evidence that some local and regional politicians are beginning to question the validity of the 18 temporary detention centers (*Centri di permanenza temporanea*, CPT) instituted by the Italian government in 1998 to control the flow and activities of illegal immigrants. Following riots in June 2006 among detainees at the Turin CPT the mayor, Sergio Chiamparino, expressed his willingness to experiment with new solutions to problems linked to immigration, and other politicians have joined in calling for reform of national immigration policy and even abolition of the detention centers.<sup>31</sup>

With regard to religious freedoms, momentum is gathering, both in Italy and other European countries, in support of the need to rethink the *intesa* system as the basis for church–state relations. Many legal scholars argue that it makes no sense to offer an option for full legal recognition to all religious groups if, in reality, such an option is politically unattainable. Maréchal, for instance, notes that government insistence on religious groups’ providing a united institutional front to achieve state recognition “is not only absent from most legal texts, but in general contrary to constitutional texts in the majority of European countries”. This requirement also conflicts with the general trend in Europe toward de-institutionalization of religious life. Thus, “the tide of opinion [in Europe] is swinging toward a questioning of the representative character of single bodies, and the legitimacy of imposing, even indirectly, such a form. It is a question of whether the state has exceeded its powers when it meddles in this domain.”<sup>32</sup> In sum, the political and legal stars in Italy seem to be aligning propitiously for religious minorities in their struggle for equal rights in society, even though the capricious nature of Italian politics and conservative inertia in Italian society must temper expectations for substantive change in the short term.

### **Some Determinants of Integration**

The internal discourse of the Muslim community relative to the role of Islamic law, *shariah*, will play a dominant role in determining the rate and degree of Islam’s integration in Italy’s religious tapestry. The issue of how to reconcile the traditional religious values, teachings, and practices of Islam with the requirements of an international socio-economic order based on concepts of secularism, rationalism, and pluralism is the focus of intense debate within the Islamic community. In a nutshell, the problem is how to adopt the beneficial aspects of Western technology without being harmed spiritually by the corrosive effects of Western culture. Fazlur Rahman, an eminent Muslim scholar, asserted that Muslims, in dealing with this predicament, must take a fresh look at their history and forge a revitalized Islamic world view: “The heart of the problem which a Muslim must face and resolve if he wishes to reconstruct an Islamic future on an Islamic past: how shall this past guide him and which elements of his history may he modify, emphasize or deflate? . . . [It] lies in the actual, positive formulation of Islam, of exactly spelling out what Islam has to say to the modern individual and society.”<sup>33</sup>

The point to be made here is that the debate between conservative and modernist trends in the Islamic community promises to be complex and bitter, but that integration of Muslims in Italy will move forward as Muslims adapt Islamic law and practice to the Italian European context. The transformation will occur incrementally through a process of adopting innovative hermeneutical methods, reinterpreting the sacred texts for a new environment, and continuing the process of constructing an Italian Islamic identity. Among the Muslim “isolationists” and “external participants” in Italy are many who

hold fast to the conservative Islamist view of inherited *shariah*: that it is God's immutable solution to societal ills "for all times and all places", and that the whole world, including Europe, will eventually submit to Muslim sovereignty. This triumphalist attitude—that Europeans find so troubling and suspect most Muslims of harboring—is reflected in the following comments made by an Italian convert to Islam who is a leader of UCOII at the Segrate mosque in Milan: "Europe itself will become Muslim. When it becomes conscious of the failure of all human ideologies, which are always a product of the dominant classes, it will orient itself to Islam. . . . It will be a process analogous to the christianization of the Roman Empire." He goes on to say that, in pursuing the goals of justice and equality, "any Muslim that may think or operate outside the rules of *sharia* ceases to be a Muslim".<sup>34</sup>

Italy's Muslim "integrationists", on the other hand, see the inherited methodology and corpus of Islamic law as hindrances to Islam's acceptance in the public sphere, arguing that changing times require adapting religious traditions and principles to fit new realities. They point out that *shariah* legal rulings reflect solutions that were worked out in response to specific historical situations from the seventh to the ninth century, and that these answers cannot be transplanted effectively to meet the needs of a modern, pluralistic, technologically based society. The way out of the contemporary Muslim predicament is not to adopt the solutions worked out and codified as law by earlier Muslims in Madinah, or Damascus, or Baghdad; rather, it is to emulate the hermeneutical approach and spiritual energy of the earlier generations who developed creative solutions to the problems of their time based on independent inquiry and original analysis of the Qur'an. Freed from overdependence on historical and legal precedents, contemporary Muslims can formulate their own dynamic responses that reflect the Divine Will as contained in the Qur'an and that address the ever-changing realities of modern life.<sup>35</sup>

In almost every Muslim setting in Italy, one encounters the ideological tension between conservative and modernist impulses and finds evidence of an emerging Italian Islamic identity. The issue of reinterpreting Islam for an Italian context is passionately debated in national and regional conferences, personal conversations, private gatherings, classes and worship services in mosques, published literature, and electronic media (including internet sites). Two recent examples will provide a glimpse of the vigorous discourse in which Muslims are currently engaged. On 16 December 2005 the recently formed (2002) European Muslim Network held its first-ever meeting in Italy at the Biblioteca Comunale Centrale in Florence. Comprised of Muslim scholars and activists from various European countries, the group vigorously explored issues related to Islam in the public sphere. The president, Swiss scholar Tariq Ramadan, stated that differences often exist among Muslims in Europe due to conflicting interpretations of terms—e.g. *jihad* and *shariah*—imported from various Islamic cultures. His plea was to seek common ground by "finding appropriate interpretations of the original *shariah* sources for the European societies in which we live".<sup>36</sup> Islamic values such as dignity, justice, integrity, and reason can form the basis for successfully living and contributing in Western society. Lena Larsen, a Norwegian convert to Islam who wears the veil, *hijab*, and is a university professor, provided a concrete example of Ramadan's point by addressing a key question in the conservative–modernist debate: the position of women. She pointed out that the *hijab* is the strongest symbol of Islam in the public sphere and carries many different and sometimes competing meanings, even for Muslims. "The striking thing", she observed, "is that the *hijab* has become a focus of public debate in Western Europe but that it takes place without the voice of women". Muslim women face challenges in European society but also in their own religious



communities where the ambience of mosques is often intolerant. They are told, “If you don’t wear *hijab*, you are not a Muslim”. Larsen’s conclusion, enthusiastically supported by Italian Muslim women in the audience, was that the lack of a voice for women on this and other issues represents an attack on their dignity and contravenes basic human rights: “Both states and religious communities must institute constraints to allow a woman to choose for herself whether to wear *hijab* or not—it is a private issue between her and God”.<sup>37</sup>

Similar themes of integration and identity formation were treated in the national conference sponsored by UCOII on 6 January 2006 at Bologna and entitled “Native European Muslims: Danger or Benefit?” Participants were urged to become actively involved in local civic life and in building a positive image of Islam; to make their voices heard in the political arena by campaigning for “Islamic friendly” candidates and writing letters and emails to members of the Senate and Parliament; and to be good examples of honesty, hard work, and obedience to national laws (including standards established by the Ministry of Health for purchase, transportation, and slaughter of animals during the Islamic holiday, the Feast of Sacrifice). The president of UCOII, Dr. Mohamed Dachan, observed that Muslims in Italy have been well treated since the first students arrived in 1966 and that Muslims have a reciprocal obligation to contribute positively to Italian life. An example of this effort to demonstrate loyalty to Italy, he said, was his trip to Yemen to help negotiate the release of five Italian hostages. (UCOII, COREIS, and other Islamic organizations had previously been involved in similar hostage negotiations in Iraq and would do so again the following year, 2007, in Afghanistan in the case of Daniele Mastrogiacomo.) A number of speakers cited Islamic sources to stress the need for patience in confronting prejudice and for calm, steady perseverance in pursuing their civil rights. A *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad states, “A continuous drop of water is better than a river that moves fast”. The Qur’anic examples of the Prophet Joseph in Egypt and the first converts to Islam in Mecca illustrate that Muslims in Italy should not expect acceptance right away but will experience suffering and false accusations before achieving integration in society. The main theme explored throughout the conference was the key role that native Italian converts can play as “bridge builders”: explaining Islamic ethical and spiritual principles to Italians; helping immigrant Muslims understand Western values of order, punctuality, freedom of expression, and critical thinking; and acting as intermediaries to help harmonize relations between first- and second-generation Italian Muslims.

Two points of contention arose during the conference proceedings. The question of Islam’s stance on homosexuality came up in the context of discussing the Islamic Anti-Defamation League’s efforts to promote human and civil rights for all Italians. IADL leaders pointed out that their campaign necessarily involves cooperation with many other organizations, including gay and lesbian rights groups, who are seeking equal treatment before the law. They felt that in a pluralistic society such as in Italy, it is critical to join forces with fellow citizens seeking similar goals, even though they might disagree on some points of faith and lifestyle. Those opposed to this collaboration firmly responded that compromises of this nature could be misinterpreted by Muslims and non-Muslims alike as Islamic sanction for homosexuality and were therefore not worth the risk. No consensus was reached, but it was clear that IADL activists were planning to continue their work with an attitude of “cooperating while not condoning”. A second thorny issue revolved around generational conflict in Muslim families over the role of Islam in public life. Some participants frankly expressed their concerns about the growing rift between first-generation immigrants holding conservative, rigid views of Islam and the

emerging second generation of young people embracing more flexible, integrationist tendencies. But other voices heatedly denied that any such generational conflict exists in the Italian *umma*, asserting that these are merely ideas imported from other European countries and planted in the minds of Italian Muslim youth.

As attested in the Bologna conference debate, a crucial issue in the process of rethinking Islam in the European Italian context is the emerging role of the second generation of Italian Muslims. In his assessment of Muslim reform efforts around the world, Ramadan states that “the younger generations . . . are beginning to ‘connect’ to the world” in productive ways that both preserve Islamic identity and promote cooperation and integration based on universal values.<sup>38</sup> Other researchers have noted a similar trend among European Muslims: “The new generation [in Europe] is actively, both consciously and unconsciously, separating the culturally specific from the ‘universally’ Islamic in a process which is re-clothing the latter in a new cultural ‘dress’ which is oriented to the European environment and replacing or, at least, significantly re-interpreting the cultural dress carried over from their parents’ regions of origin”.<sup>39</sup> My research data and other published studies indicate that second-generation Muslims in Italy are also vigorously engaged in the dynamic of reinterpreting religious tradition and reassessing the constructs of Islamic identity. Leaders of the Muslim youth organization *Giovani Musulmani d’Italia* (GMI) stated that their purpose was not to promote religion *per se* but to help build an identity and achieve a status for young Muslims that is compatible with the realities of Italian life. They are the first Muslims who are “*cresciuti*”—raised and/or educated—in Italy, and their goals are more ambitious than those of the first generation: “Tired of being objects of discourse, [young Muslims] enter the public sphere . . . and ask to be recognized as citizens of Islamic faith. It no longer has to do with merely claiming the right to be different (as is still the case with the previous generation) but rather with a demand for equality by young people who feel that they fully belong to the society in which they grew up and now live (in).”<sup>40</sup> According to the president of GMI, the approach is not simply to foster greater respect or tolerance for Muslims, but “to be Italians—to integrate ourselves fully and positively in Italian life. Signing an *intesa* does not interest us so much because it is limited to religious matters, whereas our ultimate objective is to enjoy the full range of human and civil rights guaranteed by the Italian constitution.”<sup>41</sup>

The urgent sense of mission among members of GMI to engage in socio-cultural innovation and to pursue their own path toward identity and integration has resulted in acrimonious relations at times with first-generation Muslims. Founded in 2001, GMI was initially affiliated with UCOII but began to assert its independence when it became clear that there was a wide gap between the adult supervisors from UCOII and the experiences and ideas of the 15–25-year-old members in GMI. The older generation viewed the younger with “suspicion” (as one informant said) because their *modus operandi* and views on a range of social and political issues represented a departure from Islamic tradition. The youth organization, for example, insisted on holding conferences attended by both men and women openly mingling; speaking Italian, not Arabic, in all their communication whether public or private; and sponsoring interreligious activities with Christian and Jewish youth groups at local, national, and international levels. Their innovative strategies to address Islamophobic attitudes in Italy and construct an Italian Islamic identity have included the production of comic strips, theatrical plays, and Islamic rap songs—all in Italian language but with Muslim themes and protagonists. GMI has often drawn the ire of the adult organizations because of the young Muslims’ more liberal and flexible views on sensitive issues such as veiling for women, interacting

with the opposite sex including Italian social customs such as shaking hands, greeting with cheek-kissing, dancing at night clubs, and dating; attending Catholic religion class in school; and deciding how far to go in adopting the values of Western society.

A revealing example of this generational clash is the debate at a GMI meeting over the question of Muslim students' attending Catholic religion class at school. Some felt that it is crucial to participate in these classes so that Muslims understand and respect other religions, while others (primarily the adults from UCOII in attendance) countered that this is risky because young people are not mature or prepared enough to be exposed to other religious beliefs. A young man then made an impassioned statement that seemed to sway the debate to the side of the younger generation. He viewed himself as an integral part of Italian society and by fully participating in school activities had been elected class representative by the other students. "Precisely because I participate in the life of the class, even the religion class, [the students] know that I am Muslim, they know me and respect me, because I have principles. For this reason they trust me and I represent them in the student government."<sup>42</sup> The give-and-take of this exchange, and the boldness and idealism of the second generation of Muslims that allows them to explore alternative interpretations and constructs of identity, augurs well for the future of Muslim integration in the Italian public sphere.

### **The Emergent Status of Islam in Europe**

The history of religion provides many examples of the paradigm of implantation, confrontation, and eventual inclusion that can add perspective to our study of Islam's emergent status in Italy and Europe. As a religion expands beyond its original setting, it encounters new historical, economic, social, and geopolitical forces. The resulting clash between sacred truth and secular reality creates ideological tensions within a religious community that lead its followers to engage in a process of dialogue, reform, and reconciliation. This process of dialectical exchange occurs both between members of the community and between the community and outside forces. Often it gives rise to traumatic, even violent, conflict and frequently leads to schisms and the establishment of breakaway religious movements. History provides abundant evidence that the ability of a nascent religious community to deal effectively with these dialectical tensions is a crucial factor in determining whether it will remain a tradition of limited influence or become one of lasting significance. Historian Diana Eck has compared religions to rivers of water, constantly changing over time as they encounter and adapt to shifting circumstances and new realities.<sup>43</sup> She cites many examples from the US context, including Catholics, Jews, and Mormons, to illustrate that almost all new religious groups follow a similar pattern of integration. There is a contentious early phase in which the new religion is vilified and demonized in the public sphere. Accommodation and inclusion in the religious landscape gradually occur following a long period of ideological and pragmatic adjustments within the group itself, of increasing involvement by group members in mainstream life and culture, and of political and legal reform in the surrounding society.

### **Conclusion**

Contrary to general perceptions in Italy about the Islamic community—that it is monolithic in composition, transient in nature, loyal to foreign interests, and prone to criminal and extremist activity—careful observation of Italian Islam reveals wide ethnic and

ideological diversity, a commitment to achieving permanent legal status and abiding by Italian laws and customs, a desire for some degree of constructive involvement and integration in Italian society, and an effort to construct an identity that is consistent with fully being both Muslim and Italian.

I have argued in this essay that, despite daunting political and social challenges to the insertion of Islam in Italy's spiritual geography, there is much evidence to suggest that integration is already underway and will move slowly but steadily forward to realization. Factors that impede the efforts of Muslims to achieve integration in the Italian religious landscape include the diversity and divisions found within the Muslim community, deep-seated mistrust of Islam in Italian society, media coverage that tends to be biased and inaccurate, and ambivalence on the part of the Catholic Church hierarchy toward Islam and other religious minorities. Among the factors that portend eventual accommodation of Muslims in Italy are the relatively tolerant attitudes among Italians toward immigrants and religious minorities, the increasingly effective measures adopted by Muslims to promote their cause in the public arena, the role of second-generation Muslims in reconstructing Islamic identity for the Italian context, and examples from the history of religion that illustrate how religious minorities in other societies have been successfully integrated.

One keen observer sees the current dynamic in Italy created by the massive influx of immigrants as a social experiment with unknown outcomes but intriguing potential: "Italy is now a gigantic intercultural laboratory in which, along with risks and threats that it would be naive and irresponsible to deny, there are present also remarkable possibilities".<sup>44</sup> It is my view that in this complex and unpredictable dialectic, Italian society will both shape, and be shaped by, its Muslim population in indelible ways. Successful inclusion of Islam in Italy's religious economy will require an ongoing effort of soul-searching and accommodation both by non-Muslim Italians and by Muslims. Italian society must confront deep questions about the central values of their identity as a people: who are we? What does it mean to be Italian in the twenty-first century? Where do we want to go? The Muslim community must also grapple with difficult issues: how do we distinguish between "cultural" and "authentic" Islam? What does it mean to be a Muslim in a religiously and politically pluralistic setting? To what extent can we adopt Western culture without destroying faith and identity?

Whatever answers eventually emerge from the dialogue on these questions, it is clear that integration of Muslims will gradually become a reality, and Italian society and the Islamic community will be permanently changed in the process. According to Ferrari, the effort in Europe to rethink the relationship between religion and public life and to redefine national identities "implies a delicate work of reflection and selection" to determine what is essential and what is negotiable. "This is a long and complex process of transformation but not devoid of precedents in European history of the past two centuries."<sup>45</sup> Klausen's study of the impact of Muslim immigration in Western Europe reached a similar conclusion: "Muslims are simply a new interest group and a new constituency, and . . . the European political systems will change as the processes of representation, challenge, and cooptation take place".<sup>46</sup> And while Muslims from the Middle Eastern heartlands of Islam may dismiss the idea, their immigrant brothers and sisters comprising the religious minorities of Europe and North America are busily engaged in reimagining Islam in ways that will ultimately exert a "boomerang effect", bringing lasting changes in the content and methodology of Islamic tradition back to the immigrants' lands of origin.

## NOTES

1. Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, New York: HarperCollins, 2001, p. 4.
2. See Felice Dassetto and Albert Bastenier, *Europa: nuova frontiera dell'Islam* (Europe: Islam's New Frontier), Rome: Edizioni Lavoro, 1988.
3. Stefano Allievi, "Islam in Italy", in *Islam, Europe's Second Religion: The New Social, Cultural, and Political Landscape*, ed. Shireen T. Hunter, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002, p. 77.
4. For information on Muslim populations in Italy see Table 1 in Brigitte Maréchal, Stefano Allievi, Felice Dassetto and Jorgen Nielsen, eds, *Muslims in the Enlarged Europe: Religion and Society*, Leiden: Brill, 2003, pp. xxiv–xxvi; Augusto Tino Negri and Silvia Scaranari Introvigne, *Musulmani in Piemonte: In Moschea, al Lavoro, nel Contesto Sociale* (Muslims in Piedmont: In the Mosque, at Work, in Social Context), Milano: Guerini, 2005; and Stefano Allievi, "I musulmani in Italia: chi sono, e come ci vedono" (Muslims in Italy: Who They Are, and How They See Us), *LiMes: Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica* (LiMes: Italian Journal of Geopolitics), Vol. 3, No. 4, 16 June 2004. English version available online at: <<https://portal.rccb.osis.gov/servlet>>.
5. Allievi, "I musulmani in Italia" (Muslims in Italy), *op. cit.*
6. See, for example, Tariq Ramadan's discussion of these two "ancient concepts" in Islam as they relate to whether and how Muslims should live in the West in general and Europe in particular. In *Essere musulmano europeo. Studio delle fonti islamiche alla luce del contesto europeo* (Being a European Muslim: A Study of Islamic Sources in Light of the European Context), Troina: Oasi Editrice, 2002, pp. 183–192. Also, Sami A. Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, "The Islamic Conception of Migration", *International Migration Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1996, pp. 37–57.
7. Michael Homer, "New Religions in the Republic of Italy", in *Regulating Religion: Case Studies from around the Globe*, ed. James T. Richardson, New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publications, 2004, p. 203.
8. Excellent sources on Italy's handling of church–state relations and the status of Muslims include Silvio Ferrari, ed., *Musulmani in Italia. La condizione giuridica delle comunità islamiche* (Muslims in Italy: The Legal Condition of the Islamic Communities), Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000; Silvio Ferrari, "The Legal Dimension", in *Muslims in the Enlarged Europe: Religion and Society*, eds Brigitte Maréchal, Stefano Allievi, Felice Dassetto and Jorgen Nielsen, Leiden: Brill, 2003, pp. 219–254; and Alessandro Ferrari, "L'intesa con l'Islam e la consulta. Osservazioni minime su alcune questioni preliminari" (The Legal Accord with Islam and the Consultative Board: Minimal Observations on Some Preliminary Questions), publication forthcoming in *Ordinamento giuridico italiano e tradizione giuridica islamica* (The Italian Legal System and Traditional Islamic Law), Padova: Masilio, 2006.
9. Massimo Introvigne, "'Praise God and Pay the Tax': The Italian Religious Economy—An Assessment", paper presented at the Institute of World Religions, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China, 12 March 2002, available online at: <[www.cesnur.org](http://www.cesnur.org)>.
10. Giuseppe Casuscelli, "Le proposte d'intesa e l'ordinamento giuridico italiano. Emigrare per Allah/emigrare con Allah" (Proposals for Religious Accords and the Italian Legal System: Emigrate for Allah/Emigrate with Allah), in *Musulmani in Italia. La condizione giuridica delle comunità islamiche* (Muslims in Italy: The Legal Condition of the Islamic Communities), ed. Silvio Ferrari, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000, p. 91.
11. Despite the presence of hundreds of small mosques, prayer rooms, and Islamic centers scattered around the country, there are presently only three constructed mosques in Italy, located in Rome, Milan, and Catania. A fourth mosque has recently been approved for construction in Colle Val d'Elsa, near Siena, the fruit of positive relations and a formal agreement between Muslims and government officials at the local level. Muslim leaders see this kind of "mini-intesa" as a promising development that could become a successful pattern for other communities, allowing Muslims to circumvent the obstacles presented by the national-level *intesa* process. I am grateful to Dr. Alessandro Ferrari for pointing out that, while the *intesa* is theoretically not required for the construction of places of worship, in many instances regional and local government officials have granted building permits only to religious groups with a signed *intesa*. This illegal exclusion has already been criticized twice in the Constitutional Court.
12. See the analysis of related issues in "Italy", *International Religious Freedom Report 2005*, US State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, available online at: <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51560.htm>>.
13. The *bozza d'intesa* (draft agreement) proposed by UCOII but not yet approved by the Italian government can be viewed online at: <<http://www.islam-ucioi.it/intesa.htm>>.

14. S. Allievi, *Islam Italiano. Viaggio nella seconda religione del paese* (Italian Islam: A Journey through the Second Religion of the Country), Torino: Edizioni Einaudi, 2003, pp. 48–49.
15. For in-depth discussion of these issues, see Magdi Allam, *Bin Laden in Italia. Viaggio nell'Islam radicale* (Bin Laden in Italy: Journey through Radical Islam), Milano: Mondadori, 2002; and Renzo Guolo, *Xenofobi e xenofili. Gli italiani e l'Islam* (Xenophobes and Xenophiles: The Italians and Islam), Roma: Editori Laterza, 2003.
16. Giovanna Zincone, "A Model of 'Reasonable Integration': Summary of the First Report on the Integration of Immigrants in Italy", *The International Migration Review*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2000, pp. 962–963. The reference for the complete Italian report is: *Primo rapporto sull'integrazione degli immigrati in Italia* (First Report on the Integration of Immigrants in Italy), Bologna: Società Editrice il Mulino, 2000.
17. The latter example was witnessed by the author in January 2006 at the University of Padova, where Lega loyalists demonstrated against the participation of the well-known Islamist scholar Tariq Ramadan.
18. This analysis derives from my readings in primary literature, interviews with Catholic officials, and discussions with several Italian scholars. See also Guolo's excellent chapter on the Church's interaction with Islam in *Xenofobi e xenofili* (Xenophobes and Xenophiles), ed. Renzo Guolo, *op. cit.*
19. A good example of this ecumenical literature is *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Vatican City: The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 1991. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue is the Vatican's central office for promoting interfaith cooperation. Among other things, it publishes a journal, *Pro Dialogo*, and houses the Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims. See also the writings of the former Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, supporting pluralism and ecumenism.
20. Interview with Bishop Michael Fitzgerald, head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Rome, 10 January 2006.
21. For example, several Italian scholars informed me that it is not uncommon for Members of Parliament to receive phone calls from Catholic officials lobbying them to oppose the signing of an *intesa* with "undesirable" groups like the Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses.
22. Giovanna Zincone, "A Model of 'Reasonable Integration'", *op. cit.*, pp. 956–968. The picture, of course, is still mixed. "Dark areas" for immigrants in Italy include high rates of school failure and dropout; discrimination in the housing market; poor working conditions that cause physical and mental illnesses; and "alarming" crime rates, with immigrants comprising 25% of the population of prisons and over 50% of the population of correctional facilities for juvenile delinquents.
23. "Sondaggio Ap-Ipsos: per gli italiani gli immigrati sono gran lavoratori" (Survey Ap-Ipsos: According to Italians, Immigrants are Great Workers), 6 Giugno (June) 2006, available online at: <<http://www.stranieriinitalia.it/news/sondaggio6giu2006.htm>>.
24. Information about this court case was obtained by the author in interviews with attorneys representing both parties at the Tribunale di Bologna, 9 January 2006, and in follow-up emails with UCOII and IADL–Italy. The stated purpose of the IADL–Italy, which was founded in 2005, is "to monitor anti-Islamic phenomena in Italy". See Sherif El Sebaie, "Nasce la 'Islamic Anti Defamation League Italy'" (The Islamic Anti Defamation League Italy is Born), available online at: <[www.aljazeera.it](http://www.aljazeera.it)>.
25. Dassetto and Nielsen, "Conclusions", in *Muslims in the Enlarged Europe*, eds Maréchal *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 534.
26. A similar innovative program has been implemented by the Spanish government for Moroccan immigrant children in Barcelona. See the Moroccan daily newspaper *al-Alam*, 23 December 2005, p. 3.
27. He has been a regular guest on the "Maurizio Costanzo Show" and has recently published a book *Salaam, Italia! La voce di un giovane musulmano italiano* (Peace, Italy! The Voice of a Young Italian Muslim), Reggio Emilia: Aliberti editore, 2005.
28. In February 2007 the Italian government signed draft agreements with several more religious groups, including the Buddhists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Hindus, but the Muslim community was again unable to achieve this milestone. See "Il Governo firma nuove intese con alcune confessioni religiose" (The Government Signs New Accords with Some Religious Groups), available online at: <[www.olir.it](http://www.olir.it)>, 21 February 2007.
29. "Gazzetta Ufficiale", No. 250, 26 Ottobre (October) 2005, cited in Ferrari, "L'intesa con l'Islam e la consulta" (The Legal Accord with Islam and the Consultative Board), *op. cit.*

30. Francesca Paci, “Il Tar dà ragione all’imam di Torino «L’espulsione è un atto illegittimo»”, *La Stampa Web*, 18 Maggio (May) 2006, available online at: <<http://www.lastampa.it>>. The acronym “Tar” in the newspaper headline refers to the *Tribunale Amministrativo Regionale*, or Regional Administrative Court.
31. “Italia. Chiamparino: Cpt sono da sostituire” (Italy: Chiamparino: The Temporary Holding Centers Must Be Replaced), *ADUC. Associazione per i diritti degli utenti e consumatori* (Association for the Rights of Users and Consumers), 4 Giugno (June) 2006, Other articles on this debate are available online at: <<http://www.aduc.it/dyn/immigrazione>>.
32. Maréchal, “Institutionalisation of Islam and Representative Organizations for Dealing with European States”, in *Muslims in the Enlarged Europe*, eds Maréchal *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 157, 182.
33. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 2nd edn 1979, pp. 237, 249.
34. Abdurrahman Pasquini, cited in Angela Lano, *Islam d’Italia. Inchiesta su una realtà in crescita* (Islam in Italy: Inquiry into a Growing Reality), Milano: Paoline, 2005, pp. 7, 125.
35. For the debate on this issue among European Muslims, see Jocelyne Cesari and Andrea Pacini, eds, *Giovani musulmani in Europa. Tipologie di appartenenza religiosa e dinamiche socio-culturali* (Young Muslims in Europe: Typologies of Religious Belonging and Social-Cultural Dynamics), Torino: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2005; Tariq Ramadan, *Essere musulmano europeo. Studio delle fonti islamiche alla luce del contesto europeo* (Being a European Muslim: A Study of Islamic Sources in Light of the European Context), Troina: Oasi Editrice, 2002 (English edition published in 1999 by the Islamic Foundation); and Jytte Klausen, *The Islamic Challenge: Politics and Religion in Western Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. For the Italian context, see Lano, *Islam d’Italia* (Islam in Italy), *op. cit.*, Chapters 4 and 5.
36. Author’s personal notes.
37. Author’s personal notes.
38. Tariq Ramadan, “The Arab World and the Muslims Faced with Their Contradictions”, in *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, eds John J. Donahue and John L. Esposito, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 479.
39. Dassetto and Nielsen, “Conclusions”, in *Muslims in the Enlarged Europe*, eds Maréchal *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 534.
40. Annalisa Frisina, “Giovani musulmani d’Italia. Trasformazioni socio-culturali e domande di cittadinanza” (Young Muslims in Italy: Social-Cultural Transformations and Demands for Citizenship), in *Giovani musulmani in Europa. Tipologie di appartenenza religiosa e dinamiche socio-culturali* (Young Muslims in Europe), eds Jocelyne Cesari and Andrea Pacini, Torino: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2005, p. 139.
41. Interview with Osama al-Saghir conducted at University of Padova, 13 December 2005.
42. Frisina, “Giovani musulmani d’Italia” (Young Muslims in Italy), *op. cit.*, pp. 148–149. My discussion of the dynamic between first- and second-generation Muslims in Italy is drawn primarily from Frisina’s groundbreaking investigation reported in two chapters of Cesari and Pacini, eds, *Giovani musulmani in Europa* (Young Muslims in Europe), *op. cit.*, pp. 139–187.
43. Eck, *A New Religious America*, *op. cit.*, pp. 9, 22.
44. Paolo Branca, “Introduzione”, in Lano, *Islam d’Italia* (Islam in Italy), *op. cit.*, p. 11. Professor Branca and other colleagues at the Catholic University of Milan are examples of Italian citizens working to realize some of these “remarkable possibilities”: in this case, efforts to help Muslim immigrants with challenges of education and social integration. See Paolo Branca, *Yalla Italia! Le vere sfide dell’integrazione di arabi e musulmani nel nostro paese* (Let’s Go, Italy! The Real Challenges of Integration of Arabs and Muslims in Our Country), Roma: Edizioni Lavoro, 2007.
45. Ferrari, “The Legal Dimension”, *op. cit.*, pp. 239, 254.
46. Klausen, *The Islamic Challenge*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.