

Colloquium

COMPOSITE IDENTITIES

Percorsi tra cinema, teatro, letteratura,
musica, scienze sociali e politiche

A cura di Anna Maria Chierici e Fulvio Orsitto

ISSN 2281-9290
ISBN 978-88-5513-120-9

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LED Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto

Via Cervignano 4 - 20137 Milano
Catalogo: www.lededizioni.com

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In copertina:

Marsha Steinberg, *Open Space* (olio su tela, cm 225 × 170), 1975.

Videoimpaginazione: Paola Mignanego

Stampa: Litogi

Desideriamo ringraziare tutti i partecipanti alla conferenza internazionale *Composite Identities* da noi organizzata nel 2020, ed esprimere la nostra gratitudine nei confronti di Vanessa Meyers e dell'Office of Global Services della Georgetown University per aver sostenuto quel progetto e la realizzazione di questa pubblicazione. Un ringraziamento speciale va inoltre alla pittrice Marsha Steinberg per averci concesso l'uso del suo dipinto *Open Space* per la copertina del presente volume.

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European Islam and the ‘Identity Challenge’: Exploring the Nexus between Integration Policies and Radicalization

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7359/1209-2023-sige>

1. INTRODUCTION: THE MYTH OF THE EUROPEAN IDENTITY IN TIMES OF SECURITY

In the past few decades, globalization has led to the erosion of borders and increased interaction between diverse cultures. This rapid and ongoing process has both fostered innovation and generated tensions as different ideas and beliefs intersect and collide. Interestingly, Europe, which historically viewed the rest of the world as its playground, has now become a prominent region in this transitional phase. Rather than being a collection of nations that primarily emigrate, Europe has become a destination for immigration. Consequently, the continent is grappling with new challenges stemming from its closer proximity to the rest of the world. However, the erosion of national identities, coupled with economic insecurity and a massive influx of immigrants, has left several European governments feeling insecure. This led in turn the increasing success of xenophobic far-right movements across the old continent. This internal turmoil has thrust Europe into a fervent debate concerning the essence of European identity. Discussions about Europe’s physical and cultural boundaries inevitably raise questions about who is considered European and who is not, leading to the creation of multiple spheres of inclusion and exclusion. Efforts to consolidate a Western identity and space have resulted in heightened tensions along cultural fault lines according to the paradigm of the ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington 2000). Divided societies are emerging, where ethnic and cultural groups native and non-native, settle, cluster,

and interact within distinct territorial enclaves to establish zones of familiarity and comfort amid the presence of difference, marginalization, and rejection. Balibar argues that «this unequal inclusion of European apartheid in the process of globalization is likely the reason why the traditional figure of the external enemy is increasingly being replaced by that of the internal enemy» (Balibar 2003, p. 172). Consequently, the prevailing climate of insecurity has crystallized the ongoing debate surrounding the presence of Muslim migrants, especially regarding their perceived failure to integrate into European society to the desired extent by native Europeans.

In many aspects, France can be seen as a microcosm of this situation. Due to various reasons, such as the 2004 ban on wearing headscarves in public schools, the 2005 riots in the banlieues, and the most recent ban of *abayas*¹ in public schools – France finds itself as the center of the storm surrounding Muslim integration. Consequently, it is often regarded as a litmus test for similar issues brewing in other parts of Europe. Europe's clash with Islamic culture can be effectively studied by examining the ongoing debate in France between the French conception of identity as universal and secular based on the notion of *laïcité*, and the assertion of a distinct Muslim identity as a request for recognition in the public sphere.

This chapter delves into the intricate 'identity challenge' linked with *European Islam*, drawing upon the insights of scholars such as Nielsen (1999), Roy (2006), and Amghar *et al.* (2007). It notably emphasizes the varying manifestations of the Europeanization of Islam in two distinct countries: Italy and France. In doing so, it sheds light on how this process intertwines with the social, cultural, and political fabric of the host countries. Ultimately, the overarching goal of this chapter is to elucidate the diverse manifestations of European Islam, ranging from full integration to the dynamics of radicalization, contingent upon its contextual surroundings.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING 'EUROPEAN ISLAM': THE CASES OF ITALY AND FRANCE

In the last decades, the concept of 'European Islam' has caught the great interest of scholars, policymakers, and practitioners concerned with the intersection of Islam and European society. This term represents the dynamic process of Islam adapting to the different cultural, social, and political contexts within European societies (Nielsen 1999; Amghar *et al.* 2007; Cesari 2015; Nielsen, Otterbeck 2015). As such, it encompasses the religious beliefs, practices, and sociopolitical dynamics of Muslim communities residing in European countries and involves a hybrid interplay between Islamic principles and European values and norms, aiming to foster coexistence and integration

¹ The *abaya* is a women's garment used in some Muslim countries, essentially in the Persian Gulf and in European districts where the Muslim presence is dominant or majority.

while addressing the challenges posed by the European context (Salvatore 2004).

The literature on Islamism or Political Islam, which examines the relationship between religion and politics, offers several key characteristics and defining features of European Islam. These include the adaptation to the legal, cultural, and political frameworks of European societies (Roy 2004, 2009); the engagement with interfaith dialogue and the potential cooperation with other religious communities; the rejection of extremism and violence; the development of hybrid identities and practices that incorporate elements of both the Islamic heritage and the European context in which they live (Peach, Vertovec 2016). This may involve the adaptation of traditional Islamic practices to fit within diverse European lifestyles.

Europe's Muslim population is very diverse and is growing. France has the largest Muslim population – as many as 6 million people, mostly from North Africa and making up about 10 percent of France's total population. Germany, with up to 3.5 million, is home to the second-largest group of Muslims, mostly of Turkish descent, followed by the United Kingdom with 1.6 million – mostly from Southeast Asia – and Spain and Italy with roughly 1 million Muslims each². The Muslim community is socioeconomically, religiously, ethnically, and culturally diverse, coming from more than thirty different countries. In addition, European states have taken very different approaches to the way they treat their Muslim minorities – ranging from aggressive efforts at assimilation to policies that border on benign neglect, often resulting in the ghettoization and marginalization of these communities.

In Western Europe, the presence of Islam is mainly the consequence of significant migratory flows in the 1960s from countries of former colonial empires (the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Indian sub-continent), but also from Turkey. In Italy and France Muslim immigration mostly comes from North African countries. Geographical proximity plays a crucial role, with Italy's proximity to North Africa leading to a larger influx of Muslim immigrants. Moreover, historical ties between France and its former colony have also influenced immigration patterns. Italy and France thus share similar institutional responses to migration fluxes. They both aim to encourage the development of «domesticated» Muslim institutions, such as the *Conseil Français du Culte Musulman* and *Consulta Islamica*. However, these institutions often remain unrepresentative and under the control of the state, raising questions about their autonomy. Despite these commonalities, differences emerge in terms of the state's relationship with religion. France operates under a *Concordat* system, tightly intertwining the church and state, while Italy follows a «separation model». This variance is likely to have an impact on the dynamics of Muslim integration. Furthermore, the distinct national identities of these

² See <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>.

countries are likely to play a role in shaping their integration processes. France seeks to uphold a sense of national «cohesiveness», fostering the integration of diverse populations into a unified identity. In contrast, Italy's national identity is marked by a certain «divisiveness» resulting in varied approaches to integration. These factors contribute to demonstrating how the interplay between historical, institutional, and national elements might influence the paths of Muslim immigration and integration in Italy and France.

3. RADICALIZATION DYNAMICS

Part of the literature focused on the challenges posed by European Islam when it comes to the issue of radicalization dynamics in Europe. The radicalization of Muslim migrants in Europe is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has garnered significant academic attention and policy concern in the last decades. Indeed, understanding the nexus between radicalization and integration dynamics is crucial for developing effective strategies to counter extremism and promote social cohesion. This interplay involves various factors, including socioeconomic disparities, cultural tension, political marginalization, and the influence of radical ideologies (also belonging to the European hosting countries).

As outlined by Roy (2006), Islamic radicals in Western Europe can be broadly categorized into three groups: foreign residents, second-generation immigrants, and converts. The initial group comprises young Middle Eastern individuals who arrive in Europe as students, predominantly fluent in Arabic, and hailing from middle-class backgrounds. The second group consists of second-generation European Muslims, including both educated individuals and many who have left school prematurely, often originating from socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. These individuals typically use European languages as their primary means of communication and frequently hold European citizenship. The third category, although smaller in numbers, bears substantial significance and comprises converts, many of whom embraced Islam during their time in prison (Doyle, Ahmad 2019). Interestingly, as emphasized by Roy, members from all three categories tend to follow a similar trajectory of radicalization, marked by a pivotal step where they sever ties with their original social milieu. Almost invariably, they undergo a transformation, adopting a more fervent form of Islam (or converting to Islam) by for instance joining a mosque known for hosting radical imams. Subsequently, they often undergo a process of political radicalization, manifesting their willingness to support jihadist activities (Roy 2006). Interestingly, these individuals often follow a «Westernized» path in terms of their educational backgrounds, linguistic abilities, and even their personal relationships. In other words, they immerse themselves in Western societies. From this perspective, the strength and weakness of Islamic radicals in Western Europe

can be attributed to their limited integration within the broader European Muslim community.

The dynamics of radicalization among Muslim populations in Western countries are influenced by a complex interplay of factors, and one crucial dimension of this phenomenon is the process of adaptation to the European context. Several studies have documented the role of identity struggles, particularly among second-generation Muslims, as a vulnerability to radicalization. Indeed, second-generation Muslims in Europe often grapple with the complexities of a dual cultural identity, growing up in Western societies while maintaining a connection to their heritage (Moghaddam 2005). This duality can create confusion and ambivalence about their sense of the self.

A crucial challenge for many second-generation Muslims is the quest for a sense of belonging. They often find themselves caught between two worlds, not entirely accepted by the host society, and not entirely aligned with their culture of origin. This sense of not fully belonging leads to a profound emotional struggle. The pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture is another common experience, often intensified by societal expectations and discrimination (Peach, Vertovec 2016). This pressure can result in a conflict between their religious and cultural identity and the desire to fit into the mainstream. According to several studies, identity struggle can lead individuals to search for a sense of belonging and purpose. Extremist groups may exploit this vulnerability by offering a radicalized version of Islam as a means of achieving a distinct and meaningful identity (Wiktorowicz 2005). Thus, feeling disconnected from Western society, some individuals may perceive Western values as incompatible with their religious and cultural identity. Extremist ideologies may present themselves as a solution to this perceived clash of values (Bartlett, Miller 2012).

Identities are not fixed, instead, they are shaped through social interactions and influenced by host countries' integration policies. These policies play a pivotal role in addressing social, economic, cultural, and educational disparities. In this regard, challenges might emerge when individuals' culture and religious identity are misaligned with a new society or when integration policies fail to adequately address the multifaceted dimensions of identity and belonging. Indeed, integration policies play a pivotal role in shaping the social dynamics within immigrant and minority communities, which can either mitigate or exacerbate the risk of radicalization. Several key dimensions of this relationship are worth highlighting.

Vertovec (2010) underscored how socioeconomic disparities, including unequal access to education, employment, and housing, can contribute to feelings of alienation and marginalization among immigrant communities. Integration policies that fail to address these disparities can create fertile ground for radicalization. Kundnani (2012) argued that integration policies that promote social inclusion and a sense of belonging are crucial in countering radicalization. Social inclusion initiatives can help bridge divides

between different communities, fostering a more cohesive society. Moreover, policies that respect and protect religious freedom are essential. Restrictions on religious practices or the stigmatization of certain religious communities can contribute to grievances and radicalization³. Finally, integration policies often involve educational programs that can either foster critical thinking and pluralism or perpetuate isolation and exclusion. Effective integration policies emphasize inclusive education that promotes social cohesion (Vertovec 1999). Conversely, radicalization within immigrant and minority communities can influence integration policies in several ways. Instances of radicalization may prompt governments to adopt security-focused policies, which can stigmatize entire communities. Moreover, radical incidents can lead to shifts in political discourse and policymaking, potentially resulting in policies that prioritize security over integration (Roy 2006).

4. «LES VALEURS DE LA REPUBLIQUE»: THE FRENCH ‘ASSIMILATION’ MODEL

France is home to the largest Muslim population in Western Europe. Most Muslims in France are Arabs and come from former colonies in North Africa, notably Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. Muslims living in France today do not represent one coherent community. They are divided by traditions attached to their countries of origin, by language, and by ethnic background. Roughly 2 million of France’s 6 million Muslims are French citizens. The French policy of integration is known as the «assimilation model». Rooted in the principles of *laïcité* and the idea of a unified French identity, this model emphasized the complete integration of individuals from diverse backgrounds into French society. In other words, in contrast to the UK multicultural model – which acknowledges and embraces cultural and religious diversity within society – the assimilation model encourages immigrants, including Muslims, to adopt the values, language, and culture of the host country. While the intention of this approach is to foster a sense of national unity and equality among all citizens, it has faced criticism for its potential to marginalize religious and cultural identities, especially within Muslim communities. Indeed, the French legal principle of *laïcité* has increased discrimination against Muslims in France by prohibiting many forms of Muslim religious expression (Dille 2023). *Laïcité* – intended as the complete separation of religious life and civic life – can trace its legal roots back to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, a document produced in 1789 during the French Revolution⁴. This declaration established that no one could be disturbed by their religious opinions insofar as they did not disrupt the public. However, the complete

³ See Bleich 2011.

⁴ See <https://www.elysee.fr/en/french-presidency/the-declaration-of-the-rights-of-man-and-of-the-citizen>.

separation of church and state occurred in 1905 under a law that established that the state could not recognize or fund any religion. The current Constitution passed in 1958, prioritizes the concept by establishing in its first article that France is a secular republic. Although Muslims have lived in France for centuries, the application of *laïcité* specifically to Islam was not a subject of national debate or attention until 1989. That year in a northern French town named Creil, the schoolmaster suspended three Muslim girls for refusing to take off their hijabs on the grounds that the hijab was a religious symbol that was incompatible with a secular public school. This situation sparked a national debate, with multiple other schools following suit. A national court heard the case, and it was determined that schools could determine for themselves whether or not they would expel students who wear a hijab. This legal precedent was expanded upon by a 2004 law that determined that all public schools should forbid their students from wearing religious symbols, including the *hijab*⁵.

In 2016, several French municipalities implemented a controversial ban on the burkini, a full-body swimsuit worn by some Muslim women. This ban was justified on the grounds of secularism and public safety, especially in light of terrorist attacks that occurred in the country in 2015. However, it was widely criticized for targeting Muslim women and restricting their freedom of choice in clothing. The ban was seen as a symbol of Islamophobia because it stigmatized a specific religious practice and contributed to the marginalization of Muslim communities. More recently, in the summer of 2023, after just one month in office, French Education Minister Gabriel Attal decided to ban Muslim *abayas* in public schools, declaring that attending school in an *abaya* was a «religious gesture» and as such it violates France's strict secular laws in education⁶. It is worth noting that the assimilation model is intertwined with a government that appears to clash with the very concept of *laïcité*. The French integration policy aimed at the Muslim population and mainly driven by anti-terrorism concerns has primarily followed a centralized and top-down approach including effort to monitor and regulate religious practices. A recent notable example is President Emmanuel Macron's announcement in 2020 of plans to establish an accreditation system for imams. Critics from leftist segments of the political spectrum and civil society argued that this decision was an anachronistic move, like a secular government's attempt to create a Muslim 'clergy' with a 'republican' label. Furthermore, in 2021, driven by the continued influence of the President of the Republic, the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) adopted the *Charter of Imams*, which sets out a frame-

⁵ See <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2018/07/27/01016-20180727ARTFIG00053-l-affaire-des-foulards-de-creil-la-republique-laique-face-au-voile-islamique.php>.

⁶ See <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230827-french-education-minister-announces-ban-on-islamic-abayas-in-schools>.

work for religious leaders of the Muslim faith to transform Islam in France into an 'Islam of France'⁷.

Several studies have warned that acceptance by Muslims of the «republican ideal» does not necessarily lead to their assimilation into French society, as this approach is rather perceived as widespread discrimination against North Africans and other Muslims who seek employment in France (Franz 2007). Few Muslims are visible in the top levels of French politics, media, the judiciary, business, and the civil service. There are no Muslims in the French parliament. The percentage of Muslims who fail to finish secondary school appears to be considerably higher than that of non-Muslims. Racist violence also has been rising in France. In 2003, there were 232 recorded acts of violence against Muslims; that number rose to 595 in 2004. Extreme right-wing groups, such as the *National Front Party*, were responsible for most of these acts (Franz 2007).

Although the vast majority of Muslims in France endeavor to integrate, some cohorts, particularly members of the second and third-generation French Muslims brought up in housing projects in the suburbs, resent mainstream French society. Many of these Muslims consider themselves as being apart from France. Members of this group do not view themselves as French, but rather as Muslim, in a very cultural sense. These individuals choose the Muslim identity because, on the one hand, their attempts to assimilate and to achieve social mobility have failed and thus they have been unable to overcome the identity ascribed to them by the majority society. On the other hand, to base one's identity on being Muslim allows these individuals to express their resentment in a cohesive way, not the least because their host society has provided them with this marker to begin with. These Muslims are not likely to vote and are alienated from French culture and society. Their mosque attendance, however, is also spotty, as is the likelihood that many will observe other Muslim traditions, such as fasting during Ramadan and avoiding alcohol. Instead, for this group Islam represents a cultural rather than a religious marker that allows members to see their socioeconomic disadvantages as an indicator of their moral superiority. Many in this group do not think it is possible to consider oneself both Muslim and French. To a large part, this conflict between being Muslim and being French is grounded in the clash between the traditions of the French Republic and the reality on the ground in the suburbs of French cities (Franz 2007).

Indeed, beyond the issue of the so-called «positive discrimination» (Boéton 2003), France has faced criticism for socio-economic disparities among its immigrant populations, particularly in the banlieues such as Saint-Denis, Bobigny, and Bagnole where many Muslim migrants reside. Despite significant investment in urban renewal programs, disparities in education and employment persist. High youth unemployment rates and limited access

⁷ See <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/france-islam-macron-imam-charter-finalised-tensions>.

to quality education have contributed to feelings of exclusion among some Muslim youth, making them more susceptible to radicalization. According to a statement from a second-generation young member of the Islamic community in Saint-Denis, French policies mainly driven by counterterrorism objectives rather than integration efforts seem to lead to a sense of frustration and strong resentment towards the Republic: «I hate France. France is a true terrorist power disguised as a democratic country. France is slowly killing us as a community. To become someone who is feared, if not respected, one must be openly Muslim. Islam liberates from the domination of the French society. That's why I stopped drinking and smoking, and I started to read the Qur'an. We will take revenge, inshallah»⁸.

5. THE ITALIAN INTEGRATION MODEL: A DECENTRALIZED APPROACH AND VARIEGATED FORMS OF EUROPEAN ISLAM

In Italy, the presence of Muslim communities is relatively recent compared to France, with a growing population primarily due to migration and asylum seekers. In terms of religious freedom Italy has a more permissive approach than France, allowing religious attire and practices in public spaces. However, challenges exist, especially in recognizing Islam as an official religion. While there are legal protections for religious freedom, there have been debates about the construction of mosques and the availability of halal food options.

The Italian decentralized approach to integration relies on the effort of single municipalities. For instance, Milan has implemented successful local programs that emphasize intercultural dialogue, diversity promotion, and the provision of social services to immigrant communities (Barberis *et al.* 2014). However, the lack of a consistent national integration framework has led to varying degrees of social inclusion across the country, contributing to disparities in integration outcomes.

In the city of Rome, the *Mosque al-Huda*, in Centocelle's neighborhood, is part of an intercultural network also involving church and the Sant'Egidio community⁹. Moreover, the mosque is a religious and social hub that participates in projects promoted by Community Organizing Onlus and aimed at creating a more inclusive urban space, involving schools, parishes, neighborhood committees, senior centers, and immigrant associations. The difficulty of social inclusion Mohamed Ben Mohamed knows it very well: «I arrived in Italy 20 years ago. I had political asylum and immediately began studying Italian: first at the Centro Astalli, which took me ten months, during which I formed a deep friendship, which lasts to this day, with the then president, Father

⁸ Author's interview, Saint-Denis, Paris, January 2020.

⁹ See <https://www.radiosapienza.net/luoghi-culto-dialogo-sul-territorio-iniziativa-condi-vise-la-comunita/>.

Francis. Then I continued studying at the Evangelical Church and Caritas. My family joined me two years after my arrival. It was not easy»¹⁰.

Contrary to France, Italy employs a decentralized approach to socio-economic, cultural, and religious inclusion, with regions and municipalities playing a substantial role in implementing integration initiatives. While Italy's integration policies are also characterized by socioeconomic disparities, its approach varies from that of France due to the prominence of local initiatives that frequently partner with NGOs. However, the informal labor market and labor exploitation, especially in Southern regions of the country, remain a significant challenge for migrants (Lucht 2011; Melossi 2021; Dines 2023). Italy's approach to inclusive education also varies across regions. Some municipalities have implemented programs to support the educational needs of immigrant children, such as schools in Milan providing special language support and promoting activities that encourage interaction between Italian and immigrant students; while other municipalities, especially Southern cities in Calabria and Sicilia struggle to provide adequate resources due to the lack of funding. Overall, in contrast to France, Italy exhibits significant geographical and socioeconomic diversity across its regions, resulting in varying integration experiences among the Muslim population. This diversity serves to prevent the formation of homogeneous communities characterized by anger and frustration, which are more widespread in the French banlieues and that in turn might evolve into radicalization dynamics.

Based on this scenario, the Muslim community in Italy reflects at least three different ways of articulating the relationship between the identity of the Community and Italian citizenship. First, there is the position of those who support the need to respect Italian law always, in every case. Then there are those who aspire to the gradual achievement of *sharia* (Islamic law) for the Muslim minority (particularly in family law). Lastly, there are those who assert sharia supremacy and who thus hope for the extensive and integral application of religious law (Conti 2018; Mezzetti, Ricucci 2019). The first group advocated unwavering adherence to Italian law under all circumstances as, contrarily to the French context, it is argued that Italian legislation does not hinder Muslims from practicing their religion and emphasizes the importance of maintaining social cohesion by avoiding demands for distinct legal systems for each community. Abdellah Redouane, secretary-general of the Grand Mosque of Rome, maintains that *sharia* for the Muslim minority will only be possible when European societies have reached a certain degree of maturity and social cohesion, thereby allowing the fear and mistrust currently characterizing them to be overcome (Conti 2018). According to the second group Muslims should safeguard their Islamic identity and respect their creed without undermining social cohesion in Italy. To such end, the president of the An-Nour Islamic Centre in Bologna clearly distinguishes social laws from family law (Conti

¹⁰ Author's interview with the imam M. Ben Mohamed, Roma, December 2019.

2018). Finally, the third group is primarily focused on the maintenance of a strong Islamic community, with a solid identity. As stated by the imam of the al-Huda Mosque in Rome: «The effort we are undertaking aims to nurture the Muslim religious identity as a cultural essence. What truly matters is our common ground, the Islamic identity, which binds us together. That's why we strive to educate individuals to steer away from adopting an Italian lifestyle and instead choose the path guided by the faith»¹¹.

In essence, there is a prevailing trend marked by a growing generational divide within the Islamic community in Italy, resulting in shifting identities. Until the 1990s, the religious affiliation of Muslim migrants who came to Italy generally remained confined to the private sphere. It was only after the recomposition of the family unit that they began to organize themselves, publicly manifesting their religion. This process was marked by the evolution of the idea of 'community', which is now being challenged by a new generation of Muslims who aspire to actively participate in the society in which they live. The opening of the first prayer halls in the early 1990s represents the first faint evidence of the presence of Islam in the Italian public space and marks the beginning of the second phase of the migratory cycle, that of immigrant stabilization and family reunification. Beginning to realize that their presence was stabilizing, during the 1990s some of the Muslims resident in Italy began to organize themselves and manifest their religion publicly, making official requests to public institutions or simply becoming the object of reflection, debate, and confrontation. It was during this period that, in the wake of what had happened in other European countries where Islam had been present for longer, migrants of Islamic origin began to see themselves, but also to be seen and named, according to their religious affiliation, which became the identifying criterion of their otherness. This process is particularly accentuated after September 11th, 2001, when anti-Islamic discourses began to prevail throughout Europe, while Italians discovered that the presence of Muslims is no longer temporary, and that Islam is now the country's second religion.

The 2000s mark above all the emergence of a new generation, born and raised in Italy, which with increasing insistence questions the vision of their fathers, who tend to reproduce the ways of life and behavioral codes of their countries of origin, speak Arabic rather than Italian and think of return rather than integration in Italy. Compared to their parents, the new generation stands out not only because it grows up in Italian schools, attends universities, and creates associations, but above all because it clearly aspires to participate in the social and political life of the country it feels is its own, whose cultural and linguistic codes it manages. The emergence of this new generation, which nevertheless remains relatively weak and marginal in the definition of Italian Islam, provokes in practically every community or mosque on Italian territory a confrontation between those who claim the need to maintain a certain

¹¹ Author's interview, Roma, December 2019.

degree of separateness from ‘Italians’ in order to protect an identity felt to be under threat, and those who believe in the need to become an integral part of the society in which they live and in which their children are growing up. This tension, which runs through mosques, but often also through families, if not individuals, manifests itself particularly in the difficult and contradictory redefinition of the meaning attributed to ‘community’. This redefinition involves the relationship with the rest of Italian society, but also the sense of belonging and, ultimately, individual and collective identity. At stake is the very meaning of being Muslim in a non-Islamic society (Conti 2018).

6. CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an exploration of the intricate dynamics surrounding European Islam, with a particular focus on Italy and France as illustrative case studies. The debate surrounding the essence of European identity has led to the creation of multiple spheres of inclusion and exclusion. Within this context, the presence of Muslim communities has been a central point of contention, particularly regarding their integration into European societies.

Starting from the assumption that identities are not static yet socially constructed, this chapter discussed how integration policies can shape diverse manifestations of European Islam. In other words, European Islam presents diverse challenges according to the different contexts, as exemplified by the divergent outcomes in France and Italy. France’s assimilation model, rooted in the principle of *laïcité*, has emphasized the complete integration of immigrants into French society, aiming to foster a unified identity. However, this approach has faced criticism for its potential to marginalize religious and cultural identities, especially within Muslim communities. While this approach is intended to ensure religious freedom, it has been controversial in its implementation. Restrictions on religious symbols, such as the ban on face-covering veils in public spaces, have been contentious issues, raising questions about the balance between secularism and religious freedom. In contrast, Italy has adopted a more decentralized approach to integration, with regions and municipalities playing a substantial role in implementing initiatives. Data show, in comparison with the French context a less conflictual attitude among the Muslim communities, notwithstanding some challenges. Indeed, the Italian model of integration, while permitting religious attire and practices in public spaces, has also its own set of challenges, including the recognition of Islam as an official religion.

The chapter has delved into the nexus between the identity construction and radicalization dynamics among Muslim populations in Western Europe, highlighting the complex interplay of factors such as economic disparities, cultural tension, and socio-political marginalization which are regulated by integration policies. In this regard, it has emphasized how identity struggles,

particularly among second-generation Muslims, can be a vulnerability to radicalization. In this regard, it has suggested how the divergences between the French and the Italian context are likely to shape radicalization dynamics. It is also crucial to acknowledge that the presence of radicalization practices within parts of Muslim communities can influence the nature of European integration policies, potentially leading to security-focused measures which in turn are likely to stigmatize entire communities, thus fuelling a vicious circle of anger and frustration. Understanding this interplay and the abovementioned variations is essential for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to navigate the complex terrain of identity, inclusion, and social cohesion in an increasingly interconnected world.