



Italy, Islam and the Islamic World

Representations and Reflections,
from 9/11 to the Arab Uprisings

Charles Burdett

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The recent emergence and increasing visibility of Islam as Italy's second religion is an issue of undeniable importance. It has generated an intense and often polarized debate that has involved all the cultural, political and religious institutions of the country and some of its most vocal and controversial cultural figures. This study examines some of the most significant voices that have made themselves heard in defining Italy's relationship with Islam and with the Islamic world, in a period of remarkable geopolitical and cultural upheaval from 9/11 to the Arab Spring. It looks in detail at the nature of the arguments that writers, journalists and intellectuals have adduced regarding Islam and at the connections and disjunctions between opposing positions. It examines how events such as military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq or the protests in Tahrir Square have been represented within Italy and it analyses the rhetorical framework within which the issue of the emergence of Islam as an internal actor within Italian civil society has been articulated.

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ITALIAN MODERNITIES

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To C and C

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Introduction

‘Quale Islam hanno di fronte oggi gli italiani?’ E che immagine dell’Islam si è formata nel loro immaginario collettivo?

— RENZO GUOLO

In an authoritative article, written in the early years of this century, the sociologist Stefano Allievi discusses the emergence of Islam in Italy.¹ The essential point that he makes is that its appearance on the cultural and religious landscape of Italy is a relatively recent phenomenon and that it is one that is indissolubly related to the international migratory flows of the last twenty or thirty years. In contrast with the large and established Muslim communities of other major European nation states, Italy’s growing Muslim population originates from a much more differentiated range of countries and has little to do with Italy’s former colonies: the main countries of origin of Italy’s Muslim population are, in decreasing order, Morocco, Albania, Tunisia, Senegal, Egypt, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Algeria, Bosnia, Nigeria and Turkey.² Allievi argues that, over a lengthy period of time, the development of a recognizable Islamic presence within Italy was not something that was clearly visible and therefore raised relatively little attention in the national media: indeed, it was something of which, for a long time, neither the migrant community nor the host society were fully conscious. In his words, Islam arrived ‘locked in immigrants’ suitcases.’³ Elsewhere in his writing, Allievi affirms that:

Si tratta tuttavia di un fattore in rapida evoluzione: l’islam non è più solo neo-arrivato; è ormai, co-inquilino. Comincia ad entrare in quella che possiamo considerare la ‘fase due’ della sua presenza in Italia: quella della sedentarizzazione, della stabilizzazione, in parte anche dell’istituzionalizzazione, per quanto ancora ad uno stadio relativamente embrionale.⁴

[It is a question of an issue that is evolving rapidly: Islam is no longer only a new-comer, it is now a fellow tenant. It is entering what we might consider to be the 'second phase' of its presence in Italy: that of its establishment, its stabilization, in part also its institutionalization, though this is still at a relatively embryonic stage.]

Though the early stages of the rapid development of Islam as Italy's second religion may not have excited a great deal of comment within the national media, the same cannot, of course, be said about more recent manifestations of the growing importance of Islam within the public space. Italy's growing Muslim population, almost entirely Sunni, by most estimates, now numbers around 1.3 to 1.5 million and its presence has become 'absolutely evident'.⁵ The figure constitutes about 2% of the Italian population and is about half of the average percentage in European countries. The various indicators by which one can measure an institutionalized Islamic presence – whether these are the building of mosques, the formation of cultural/political associations, or the production of books or articles – have attained, Allievi argues, a high level of visibility both at a national level and within more localized communities across the peninsula.

The increasing evidence of Islam as Italy's second religion, as is probably only to be expected, has generated a polarized and often deeply acrimonious debate that, with varying degrees of intensity, has involved all the cultural, political and religious institutions of the country. On one side, the issue of the likely changes to basic assumptions about the nature of Italian cultural or religious identity has given rise to public manifestations of intransigence and the expression of views which, as the journalist Marco Politi points out, are not really preoccupied with Samuel Huntington's thesis of the potential for inter-civilizational strife, but are more concerned with establishing models of inclusion and exclusion within Italy itself.⁶ Both Allievi and Guolo – also a sociologist – have explored the spectrum of reactions within Italian society to the fact that Islam has become a social actor *within* the country.⁷ Allievi points, above all, to the extremist rhetoric of the Northern League and the demonstrations of Islamophobia that have taken place in a series of small towns in the heartland of the party. Clearly, the events of 11 September 2001 gave a particular impetus to the current of anti-Islamic feeling; a current of feeling that has been expressed most prominently by

the writings of Oriana Fallaci.⁸ But if the debate surrounding Italy's changing demographic and cultural reality, and more generally the complexity of the country's relation with the Islamic world, has been characterized on one side by the expression of extreme anti-Muslim sentiment, then on the other side one finds, needless to say, the articulation of more nuanced and informed views, as well as the publication of works that seek to explain Islamic belief and practice to an Italian public.⁹

The nature of the debate that surrounds the issue of the growing importance of Islam within Italian society – a debate that Marco Politi has described as at times becoming 'incandescent' – demonstrates, in the view of some influential commentators, that much work needs to be done to encourage greater awareness of the dynamics of successful inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue.¹⁰ Others have argued that a pervasive sense of crisis, or even of conflict, does at least serve the function of bringing matters of considerable moment into public consciousness.¹¹ If, owing to the forces of globalization, Italy is changing rapidly, then it is perhaps inevitable that the effects of this process are registered at every level of society. What is certain is that Islam, as Guolo has written, asks searching questions of Italian society, of its identity, of its internal coherence and of its likely future development.¹² One might add that any change to the sense of what constitutes the reality of the present brings with it a corresponding, but not necessarily obvious, alteration to the way in which the past of the country is considered.

The debate surrounding Italy's relationship with Islam and with the Islamic world is clearly a fitting object of academic research and it is one that, within cultural and literary studies as distinct from sociology or political science, can be approached from a variety of angles. One can, for example, look in detail at the ways in which the media has confronted the issue; how, in other words, reporting and comment in Italy's leading newspapers *La Repubblica* and the *Corriere della Sera* (or indeed within more politically partial publications such as *Libero* and *Il Giornale* on one end of the spectrum and *Il Manifesto* on the other) have attempted to shape public opinion. A good example of this kind of work is Marco Bruno's work *L'islam immaginato* [Imagined Islam] (2008).¹³ This kind of analysis reveals the deepest levels at which discourse functions and it

can be placed in comparative perspective by looking at the corresponding themes that have recurred both in the print journalism and audio-visual media of other European countries. Such a method of proceeding would, following the injunction that Edward Said makes in his celebrated work of the legacy of imperialism,¹⁴ enable one to study the development of culture in counterpoint.

Another approach – the one that is pursued in this study – is to examine the writings of some of the most prominent protagonists in this debate. A fair amount of work has been done on Oriana Fallaci's 'trilogy' and it has served to shed light on the rhetorical means – the reliance on apostrophe, the coincidence between autobiography and invective – that her works use in order to set up a contrast between her presence within the texts and a stereotyped notion of Islam.¹⁵ But her voice, though it has no doubt been highly influential, is only one of many: there are a myriad of other figures who, though they may not have attained the same kind of attention, have made important contributions to the debate on Italy's relation with Islam and the Islamic world. Every participant in this debate communicates their own understanding of the nature of the relationship between religion and culture, and of the merits, or otherwise, of a multicultural society; they each situate themselves, with varying degrees of explicitness, within the political spectrum; and, in the rhetorical strategies that they deploy and in the series of examples that they draw, they each exploit and/or demonstrate the workings of a range of discourses that run through the whole of Italian society.

The purpose of this study is, through the examination of a range of events and issues, to present some of the most significant voices that have made themselves heard in defining Italy's relationship with Islam and with parts of the Islamic world. It is to look in detail at the nature of the arguments that they adduce, at the connections between different positions and at the depth of the fault lines between opposing perceptions. Though the study draws on a lively field of recent cultural studies work on multiculturalism and migration, it is not set up as a survey of a societal phenomenon but rather as a probing of the rhetorical framework and shape of discourse within which the issue of the emergence of Islam as an internal actor within Italian civil society has been articulated.

In this context, the use of the term Islamic world requires some qualification. In his introduction to *The Islamic World: Religion, History, and the Future*, Ziauddin Sardar begins by defining how the expression is generally deployed, that is as a term that refers to a 'swathe of nations, regions and peoples whose defining feature is adherence to the religion of Islam' (p. ix). But while, as he argues, shared religion is a unifying factor and while unity is a central principle of the worldview of Islam, the Islamic world is far from being a composite whole and should indeed be seen 'at best only a weak connection' that needs to be 'balanced by countervailing principles of unity' (p. xiii): every Muslim community and every Muslim-majority country is conditioned by its distinctive histories and there are few modern nations whose entire population follow only one tradition of Islam. Moreover, as Sardar contends, just as Islam – in common with every religion – is interpreted through the lives and thoughts of its adherents, the Islamic world is not static but dynamic and it is appropriate to see it as engaged 'in a continuous dialogue within its own defined parameters, rhetoric, ideas and ideals'.¹⁶

Insofar as the present study is preoccupied with the ways in which writers, intellectuals and journalists have sought to define Italy's relation with Islam and to convey their understanding of events and circumstances that affect that question, the work refers specifically to those parts of the Islamic world that have been at the very centre of media attention and which have played a significant role in defining attitudes and opinions. The consideration of Italy's relation, over extensive periods of time, with the markedly different configurations of the Islamic world is an urgent object of scholarship, but it is one that lies well beyond the confines of the present work with its explicit focus on a series of texts written at sharply delimited times. That said, one of the aims of the study is to point to how monolithic representations of the Islamic world have been disseminated to large audiences and how such representations have been contested by works that seek to encourage, on the one hand, a complex and differentiated understanding of the Islamic world and which, on the other, seek to break down the very notion that one can speak of the West and the Islamic world as easily identified and essentially separate entities.

The principal focus is, then, on the way in which Islamic communities have been represented over a ten-year period in Italy and, as is detailed below, chapters examine critical and literary reflections on the topic. The question is intimately related to the issue of migration and my analysis draws on the impressive body of scholarship that has been produced over recent years on how the experience of migration has been represented in Italian literature and culture more generally. But, as I have indicated, one cannot address the more specific question of the literary and journalistic representation of Islam in Italy without looking at the wider issue of how writers and journalists have confronted events of such global significance as the attack on the World Trade Center, the 'war on terror', and, more recently, the Arab uprisings. Every writer, critic or journalist who has considered attitudes in Italy towards Islam and Islamic communities refers inevitably to the way in which such events have been represented and the effect that they have exercised. My study therefore attempts to look at some of the most significant books that have been published in Italy on these events: the intention in those chapters that are devoted to looking at the textual representation of 9/11, military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq and at the protests that centred on Tahrir Square in 2011 is to consider what they reveal about underlying perceptions, how they frame notions of culture and belonging, and perhaps most importantly, how they represent human experience. The intention is, in other words, to consider how discourses concerning what we refer to as the Islamic world are, in part, shaped by the way in which well-known observers have sought to reconsider their own identity and the changing context in which they live by looking closely at events that have unfolded across the global stage.

Methodologically speaking, the study applies the techniques of literary scholarship: it looks at the nature of the voice that the author employs, at the recurrence of metaphorical constructions, at the evocation of emotion, at the manipulation of genre. While many of the texts that are the object of analysis are written by well-known authors, such as Oriana Fallaci or Tiziano Terzani, and while a good deal of the writing exemplifies sophisticated modes of fictional and non-fictional communication, the study applies the procedures of textual analysis to a body of material that extends well beyond what would ordinarily be defined as literature. It seeks, in

other words, to analyse in detail works that might be defined as reportage, social commentary or more simply as fact-based publications. It sees texts, whatever their pretensions to the objective or the referential, as cultural practices of signification. In extending the boundaries of what is ordinarily addressed by textual scholarship, the study participates in a wider movement within cultural studies, the aim of which is to trace ideas across different genres and to place a series of voices in dialogue, or in contrast, with one another. The purpose of examining the texts with close attention to detail is not simply to reveal the intricacy with which their rhetorical strategies have been arranged; it is, rather, to uncover the conceptual structure on which those arguments are based; it is to consider the understanding of culture that informs the judgements that the works formulate; it is to look at the constructions of alterity that operate within the writing and it is to examine the notion of subjectivity on which every writer inevitably relies; it is to look at the structure of feeling that underlies the works and, as I have suggested, at the types of emotion that they seek to excite.

All those who have made themselves heard – and naturally the study does not claim to be fully comprehensive – do not simply comment from a distance on the issues involved, but they also use their own sense of identity as a means of exemplifying their arguments. One means, therefore, of developing a deeper understanding of constructions of collective identity – and of the anxieties that are concealed within them – is to look in detail at the techniques of self-presentation that are used by protagonists in the debate or at the ways in which a variety of writers and journalists have posited the relationship between self, society and culture. Generally speaking, because most interventions take the form of journalism or of political commentary, it is easier to focus on the content of a given piece rather than on its mode of transcription – and yet, the autobiographical self often forms an intrinsic part of the way in which an argument is not only framed but in the way in which it seeks to convince.

There are many examples that can be used to illustrate this point, but among those who have commented extensively both on Italy's relationship with the Islamic world and on the increasingly visible presence of Islam within Italy, the journalist, writer and (more recently) politician Magdi Cristiano Allam certainly occupies an important position.¹⁷ Born in Egypt

in 1952, he moved to Rome in 1972 where he took a degree in sociology. His career as a journalist, employed by a national daily, started when he began to write for *La Repubblica* in 1979. He became one of the first journalists in Italy to write seriously on the increasing importance of Italy's growing Muslim population.¹⁸ Immediately after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, he was sent by *La Repubblica* on a four-month tour of the Middle East with the purpose of presenting a picture of the complexity of the contemporary Islamic world. The collection of articles that he wrote was subsequently published by Mondadori with the title *Diario dall'Islam* [Diary from Islam] (2002), while his work as a journalist became increasingly accompanied by appearances on television and on radio. Also in the shadow of the attack on the World Trade Center, he published, with the title of *Bin Laden in Italia* [Bin laden in Italy], an inquiry into the existence of extremist groups in Italy by conducting a series of interviews, across the country, with figures among the Muslim community.¹⁹ Still working for *La Repubblica*, he covered the invasion of Iraq, writing from Kuwait City until the fall of Saddam Hussein.²⁰ In 2003, citing restrictions of his freedom to comment as fully as he wished on the realities of the Middle East, he formally ended his collaboration with the newspaper.²¹ Immediately afterwards, he was offered by the then editor of the *Corriere della Sera* Stefano Folli the opportunity of continuing to work as a commentator on the Islamic world while also assuming the title of *vice-direttore ad personam*. Though before moving to the *Corriere* he had published a number of books, it was while he was employed there – he ceased working for the newspaper in 2009 – that his career as an author, as distinct from that of a journalist, really gathered momentum.

Owing to the topicality of the issues that he confronts in his writing, the prominence of his public persona and the highly controversial nature of many of the statements that he has made, Allam has attracted a great deal of attention from the Italian media. Though he has been employed on the staff of different national newspapers, he maintains a status as a public intellectual, as a figure of high media prominence who is not employed to represent the interests of a particular group within society but who exercises a role as someone who asserts the independence of his opinions, who is outspoken in his views and who is, in his own reckoning, prepared

to reveal uncomfortable truths to those who occupy positions of power. He is adept at exploiting the resources provided by new and traditional media for making his voice heard in national debate and engaging with large sections of the public. Each of the texts that he has published has immediately caused a strong reaction and all of his texts have been extensively reviewed in the press.²²

Even the most cursory consideration of the titles of the books that he has published over the last ten years, all with Mondadori, indicates the importance of autobiographical reflection to his work. In 2005 he published what was perhaps his most important text on the challenge posed by Islamist extremism, *Vincere la paura: la mia vita contro il terrorismo islamico e l'incoscienza dell'Occidente* [Overcoming Fear: my life against Islamic terrorism and the indifference of the West]. It was followed, a year later, by his observations on Italian attitudes to the threat, real and potential, of terrorist action, *Io amo l'Italia: ma gli italiani la amano?* [I Love Italy, but do Italians?]. In 2007 his book *Viva Israele: dall'ideologia della morte alla civiltà della vita: la mia storia* [Long live Israel: from the ideology of death to the civilization of life: my story], appeared and it was followed in 2008 by the narration of his approach towards and eventual conversion to Catholicism, *Grazie Gesù. La mia conversione dall'islam al cattolicesimo* [Thank you, Jesus: my conversion from Islam to Catholicism].²³ His subsequent text, published in April 2009, entitled *Europa Cristiana Libera: La mia vita tra verità e libertà, fede e ragione, valori e regole* [Free Christian Europe: my life between truth and freedom, faith and reason, values and rules], is essentially the story behind his move from journalism to politics. Allam does not engage in the practice of self-narration simply to provide an account of the stages of his life. He writes a particular kind of autobiography, one in which he interrogates the effect that the objective structures of society, religion and culture exercise on the experience of subjectivity. The texts that he has published since 2005, all of which address one aspect or another of the Muslim world and its relation with the West, have attained circulation figures between 80,000 and 120,000 copies.²⁴

Given that first-person narration is so central to the books that Allam has produced over the last few years, it would not be an exaggeration to say that they conduct an exploration of Italy's relationship with the Islamic

world in part through the medium of autobiography. This is not to suggest that the primary concern of his works is to define the process by which he came to assume his actual self or that his texts aspire to the status of literature – Allam writes essentially as a journalist or as a commentator. It is, however, to point out that his works, as is indicated by the majority of their subtitles, investigate, with constant reference to the experiences of the author, the effects of collective discourse on individual consciousness.

Though Allam does not use a vocabulary that indicates an advanced theoretical awareness of the nature of subjectivity, his work reflects on the ways in which the experience of selfhood is mediated through religious or secular philosophies and institutions. His work considers, by its very nature, what Peter Berger famously refers to as the ‘dialectical’ relation between the individual and the socially constructed reality to which he or she belongs. It looks, to use Berger’s language, at the repertoire of identity supporting structures that a given collectivity provides, at how they present themselves as natural or normative and at how the subject, willingly or unwillingly, assumes the roles and identities that society makes available.²⁵ Or one could put this point in slightly more contemporary terms by referring to the work of a number of historians who, following the lead given by Foucault, examine the way in which material environment, cultural convention and linguistic usage create a collective psychological organization in which the individual mind is immersed.²⁶

An important part of the study will, therefore, be to look precisely at the level of reflection that one finds in the texts concerning how cultures, with their identity supporting structures, shape notions of selfhood; or, to put this point slightly differently, how the various authors reflect on the degree to which national, religious, and cultural models are internalized and made subjectively real. Closely related to this issue is the question of how far writers and commentators see personal identity as fixed by cultural formation, or how far they see, in the words of Paul John Eakin, self and self-experience not as ‘given, monolithic and invariant but dynamic, changing and plural.’²⁷ A basic insight of literary criticism is that the content of any text is not independent from the form of its expression and thus, in order to understand how a given writer deploys his or her subjectivity in contributing to the debate on Italy’s relationship to Islam and the Islamic

world, one needs to look in detail at the mode of intervention that they rely upon. Autobiography, travel writing, foreign correspondence all posit different ways of writing about self-experience; by analysing how the conventions of each genre are exploited, one can gain a clearer understanding of how the writing self is enmeshed in what it contemplates.

In a way that is perhaps less straightforward but nevertheless as important, by looking in detail at how the techniques of self-writing are manipulated, one can begin to see how the written self – with its perceptions, memories, processes of ratiocination and emotive responses – is used as a theatre in which issues of enormous political, social and cultural moment are explored both intellectually *and* affectively, thus promoting an understanding of events and circumstances which, despite whatever claims to objectivity are made, is nevertheless filtered through the self's apprehension of its own psychological mechanisms and its own location within a complex discursive environment. Yet, the purpose of the present study is not simply to deconstruct the constitutive elements of one voice or another and to provide, by so doing, an assessment of its relative importance; the purpose of the study is, rather, to add to the depth of our knowledge of the debate that is occurring in Italy by placing the various voices that have made themselves heard in counterpoint – to understand each voice, that is, as it functions as part of a dialogue.

A good deal of critical writing on autobiography insists on the importance of the relational in any narrative of identity formation: how the self relates to significant others, to social constructs or conceptual models of subjectivity is key to an understanding of what Paul John Eakin defines as the deep subject of autobiographical discourse.²⁸ A major concern of the study is, therefore, to examine the grounds for understanding other people that are posited by writing which is predominantly in the first-person singular. By looking in depth at the strategies that are deployed to represent the self's relation to the other, the study attempts to interrogate the nature of the boundaries that people set up between themselves; their dependency on such categories as the familiar and the unfamiliar and the degree to which boundaries are static or susceptible to change.

Borders that separate self from other operate at the most profound and even unconscious level. Indeed, the American literary and cultural

studies scholar Janice Radway, picking up on a contention made by the sociologist Avery Gordon, argues that we should see the unconscious less as something that is enclosed within the subject and much more as the 'life of others and other things *within* us' [italics mine].²⁹ Part of the study, with reference to the theoretical work of such well-known philosophers and cultural critics as Judith Butler, Martha Nussbaum and Tzvetan Todorov, seeks precisely to examine the nature of the emotions that are generated by those who are perceived to belong to traditions of thought, belief and behaviour that are considered to be other. It looks at the intricate construction of people's identity that are present in textual representations of Islam and the Islamic world and at the structure of feeling that motivates such configurations. It considers the mechanics of stereotypical definitions of alterity, but it concentrates on how certain forms of writing do not seek simply to convey a purely intellectual knowledge of other people but to suggest how we might achieve an instant form of recognition. As a whole, the major research question that the study poses is how a set of formally similar works, many of which have attained extremely high circulation figures, place their readers in relation to diversity.

Interest in how notions of self and other are articulated leads necessarily to the question of how people interpret the meaning of culture. Clearly, the significance that we ascribe to the principles that organize both the material and non-material world constitute, in the words of Astrid Erll, 'the principal research object of the humanities and social sciences' but some kind of notion concerning one's sense of the meaning of culture informs everyone's daily practice and it is necessarily an important part of reflection on any form of encounter.³⁰ If, for example, cultures are thought about as rigidly bounded entities or as a unitary sets of practices – whether these relate to language, religious observance, sense of nationality – confined, more or less, to determined geographical spaces and considered to be essentially self-contained, then it is possible to imagine separate cultures being potentially always in friction with one another or indeed to there being some kind of coherence in the theory of a 'clash of civilizations'. If, however, cultures are seen as inherently unstable, as porous and as mobile, then it becomes much more important to understand the processes of negotiation, transposition and translation through which cultures are perpetually

changing. Part of the investigation into the work of writers, journalists and commentators aims to uncover the models of culture that are habitually referred to, the series of narratives that are integral to these models, and the all too real consequences of thinking about culture in one perspective or another. A number of commentators reveal the urgency of thinking seriously about what we mean when we talk about culture rather than falling back on unexamined interpretative frameworks that define the relationship between personal and collective identity. At the same time, part of the study charts the complexity with which new cultural phenomena are thought about and represented.

Insofar as the study looks at perceptions of Islam and the Islamic world in Italian culture, it is concerned with the question not only of what models of cultural and religious identity people hold on to but how what is seen as separate, distinct or different is *translated*. The study is interested, in other words, in the practices of cultural interchange that define sites of exchange or, to use the phrase that Mary-Louise Pratt's work has disseminated, the 'contact zone'.³¹

As is made clear in the acknowledgements, the research that forms the basis of the present work has been financed under the 'Translating Cultures' theme of the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The purpose of the theme, in a world that is increasingly characterized by transnational and globalized connections, is to promote 'understanding and communication within, between and across diverse cultures' by studying the role of 'translation, understood in its broadest sense, in the transmission, interpretation, transformation and sharing of languages, values, beliefs, histories and narratives'.³² The study, both directly and indirectly, participates in the wider movement within the academy to examine cultural interchange and mobility, to explore how the interaction of cultural and societal models prompts the reformulation of dominant ideas of 'national' culture as well as the individual's sense of his or her subjectivity.

In examining in depth how differing world views have been written about and represented, the study aims to explore the multiple levels at which encounters take place: in what spaces they occur; how they engage a notion of the past as well as the present and the future; how they are mediated and to what extent they encourage a radical re-thinking of accepted