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# Religious Symbols Made in Italy

MAURIZIO ALBAHARI

During the last Italian electoral campaign, in March 2006, then Prime Minister Berlusconi declared that “we do not want Italy to become a multiethnic, multicultural country; we are proud of our culture and of our tradition.”<sup>1</sup> This article addresses the context, implications and social counterparts of such increasingly heard statements. Italy is currently the country with the highest rate of migrant population increase after the U.S. It has a *regolare* (documented) migrant population of at least 3 million (5.2 percent of the total population), including both EU and non-EU citizens. Of this, “Muslims” constitute 33.2 percent, while “Christians” (Catholic, Orthodox, and other) 49.1 percent.<sup>2</sup>

## Migration and the nation

With one of the lowest birth rates in the world, Italy will face a severe crisis in its pension system unless it manages to attract significant numbers of migrant workers.<sup>3</sup> And while thousands of potential workers have to risk their lives to arrive in Italy—given the paucity of legal channels of migration and asylum—Italian entrepreneurs constantly argue with the national government because the regionally al-

lotted quotas of migrant workers are inadequate to satisfy their demand of cheap labour. Thus, a focus on empirical data and everyday encounters shows a very ambiguous picture. On the one hand, this picture is not necessarily as gloomy as the decontextualized “cultural war” analyses and normative statements à la Berlusconi would suggest. At the same time, class solidarity and critical citizenship wither vis-à-vis national construction and identitarian, cultural, and religious concerns. And migrants, increasingly “becoming” “Muslims” (that is, talked about, represented, and perhaps seeing themselves as such) conveniently function as racialized, gendered, surveyed, and exploitable subjects and workers.

## Locating national controversies

When right-wing Italian politicians abstractly use the improbable rhetoric of the Crusades or draw arbitrary connections between the Ottomans’ brief conquest of Otranto in southeastern Italy (1480–1) and contemporary migration influxes, they encounter very scarce popular resistance. More disturbingly, in the last few years Italy has started witnessing pervasive controversies stemming from the concern with religion and migration. But are Muslim communities or representatives the igniters and active protagonists of these controversies? In November 2006, when Swedish IKEA and other Italian and multinational corporations announced that *presepi* (nativity sets) would be taken off the shelves due to low sales, centre-right political representatives organized a short-lived boycott and denounced the episode as one more example of relativism “paving the way to Islamic extremism.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, 2004 saw the explosion (and rapid eclipse) of a presepe controversy involving Italian schoolteachers and parents (rather than migrant or “Muslim” ones) concerned with the display of religious symbols in a specific public school in northern Italy. The issue was assigned a primary role in the national media, arguably because of the emotional and commercial appeal of interreligious controversies in the first place. The

**While Italian pundits and politicians purport a world of cultural-religious friction, systematic monitoring of the Italian mediascape and extensive ethnographic fieldwork illuminate a far more complex picture. Ambiguous everyday encounters coexist with structural inequality and exclusionary discourses. The periodic controversies dominating the popular media—over religious symbols, migration, and “Islam”—chart moral (and even theologically laden) political visions that function to inculcate new mechanisms of social control and boundary making in Italy.**

problem was championed by the 9 December 2004 TV talk show *Porta a Porta*. With the controversy posed as an attack to the presepe tradition by Muslims, self-anointed secular “defenders” of presepe could emerge in the show, advocating the “rights of Italians” and the incontestability of the traditionally unchallenged display of nativity sets in public schools. They performed the familiar discourse of the preservation vis-à-vis newcomers of identity, culture, and tradition, embodied in public presepe. On the other hand, eminent Cardinal Ersilio Tonini,

paradoxically known for his moderately conservative standpoints, severely attacked his fellow TV guests. He chastised these national government politicians for destroying the country’s future with their radically anti-Islamic viewpoints and statements. Later during the 2004 Christmas season I visited a poster session on migration in a socially engaged parish in Bari, southern Italy. A banner hanging over dozens of fair-trade nativity sets from around the world provided a “Catholic” counterpoint to the self-proclaimed “secularist” anti-immigration and anti-Islamic arguments of the public defenders of presepe: “Christmas is the holiday of an immigrant. Jesus too would be an immigrant today, with his family. There is a deep connection between the holy family and the innocent families of all times enduring trials and suffering.”

Similarly, it is well known that the Catholic crucifix is customarily displayed in Italian public spaces such as schools and tribunals. Yet, the fact that “even among those who are extremely open to immigrants and to other religions the rate of consent to the presence of the Christian symbol is 78%”<sup>5</sup> does not imply that these people automatically agree on the “meaning” of the crucifix prior to its representation, legal enforcement, and cultural understanding. Every “meaning,” including that of *presepe* and of the crucifix, must be investigated, dissected, and analyzed as a socially located and enforced one.<sup>6</sup> Historically, the crucifix is the ultimately open-ended object of vibrant theological debate and two millennia of varied religious practice. At present, redundant statements on its display, ultimate meaning, and essential nature increasingly reduce it to a limited symbol. In short, it is now conscripted as an icon of “Italian liberal-democratic and Republican values,” “national identity,” “universal compassion,” “the West,” and, ironically, “secular tolerance.” As such, it is deployed, most often by non-religious pundits and politicians, in marked contrast to migration and, in particular, the alleged patriarchy, intolerance, and illiberalism ascribed to Islam. In this usage, the crucifix evidently contradicts contemporary Catholic social teachings and becomes an exclusionary tool directed against “atheists,” “minorities,” “Jews,” “Muslims,” and others—migrants and Italians alike.

## Making “others” and “selves”

Shallow controversies, rather than pluralistic and constructive debates, monopolize news-making and public intellectuals’ knowledge production for a short time, until their commercial and ideological expiration. The media present such controversies as matters directly impacting Italians’ physicality, rights, identity, and religious and cultural traditions, now to be “defended.” Television talk shows, in particular, function as arenas for starlets, opinion-makers, and politicians vying for visibility. Here, skirmishes on issues of immigration and religion among a half-dozen guests, such as in the above-mentioned presepe case, become proxies for “public debates,” through which a national public and the Muslim disruptive exception are simultaneously produced. And yet, often local governments at the regional, provincial, and municipal levels are establishing their own policies and understandings of migration and Muslim practice, with “cul-

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tural" exchanges, contingent agreements on specific practical problems, and discursive and pragmatic contrasts vis-à-vis national discourses and policies of immigration. Non-governmental organizations participating in the management of migration show a variety of political referents and agendas. Similarly, in Italian Catholic venues I have encountered extreme variation of opinions and convictions about migration and "Islam," not reflected in sketchy cultural clash arguments. At a conference, for example, Father Mimmo reminded his audience of lay secondary school teachers that "there is goodness inherent in Islam" and that John Paul II once kissed a copy of the Quran.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, another priest, the director of an extremely efficient Caritas facility of primary assistance and sheltering of migrants, told me in an interview that Muslim guests are not allowed to pray in any room of the facility. In fact, he said, that would entitle them potentially later to claim that space of prayer as Islamic.

Despite such doses of scepticism, "first-hand," socially embedded relationships with Muslims have the potential to work as a framework against which knowledge produced about Muslims through the mass media and other desocialized discourses may be appraised and verified. And diverse socio-cultural relations do happen, between persons who might or might not be interested in abstract "interreligious dialogue," but who nevertheless pragmatically interact in the workplace, the parish, the classroom, or the neighbourhood. For many other Italians instead, especially in non-metropolitan and remote areas, the knowledge of "Muslims" acquired through the media constitutes the background informing potential future relationships with Muslim individuals or groups, as the "veil" example below suggests.

Ms. Beba, the director of a Caritas parish centre in Lecce matching job offers with migrant availability, admitted that local elderly people (or relatives on their behalf) sometimes ask explicitly for Christian domestic caregivers, because they would feel embarrassed about "passeggiare [going for a walk] and being seen with somebody with a veil on their head." This example is indicative of the bundled characteristics that are being naturally and superficially associated with Islam and that make it "known" to many Italians through the mass media: the veil is one of them, arguably also as a consequence of widely publicized French debates on the subject. The example also suggests the lack of significance of these characteristics: as elsewhere in other regions of southern Europe, many older Catholic women in Lecce cover their head with black or coloured foulards, in church as in everyday life outside the house. Finally, this example illustrates the essentially social and relational nature of the concern about the appropriateness of "religious" symbols and practices. It is not that clients are uncomfortable with veiled women per se. Rather, they are "ashamed" to be seen with veiled women during the social ritual of *passeggiata* [promenade], taking for granted a collective stigma on the veil that, while pervading dominant discourses, might or might not be empirically accurate.

## Drawing and resisting conclusions

Both "migration" and "religion" (read: "Islam") are often politically and analytically tackled as challenges to the nation-state and the EU. In this view they challenge sovereignty, church-state separation, and amicable relationships and the postulated cultural, religious, identitarian, and demographic balance of Italy, the EU and, in general, of secular liberal democracies. Interesting research questions emerge when such essentially governmental concerns centred on "challenge" are turned inside out. Thus, how is the liberal-democratic, secular, Western national body constructed vis-à-vis "religious" migrants? How is national and supranational sovereignty performed and reinforced vis-à-vis migrants' transgression? In this perspective, then, controversies over "religious symbols," male and female genital modification, *dhabiha* (ritual slaughter), mosque building, and the public display of Catholic crucifixes should prompt analyses of underlying ethnocentric concerns, imperial gazes, and governmental stakes.

In particular, if what is crucial for governments at various levels is not "homogeneity versus difference as such" but the authority and prerogative to define crucial homogeneities and differences,<sup>8</sup> then "religion" is not the object of impossible exclusion, but rather of governmental intervention. Entering and often engendering morally charged controversies on the meaning of the crucifix, the religious normativity of the veil, the appropriateness of the Prophet's depiction and other such complex issues, secular governmental actors increasingly produce a pervasive "knowledge" about such tropes and about the (Muslim) people, beliefs, and religious practices supposedly igniting related problems. Support-

Usama Bin Laden and George W. Bush Christmas figurines displayed in a Naples shop

Image not available online

PHOTO BY MARIO LAPORTA / © REUTERS, 2002

ing a pervasive moral construction and evaluation of "difference," they also draw boundaries defining "the nation," "the public," "Italian civilization," and "Judeo-Christian Europe." Normative, ethical, and even theological arguments are increasingly articulated and disseminated by "secular" governmental actors. In contrast, I contend, social scientists should focus not on the retrieval of the supposed "meaning" or nature of certain "religious" symbols and tropes. Rather, they should engage the social, cultural, and political implications that such controversies and governmental knowledge production have in constituting and reproducing dominant ideas about the liberal-democratic individual, the resulting national community, the feminized migrant, the religious fundamentalist, and so forth. For it seems that these controversies increasingly function as virtual "monuments," admonitions, and warnings on what the nation, civilization, Christendom, and Europe should be. In particular, the ongoing quest for a solution to what being European (or Italian, German, etc.) means is not only an unsolved problem, but ideally an unsolvable one as well. Any final solution would result in further institutionalization of an exclusionary, ethnocentric, and necessarily undemocratic regime of citizenship and membership.

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## Notes

1. *Il Corriere della Sera*, 28 March 2006.
2. Caritas/Migrantes, *Immigrazione Dossier Statistico 2006: XVI Rapporto sull'immigrazione* (Rome: IDOS, 2006).
3. See Kitty Calavita, "Italy and the New Immigration: economic realities, political fictions, and policy failures," in *Controlling Immigration: A Global Perspective*, ed. W. A. Cornelius et al., 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 345–80.
4. MP Luca Volontè, *La Repubblica*, 30 November 2006.
5. Italo De Sandre, "Pratica, credenza e istituzionalizzazione delle religioni," in *Un Singolare Pluralismo: Indagine sul pluralismo morale e religioso degli italiani*, ed. F. Garelli, G. Guizzardi, and E. Pace (Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino, 2003), 115.
6. See Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Man* (n.s.) 18 (1983): 237–59.
7. Tutti diversamente stranieri Conference, Modugno, 17 December 2004.
8. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 267.