

## Article

# Training of Imams, Murshidat and Muslim Religious Leaders: Experiences and Open Questions—An Overview of Italy

Valentina Schiavinato \*  and Mohammed Khalid Rhazzali \* 

Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padova, 35123 Padova, Italy

\* Correspondence: valentina.schiavinato@unipd.it (V.S.); khalid.rhazzali@unipd.it (M.K.R.)

**Abstract:** Muslims in Italy are an increasingly large and relevant part of the social fabric, although their social condition is still characterized by a “precarious” status. This is explained by a relationship with State institutions that is not yet fully defined in formal terms and by resistance to legitimizing their presence in the public space. In addition, international events have led to the spread of a securitarian political rhetoric and to the intensification of “control” devices on the organized forms and public manifestations of Muslim religiosity. One issue that has concerned political interlocutors has been the training of “imams”. This paper presents the Italian case of training “on” and “of” Islam, analyzing it as a contested field, albeit in a not open and hostile form, between the different social and institutional actors, that is Italian universities, Islamic organizations and transnational Islam and Islam “of the States”. It then analyzes the approach that has been developed and experimented by an Italian State university for the training of imams and murshidat, in collaboration with Italian Islamic organizations and some universities in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation countries, and it also discusses how it fits in as a possible innovative model among the various “assemblages” that have emerged in Europe in recent years.

**Keywords:** Islam in Italy; imam training; imam and murshidat; religious field



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## 1. Introduction

Over the past 50 years, Italy, traditionally a Catholic country, has progressively transformed into a country characterized by significant religious diversity (Pace and Rhazzali 2018). This is certainly not a new phenomenon for a territory that has historically represented a crossroads in southern Europe, between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean and between Western European countries and those of the Near and Middle East in particular. However, this diversity has seen an increase and relative stabilization with the incoming migration processes of the last three/four decades (Allievi 2018). To date, no definite data are available on the presence of Muslims in Italy, but only estimates, calculated on the basis of various criteria, including the religious composition in the country of origin. The most recent estimates, elaborated by Cesnur (Center for Studies on New Religions; Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2023), reveal that approximately 4.3% of Italian citizens would identify with religions other than Catholicism. This percentage is estimated to rise to over 10.5% when considering the entire resident population (almost 59 million people), thus including migrants. The most represented “religious minority” is the Muslim one, mostly Sunni, which would amount to a total of approximately 2,285,000 people, corresponding to 3.9% of the resident population (ibid.). Among them, 566,000 are assumed to have Italian citizenship and 1,719,000 are estimated to be migrants (ibid.). According to other estimates (Ciocca 2023), Muslims in Italy would number over 2.7 million people (4.7% of the residents), mostly (80% of the total) of descent from 10 countries: Morocco, Albania, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Senegal, Tunisia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Gambia.

The increase in the Muslim presence in Italy has led, among other effects, to the emergence of new educational needs and, in response to them, to the implementation of

educational and training actions by several social and institutional actors, in collaboration or competition with each other. When speaking of education, we can trace different types of offers that can be distinguished based on the recipients, the contents and the promoters. The most appropriate and effective distinction we can propose, from an analytical point of view, is between training “on Islam” and training “of Islam” (Schiavinato 2017), thereby using a lexical simplification that, nonetheless, suggests a significant and meaningful representation. It is based primarily on the target audience, which may be “external” or “internal” to the Muslim communities in Italy. Interwoven with this are other criteria of differentiation, referring to the covered content and the promoting subjects, to outline a wide range of possible training and religious education offers.

On the one hand, training “on Islam” refers to those courses, addressed mainly to non-Muslim participants, that aim to offer a knowledge of Islam as a religion, its principles and foundations, its historical and cultural roots, and the changes it has undergone over time and in different territorial contexts. The kind of knowledge being offered, and the methods of delivery depend on the adopted approaches, which may be religious studies, historiography, cultural studies, or social sciences. The training style and the level of specialization also depend on the promoters and the context. The structured education in the Italian university system (bachelor’s, master’s and higher education courses) has focused mainly on the study of the foundations and historical changes of Islam, but it has also addressed the relationship with the contemporary world and its development in Muslim-majority societies and in those where Islam is not a “historical” or prevalent religion, as in most European countries. Seminars and training courses of a popular nature, on the other hand, appear to be aimed at fostering greater basic knowledge and deconstructing prejudices and “suspicions” in the general population. Lastly, more specific thematic in-depth courses are provided by cultural or religious organizations and associations and are aimed, for example, at professionals within the framework of the so-called continuous training, whether compulsory or not (for public service sectors and private sectors linked to the international economy and finance).

On the other hand, a new field of education has emerged, which could be defined as training “of Islam” (Schiavinato 2017). It is aimed at an “internal” target and linked, therefore, to the emergence of a new portion of the population who is interested in entering the education circuit, both as the addressee of educational action, designed for all or specifically targeted, and as a proactive player in the “market” (Berger 1967) of national and international supply. These new target participants may be, in a broader sense, people who identify with Islam, as in the case of events and meetings devoted to specific doctrinal topics, but also in the teaching of Islam to children or young people or a more specific recipient audience composed of community leaders, imams and other Muslim authorities and religious actors.

This article enters the scholarly debate around new arrangements for the training of Muslim religious personnel implemented in the European context. Over the last 15 years, scientific discussions and research on the training of imams, “chaplains”, and Muslim religious leaders in Europe have increased (Abu Dardaa et al. 2008; Drees and van Koningsveld 2008; Husson 2007; Johansen 2006). They analyze experiences conducted in academic settings (Berger 2021), those proposed by mosques, associations, and private Islamic institutes (Groeninck 2020), and the “mixed” ones that are carried out in collaboration between universities and Islamic organizations (Scott-Baumann and Bunglawala 2020). Some publications adopt a comparative perspective or are conceived as a collection of national studies (Vinding et al. 2020; Hashas et al. 2018; El Asri 2015). Other papers focused on individual local and national experiences (e.g., Sözeri et al. 2019; Boender 2013; Ghaly 2010 for the Netherlands; Rea 2016 for England; Fedele 2016 for France; Larsson 2014 for Sweden; Botti 2017; Schiavinato 2017 for Italy). Some authors have recently described these new educational opportunities in terms of “assemblages” (Groeninck and Boender 2020), i.e., as devices that are difficult to categorize among the alternatives outlined in public and political discourses that, in an essentializing manner, delineate a rigid dichotomy

between forms of “secularized education about Islam” (ibid, p. 2), offered mostly by public institutions, also in a manner functional to securitarian concerns, and “religious education into it” (ibid.), proposed by Islamic organizations and aimed at theological teaching.

In this article, we will analyze the stakes that religious education “in Islam” poses for the various social and institutional actors operating in this field. We will focus on a case study of a recent training program for imams, murshidat, and Muslim religious leaders that has been developed and implemented with the active involvement of the authors of this contribution. It will be presented and analyzed as a new challenge and a new model on a national and international level.

The article can be regarded as a kind of “auto-ethnography” (Bochner and Ellis 2022; Ellis and Bochner 2020) or “opportunistic research” (Riemer 1977), since, similarly to other publications on this topic (Berger 2021), it focuses on the training courses realized with the active involvement by the authors of this paper, in collaboration with other colleagues. A reflexive approach was therefore adopted to analyze the considerations and choices made by the authors themselves in the process of designing and implementing the courses. In particular, the reflections addressed the aspects of continuity and difference with respect to other training courses previously realized by the same academic group or by other subjects.

As it will be explained later in the text, we refer here to an Advanced Training Course for Imams and Murshidat and three lifelong learning Training Courses for Muslim religious personnel (a general course for Imams and Muslim Ministers of Worship, a Training Course for Imams and Muslim Ministers of Worship operating in the Prison Context, and a Training Course for Imams, Murshidat and Muslim Minister of Worship operating the Hospital Context<sup>1</sup>). These have been offered at the University of Padova and financed by the Italian Ministry of University and Research as part of a broader inter-university collaboration project on a fund for initiatives to counter violent radicalization. The involvement of the authors unfolded at all stages of the design and implementation of this training offer. In particular, the second author oversaw the project design and negotiation phases with institutional stakeholders and Islamic organizations and actively directed the course devoted to the prison context. The first author collaborated in defining the teaching plan and coordinating the training activities, being in direct contact with participants as well as teaching faculty and speakers.

The empirical data referred to in this article were collected in the course of a multi-year action–research<sup>2</sup> project, of which the training activity here examined can be considered as an integral element, in other words, as the action part related to the research. The research was conducted with qualitative methods, including the collection and analysis of formal and informal documentation<sup>3</sup>, ethnographic observation and interviews<sup>4</sup>, the final satisfaction questionnaire about the course filled by the participants on the Advanced Training Course and the questionnaires on initial expectations regarding the course compiled by the participants in first editions of two imam training courses<sup>5</sup>.

The ground of the training “of Islam” is therefore described and analyzed here as a “contested field” (Bourdieu 1971; Guolo 2005; Di Motoli 2017; Rhazzali and Di Mauro 2022) between the different social and institutional actors involved in the conception and experimentation of new formulas: the Islamic organizations in Italy, the so-called transnational Islam and the Islam “of the State” (or “of the embassies”) and the public university. The actors involved in the struggle for hegemony experience the constraints produced by the interaction with their organizational fields (Di Maggio and Powell 1983), in relation to similar fields on an international scale, but also by the “institutional isomorphism” that ensues (Powell and Di Maggio 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1977), through which “standard” operating models tend to be imposed and generalized.

## 2. Religious Education in Italy: Legal Framework and Institutional Practices

Before describing the articulation of the training offer in Italy and analyzing the “assemblages” (Groeninck and Boender 2020) that have emerged in recent years, it may be worth describing the legal–institutional framework and the peculiarities of the Italian

system that contribute to constructing and defining the specificities of the Muslim religious personnel training sector in Italy.

### *2.1. The Legal and Institutional Framework of Islam in Italy: A “Special Observed” with a “Suspended” Status*

From a political standpoint, Italy is characterized by a more general delay in the recognition of Islam in the public space, which, in juridical terms, translates into the failure to conclude an agreement with the Italian State. Although Islam is protected by the general provisions of the Constitutional Charter<sup>6</sup>, it is still today “relegated” to the list of “admitted cults”, whose relations with the State are regulated by an outdated law conceived and promulgated in the Fascist era, Law No. 1159 of 1929 “Provisions on the exercise of the cults admitted in the State and on marriage celebrated before the ministers of those cults” (our translation; “Disposizioni sull’esercizio dei culti ammessi nello Stato e sul matrimonio celebrato davanti ai ministri dei culti medesimi”). This law guarantees some safeguards, such as the freedom to exercise worship, in both private and public form, the possibility of recognizing legal personality as “moral entities” to the institutes of religious denominations and the possibility of acknowledging the appointment of “ministers of religion”. However, these rights are conditioned by a greater level of supervision and control by the State, which is expressed, in particular, in the self-attribution of the responsibility to approve the appointment of ministers of religion. The legal status of Islam in Italy is, therefore, greatly disadvantaged compared to the “privileged” status of the Catholic religion, governed by the Concordat, which was stipulated in the context of the signing of the Lateran Pacts between the Kingdom of Italy and the Catholic Church in 1929<sup>7</sup>, and which guarantees the Church power and autonomy of jurisdiction in spiritual and ecclesiastical matters, as well as a series of special privileges and exemptions. It also differs from other so-called “minority” religious denominations that, in the last 40 years, have come to the stipulation of specific agreements, the so-called “Intese”<sup>8</sup>, foreseen by Article 8 of the Constitutional Charter. The instrument of the “Intesa”, in fact, provides greater autonomy for religious aggregations that have assumed the status of religious denominations (for example, in the appointment of ministers of worship without the need for approval by the State) and allows them access to some important devices for the daily existence and administration of the community. Among them, we can mention direct or indirect public funding and subsidies from the state (to be used, for example, for the construction or renovation of places of prayer) and the possibility of providing religious education in schools. Moreover, the “Intesa” provides the framework for a systematic and organized implementation of the intervention of religious authority in different public spaces (hospitals, prisons, places of religious dialogue), following what has been identified as a “non-traditional” religious need (outside the mosque) and a new trend (Rhazzali 2015; Long and Ansari 2018) emerging in Europe but also in Muslim-majority countries (for the case of prison, see Rhazzali 2023).

At the same time, in Italy, as in the rest of Europe, in the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001 and those of the following years in Spain, France and England, new concerns surrounding the so-called “Muslim danger” have occupied the political and media debate, formulating an equation that rubrics Islam in general, and not only the forms of Islamic extremism and violent radicalism, as a matter of “security”. Consequently, a political project has been nurtured aimed at the securitarian control of places of worship and Muslim religious leaders (Cesari 2012), also through an impulse to the training of so-called “home educated” (Groeninck and Boender 2020) or “home grown” (Berger 2021), thanks to substantial resources (national and EU) included in the framework of policies to counter violent radicalization and de-radicalization intervention<sup>9</sup>. The image of the “Muslim danger”, therefore, has emerged as one of the argumentative elements in political discussions on places of worship and mosques as well as on the role and training of Muslim religious personnel and the imam in particular.

## 2.2. Muslim Religious Education and the Institutional and Political Sphere: Limits and Opportunities

The difficulties in reaching an agreement with the State and the security concerns are compounded by a response from Italian public institutions that, over the years, have proposed various provisions for dialogue and reflection on issues related to the Muslim presence. Consultative bodies were therefore established within government ministries (Ministry of the Interior and, in one case, Ministry of Integration), with the engagement of Muslim social actors, representatives of Islamic organizations in Italy, and academic scholars<sup>10</sup>. Prompted by these bodies, a number of documents have been drafted that provide the affirmation of principles and the proposal of suggestions and declarations of intent, regarding some issues deemed as being crucial. On the one hand, they deal with the effective recognition of the rights of religious freedom expressed first and foremost in the Constitutional Charter. On the other hand, they build a common path of values and symbolic frameworks, especially concerning places of worship and the profiles of religious authority<sup>11</sup>. In these documents, particular attention is paid to the issue of the training of imams and Muslim ministers of religion, which is considered a key topic in the debate on the inclusion of Islam in the public space in Italy. One of the points that is reiterated is the possibility for public institutions, including universities, to include, among their educational offers, training courses for Muslim religious actors and operators, according to the model of a sort of continuous training called “civic training” and “education to the rights and duties of religious citizenship” (Ministero dell’Interno, Comitato per l’Islam Italiano 2011, “Parere su Islam e Formazione”). More caution is exercised regarding doctrinal and theological training, for which the possibility of State accreditation of private training organizations is envisaged. In this case, the involvement of public universities is limited to “mediation” functions between local training organizations and foreign institutes, although the possibility of their involvement in the “preparation of specific training curricula” is outlined (ibid.).

In recent years, several law proposals specifically dedicated to the figure of the “imam” have been formulated in Italy, also starting from the reflections and suggestions put forward by the consultative bodies at the Ministry of the Interior. These proposals never reached the end of the approval process and, in a couple of cases, were rejected or blocked by a negative opinion of the parliamentary evaluation commissions, in the first round of approval in the Chamber of Deputies<sup>12</sup>, because they were considered to have been drafted in the context of security concerns and not aimed at protecting the religious freedom rights of Muslims. They were proposing, in particular, the establishment of a “register of imams” (see Draft Law No. 2950 of 25 July 2007) or a “national register of imams” (see Draft Laws No. 2976 of 19 March 2015, No. 3421 of 11 November 2015, No. 554 of 23 April 2018) or even a “National Council of Imams” (see Draft Law No. 2880 of 2 February 2021). In all five texts of these proposals, there is an explicit reference to the issue of imam training at some point (in the title, in the initial report or in the proposed articles of law). However, the topic of training, although announced in the legal texts and presented as a central issue, is then dismissed rather quickly in almost all cases. It is, in fact, only hinted at hypothetically in one case (Draft Law No. 2950 of 2007)<sup>13</sup>, while in two other cases, it is briefly referred to as a problem and a need highlighted “by authoritative exponents of the Islamic community present in Italy itself” (see the initial reports of the two Draft Laws no. 3421 of 11 November 2015 and no. 554 of 23 April 2018).

This leads to the paradoxical case of Draft Law no. 2880 of 2 February 2021 “Provisions on the training and activity of imams and the establishment of the National Council of Imams”, which, while making explicit reference to the issue of training in the very title of the proposal, then completely forgets about it in the texts of the articles of law submitted for approval. Only proposal No. 2976 of 19 March 2015 “Establishment of the Public Register of Mosques and the National Register of Imams”, which was, moreover, rejected by the Commissions’ examination prior to discussion in Parliament, devoted an entire article of law to the issue, with Article 10 “Training and study courses”. The text envisaged the

establishment of “training and study courses at the faculties of literature and philosophy of the main universities where there are courses of specialization in Oriental history and civilization”, aimed at those who already exercise the function of imam, lacking certain requirements relating to the levels of education, knowledge and skills defined by the same text of the law, or at those who intend to assume this function. The attainment of the final certificate of the course attended would be a condition for the issuance of a document “certifying the suitability of the holder to perform the function of imam in Italian mosques” by the “Commission for the Roll of Imams”, the establishment of which at the Ministry of Education, University and Research is provided for by the same Draft Law (Article 9 “Commission for the Roll of Imams”). Article 9, moreover, delegated to the Commission the planning of training, specifically assigning it the task of promoting “initiatives aimed at raising the qualification and updating of imams registered in the Roll” (Draft Law no. 2976, 19 March 2015). Interestingly, because apparently in countertendency with a focus in the political debate on combating interference from outside national borders in the training of imams, but consistent with what was suggested, for example, in the “Opinion on imams and training” of the “Committee for Italian Islam” (2012), the same article proposed that the Commission, in carrying out its duties, should collaborate “with the institutions and academic authorities of the major universities of the Arab countries in the Mediterranean Sea area” (*ibid.*).

The hints provided by the advisory bodies to the Italian government and the provisions of the draft laws here outlined constitute the framework for a broader debate on the actors that may be involved in the planning and implementation of imam training and, in particular, on the legitimacy of an active involvement of the State and public universities in theological training. The discussion revolves around the observance of the constitutional principles of the laicity of the State, religious freedom and cultural and religious pluralism, and the protection of the autonomy of religious denominations in the administration of worship-related matters.

Even in the legal debates, there is no definitive agreement on the issue. Some scholars resort to an old legislative measure, which removed the theological faculties from Italian State universities (Law 1251 of 26 January 1873), to deny the possibility of theological teaching in public universities. Others, on the contrary, believe that the effect of this law has ceased, given its nature of “regulatory” measure, or else consider it outdated by university legislation, or even incongruent with the constitutional principle of freedom of art and science teaching (on this debate, see [Mazzola 2018](#); [Dogliani and Viriglio 2001](#); [Varnier 2001](#)). This impasse would then seem to have been overcome by a regulatory simplification measure (Decree Law No. 200 of 2008) which, in order to streamline the legislative apparatus, repealed, among others, the articles of Law No. 1251.

However, as we shall further examine, the issue of imam training seems rather to be played out at the level of political expediency, access to (concrete and symbolic) resources and competition for access to and management of a field that is “contested” between different institutional actors.

### **3. The Training of Islamic Religious Personnel in Italy: A Map for the Definition of a “Contested” Field**

#### *3.1. The Training of Islamic Religious Personnel: Between Supply and Demand*

A useful element in understanding what is at stake in the construction of the “contested field” of training of Islamic religious personnel in Italy is the analysis of the needs to which the training offer could respond, in other words, their starting educational level and their desire, will or need to enrich it. Considering the current scenario, we can report the profiles of Muslim religious personnel in Italy as characterized by a wide variability in terms of level of education, which is both basic and more specifically “theological”. Their legitimacy, in fact, is based more on their social commitment and the recognition that ensues than on the occurrence of a defined and attested training or formal certification by a religious institution ([Saint-Blancat 2008](#); [Rhazzali 2018, 2022](#)). In the Italian and European context, in

fact, there is no legal norm that requires the certification of a formally recognized training in order to perform religious functions addressed to the community. This framework differs, by contrast, from what is occurring nowadays in Muslim countries that, as a result of the various reforms of the religious field produced in recent years and in response to policies to prevent and counter violent extremism, have engaged in the management of what researchers categorize as “official Islam” (Brown 2017) and in the sharp reduction of the space of the so-called “unofficial” and “self-managed” community Islam, which is deemed vulnerable to jihadist proselytizing.

From the interviews we conducted with representatives of the main Islamic organizations in Italy, a picture emerges that shows the prevalence of the so-called “do-it-yourself imams” in most mosques and Islamic centers throughout the country<sup>14</sup>. They can be described as social actors who impose their leadership through a certain entrepreneurial capacity (they are often the founders of the religious community themselves) or who are appointed by the members of the association that runs the religious aggregation with the consent of the rest of the adherents (Rhazzali 2018). Imams are generally appointed according to their availability (often on a voluntary basis, depending on their work commitments outside the mosque) and their demonstration of being sufficiently knowledgeable on religious topics and being a convincing *Hafiz* (one who knows the Koran by heart)<sup>15</sup>. However, they often lack specific training for their role. It should be clarified that, often, assuming the role of imam does not entail undertaking an effective role as leader of the community on a theological–religious level but only as its representative on a political level and as an interface with the outside world and public institutions (ibid.). The functions of imam, instead, may be performed by another person, who oversees the religious functions of the mosque, assisted by other religious men and women who play a “pastoral” role outside the mosque (prisons, hospitals, mortuaries, schools, interfaith dialogue initiatives, etc.), without having to deal with community management and leadership (ibid.).

In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the referees of the two major Islamic organizations in Italy quantify the total number of imams present in Italy differently due to different estimates of the number of places of worship in Italy (to which the number of imams conventionally correspond, in a one-to-one ratio).

According to one referee, there are about 1,200 places of worship and only a few of them, the most “historic” and the largest, would have imams (quantifiable in about thirty) who have obtained high-level university training in religious sciences (*‘Ilm ash-Shari‘a*) abroad, and who, in some cases, are members of organizations of national (Italian Islamic Association of Imams and Religious Guides) or international relevance (European Council for Fatwa and Research—ECFR, International Association of Muslim Scholars—IAMS). Furthermore, according to the interviewee’s estimates, a greater number of imams (about 200–250) would still have obtained a traditional education at Al-Azhar University in Egypt, although they did not continue their studies to be able to issue fatwas. The referee of the other Islamic organization, citing the numbers provided by the Ministry of the Interior, of at least 900 places of worship, maintains that a minority of imams and religious guides can be identified with significant and continuous training on religious content (quantified at about 10% of the total), while there was another quota (about 20%) with a training in Koranic schools abroad, but the latter would not be deemed ‘suitable’ for the local context. According to these representations, there would be a large pool of imams or other Muslim religious personnel in various capacities who might be interested in “recovering” a weak or “field-built” training, or in “translating” their cultural and theological heritage, in some cases also very “weighty” and rich but acquired in another framework, to the Italian sociocultural context. Another survey conducted in Italy on a sample of 54 imams (Russo 2018) would confirm that only some of them had access to specific theological–doctrinal training (corresponding to 33.9% of the respondents).

As we will show in the following paragraphs, the training of Muslim religious personnel in Italy today could be described not as “initiator” or “enabling” training for the role but rather as an “on the job” training focused on specific topics or thematic areas (“civic”

training, “theological” training) and addressed mainly to those who already hold the role of imam and religious guide and present themselves in this capacity. Sometimes, it is also aimed at community leaders and people who perform religious and non-religious functions and services (social, pedagogical, etc.) within religious communities, such as the religion and Arabic language teachers and the female guides, who are called *murshidat*. These patterns occur in almost all cases, except for a few training courses organized by Islamic organizations themselves, which have only begun to emerge in recent years, as in the case of the Italian Institute of Islamic and Humanistic Studies Bayan, which is discussed below.

### *3.2. From the Conflict over Control of Mosques to the Investment in Education and Knowledge Production in Italian Islam*

In the last ten years at least, the issue we have defined as the training “of Islam” in Italy seems to be becoming a priority not only in political discourse but also among the vested interests of the religious actors at the head of Muslim communities and organizations themselves, of the so-called “Islam of States” and “transnational Islam”, and, as already mentioned, of the universities. In this paper, we suggest mobilizing, in a broader sense, a concept borrowed from the seminal work of Bourdieu (1971) to describe and analyze the field of Muslim religious personnel training as an influential element in the constitution of the “religious field”, in which different social and institutional actors compete for a position and a role, bringing into play different types of “capital”. Bourdieu’s thought is closely linked to the historical and cultural context in which it was formulated and applied, namely the France long marked by the monopolistic dominance of the Catholic Church and by its links with the State (Dianteuil 2003). However, the concept of the “religious field” would seem likely to have a heuristic function in analyzing the development in European societies, and in Italy in particular, of Islam, a non-hierarchically organized religion, at least as far as Sunnism is concerned, and characterized by a plurality of sources of authority (Di Motoli 2017). The Islamic religious field emerges as an object of contention precisely because of these dissimilar elements and the “imperfect” tendency to fit them into the interpretative categories and normative provisions peculiar to the Italian context and its privileged relationship with the organizational structures and symbolic resources of the Catholic religion. Thus, as in Berger’s (1967) and Luckman’s (1967) interpretations, through the processes of secularization and pluralization, the religious field acquires the contours of a market, also becoming a market of meanings, in which religious, political and social institutions, mastering the mechanisms of marketing, enter into relations and into negotiation and competition processes with one another in order to occupy a share and promote their services. We do not intend here to embrace the assumptions of the religious economy model<sup>16</sup> when they also relate back to the mechanisms of rational cost-benefit calculations typical of certain economic models, assuming reductionist positions (Bruce 1999; Beckford 2003). We recognize, however, in the evolution of the dynamics of the Muslim religious field in Italy, processes that clearly describe it as a “market of meaning” (Berger 1967). If we look, first of all, at the religious organizations, we may observe how they are continually activated and mobilized. On the one hand, they are seeking recognition and to find their place in the public space in a society that does not guarantee them the protections and privileges accorded to the historical religion, the Catholic one. On the other hand, they are in search of resources and opportunities, both political and relational, in order to propose and promote their role and services to the Muslim population itself. In this framework, the other players in the field, and first and foremost the public universities, would risk becoming unwelcome and privileged competitors who could disrupt the “market” with offers that are difficult to challenge, despite their lack of expertise and authority in a domain, namely religious sciences, that historically does not fall within their competence.

Moreover, the non-implementation of a legal framework regulating the relationship between the State and Islam (due to the failure to establish the legal instrument of the “Intesa”), on the one hand, limits the religious organizations’ access to an economic and



symbolic capital (be it funds taken from citizens' taxes or the teaching of the Islamic religion in schools) that would guarantee them a certain degree of autonomy and, on the other hand, gives the State a greater degree of control over their actions. In this framework, as in other European countries, the evocation of the specter of "radicalization" and the shift in discourse and public policies toward a securitarian approach in the management of cultural and religious diversity (Cesari 2012) are playing a crucial symbolic and concrete function in the shaping of the Muslim religious field, thereby assuming a role of legitimization and de-legitimization of the others and their actions. These conditions thus seem to favor the transformation of the Muslim religious field into a territory of contention and defense of the respective spaces of autonomy and power. The domain of the training of religious personnel is characterized, as we have already mentioned, by the non-formalization of paths and criteria of legitimization and "investiture", and thus it emerges as a privileged point of observation on these dynamics. The specific interest expressed by the Italian State, and by some of its political and ideological manifestations, appears to be closely intertwined with the topic of countering violent religious radicalization. The target on which this action is focused concerns specifically the figure of the imam. A representation is constructed that, while occasionally enunciating a more analytical elaboration, renounces to understand his complexity and specificity related to the Islamic religious field in order to reduce it within an interpretative framework proper to the European and Catholic cultural context. Some attempts on the part of the State to enter to "census", control and regulate, through regulatory devices, the figure of the Muslim religious authority and, in some cases, its education, have remained unfulfilled due to a constraint placed by the same legal framework of compliance with the constitutional principles that safeguard the autonomy of the religious sphere. In another scenario, the State promotes training programs that, focusing on the so-called civic training, aim to "domesticate" the profile of the Muslim religious personnel and thus make it more "controllable". The sphere of "theological" training remains, instead, entrusted "within" the local religious communities themselves and to their ties with the countries of migration and their transnational channels.

Against this background, a significant part of ongoing changes in the Islamic religious field is the refocusing of Muslim countries' investment in Europe. They have largely been diverted away from the financing and promotion of mosques and places of worship, and they have rather been allocated to projects carried out in partnership with universities, which basically concern Islamic sciences, interreligious dialogue and the training of Muslim religious personnel. In this regard, we can take as an example the case of the only Italian Islamic organization recognized as a "moral body" of the Muslim confession under Article 2 of Law No 1159 of 1929, the Centro Islamico Culturale d'Italia (Cultural Islamic Center of Italy), which administers the Grand Mosque in Rome. Starting with the 2017 board elections, a transformation took place that made the "Italian" component more central while also marking the exit from the field of Saudi Arabia and Morocco in particular, who sat on the board representing their ambassadors. According to the then-new president, Khalid Chaouki, a former member of the Italian parliament, former founder and president of the "Young Muslims of Italy" group and former member of the Council for Italian Islam at the Ministry of the Interior, this step was intended to "make the reality of the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy fully Italian" in order to strengthen an increasingly Italian Islam and support a project of formal recognition by the Italian state (Ansamed 2017). At the same time, some Muslim-majority countries have taken the first steps toward establishing several chairs for the study of Islam and Arabic language and culture at Italian public universities. In 2016, thanks to the signing of an agreement with the Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, the "Centro Interdipartimentale per le Scienze Islamiche—CISDI" (Interdepartmental Center for Islamic Studies—CISDI), already founded in 2010 at the Alma Mater Studiorum—University of Bologna<sup>17</sup>, was transformed into the "King Abdulaziz Chair for Islamic Studies—KAIS"<sup>18</sup>. In 2017, it was the turn of the University of Palermo, with the establishment of the "Abdulaziz Saud al-Babtain Chair for Arabic Language and Culture" financed by the Abdulaziz Saud al-Babtain Cultural

Foundation of Kuwait<sup>19</sup> which also enabled the establishment of a “Chair for Peace” at the University of Rome 3 in 2017<sup>20</sup>. Again, in 2019, the “King Hamad Chair in Inter-Faith Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence” was founded at La Sapienza University in Rome. The analysis of this new process, characterized by a certain rush of stakeholders from other countries to create relations with public university institutions, clearly reveals how the focus of such projects moves between different interests. More specifically, they seem to be aimed at building knowledge in the field of Islamic studies or concerning the promotion of the Arabic language and culture, or even the themes of Peace and Interreligious Dialogue. Such an investment would also seem aimed at a positive re-evaluation of the strategic role of the Gulf countries, and more generally of the Arab Muslim world, in the geopolitical scenario and in the dialogue between the shores of the Mediterranean also as a bulwark against feared radical drifts.

### 3.3. *The Training as a Contested Field: The Actors at Stake*

The main national Islamic organizations (Italian Islamic Confederation—CII, Union of Islamic Communities of Italy—UCOII, Italian Islamic Religious Community—COREIS), but also some local Islamic centers, have traditionally been active in organizing training initiatives aimed both at the general population and at their own religious actors and leaders. These are, most frequently, single meetings or short training cycles, which in many cases involve, as trainers, lecturers from international organizations, such as the European Council of the Ulema of Morocco (in the case of the trainings organized by the Italian Islamic Confederation) or the European Council for Fatwa and Research (for those realized by the Italian Islamic Association of Imams and Religious Guides). The Religious Islamic Community—COREIS is a special case in point. It is characterized by a particular vocation for religious and spiritual training but, by its own admission, defines itself as a “coordinating minority” (Pallavicini and Pellegrino 2020) with a few thousand members nationwide and an active membership of around 80,000 people. COREIS, over the years, alongside other training facilities, has developed a two-year course (of two hours of lessons per week) aimed at imams, which “focuses on basic knowledge of the Islamic religious sciences and the Italian legal system” (Pallavicini 2018, p. 403) and “provides the students with an expanded knowledge of the Quran, Classical Arabic, Italian, and the contemporary social context, to improve their ability to lead the prayers and prepare sermons” (ibid.). In other cases, Islamic organizations are engaged in more articulated courses that are implemented in collaboration with universities or study and research foundations.

More recently, however, the same Italian Islamic organizations and other local actors have begun to express the ambition to move beyond the promotion of single internal training activities as traditionally carried out until now. They have proposed, therefore, to establish training institutes on the academic model, which can also aspire to obtain recognition by the State and the Ministries of Education while remaining autonomous from them. The most ambitious project in this regard is the Italian Institute of Islamic and Humanistic Studies Bayan, which was founded and launched last year. It has been promoted by a group of religious leaders belonging to the Association of Imams and Muslim Religious Guides<sup>21</sup>, an association directly linked to the Union of Islamic Communities of Italy—UCOII, which is a national organization with strong transnational ties. The institute presents itself, in its media showcases (website and Facebook page first and foremost)<sup>22</sup>, using a language and presenting training devices that recall the academic sphere. It describes itself as a provider of a “three-year course in Islamic Sciences”, a “teaching qualification diploma”, an “Arabic language diploma” and, in addition, “specialization courses”, being defined as “courses prepared according to Italian and European academic quality standards”, based on “scientific expertise and academic experience” (<https://www.bayan-edu.it>, accessed on 11 May 2024). The stated objectives include “to train and qualify imams and guides in an integrated manner to meet the needs of Muslims in Italy and Europe”, but also to “provide a specialized academic environment for researchers and those wishing to learn about Islam” (ibid.). The Bayan Institute, therefore, seems to aspire

to demarcate the field with an offer that ranges between the areas that we have defined as “training on Islam”, on the one hand, and “training of Islam” on the other.

Another important actor on the national scene, but with important ties with the institutions of the Kingdom of Morocco (Di Mauro 2021; Rhazzali and Di Mauro 2022), the Italian Islamic Confederation, has entered the arena with a project that would stand as an alternative to the other projects proposed both by the so-called Islam of States and translated into the already described Chairs at Italian State universities promoted by the Gulf countries and by the other actor “within” the Italian Muslim religious field, the UCOII, with the foundation of the Bayan Institute. This is the project, supported by the Kingdom of Morocco (Bonaccorso 2023, pp. 86–87), for the requalification of a former industrial complex built in 1922 and the establishment in it of a multifunctional cultural center<sup>23</sup> also destined for religious training activities. The center should be built in Turin, which is an important city for the Confederation but also a symbol and beating heart of interreligious dialogue initiatives between local and national institutions and the cultural and religious association network. This translates into a certain involvement of the city’s institutions and the Polytechnic University of Turin (Department of Architecture and Design), which has engaged its researchers specialized in design for interculturality with the collaboration of the “TurinProject CII youths” (youth belonging to the Italian Islamic Confederation). They came up with an ambitious project idea that intends to “constitute a quality element in the city’s panorama, placing itself at the service of social inclusion, internationalization and the needs of the local population—with particular reference to the overall redevelopment process of the ‘Barriera of Milan’ district, which has already been launched in recent years by various city administrations”<sup>24</sup>. Also in this case, according to what emerges from the interviews, the aspiration would apparently be to propose an academic-type model, establishing an institute for the training of imams and murshidat, through a partnership with the Al-Qarawiyyin University of Fez, one of the most prestigious centers of study in the Arab-Muslim world, which boasts a very long tradition of Islamic studies and is deemed by some historians to be the oldest university in the world. The model being proposed here would seem to follow that of the Institut Mohammed VI de Formation des Imams, des Morchidines et des Morchidates, which was established in Morocco as part of the Ministère des Habous et des Affaires Islamiques<sup>25</sup>.

#### **4. The “Institutional” Training of Muslim Leaders, Authorities and Religious Actors**

##### *4.1. From Civic Training to “Islamic Sciences”*

As we have observed from the ‘mapping’ of the training courses offered in Italy in recent years, and as detailed in some examples below, the training of Muslim religious leaders by Italian public bodies has so far mostly been in the sphere of what has been called “civic training”. It focuses on knowledge of the Constitutional Charter, the functioning of the State, the democratic principles, the articulation between the rights and duties of citizens and the relations between State and religions. Within this context, we can distinguish between training courses that, recognizing the particularity of Islam in Italy (the first “minority” religion, but without “Intesa” with the State), are specifically dedicated to Muslim communities and others that, being consistent with the principle of non-discrimination and neutrality toward the different confessions, are addressed to the leaders of all religious “minorities” in Italy. One of the first pilot programs was carried out by a consortium of Italian universities, the FIDR Inter-University Research Centre Italian Forum Democracy and Religions, with the course “New Religious Presences in Italy” (“Nuove presenze religiose in Italia”), articulated in three editions, from 2010 to 2012, which was financed by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration, and a banking foundation (Angelucci et al. 2014). Through a mixed formula of face-to-face training and workshop activities, and through the mediation role of an “external” and authoritative subject, the university, the course provided a privileged framework for the dialogue between the voices of representatives belonging to the various Islamic organizations most represented in Italy (Union of Islamic Communities of Italy—UCOII,

Italian Islamic Confederation—CII, Italian Islamic Religious Community—COREIS), which are sometimes in conflict and rivalry for access and affirmation in the public space, on a series of issues relevant to the life of Muslim communities in Italy. They were also able to formulate shared reflection and proposal documents on the statutes of mosques and Islamic cultural and religious associations as well as on the recognition and regulation of the figure of the imam. Similar programs, aimed at religious communities that have not signed the “Intesa” (agreement) with the Italian State, were carried out in the subsequent years, again due to the initiative of the Ministry of the Interior, through the formula of funding from the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund FAMI 2014–2020, which was established by the European Union<sup>26</sup>. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the “Training course for exponents of religious communities present in Italy that have not entered into agreements with the State” (“Servizio di formazione degli esponenti delle comunità religiose presenti in Italia che non hanno stipulato intese con lo Stato”) held in 2017, on the initiative of the Ministry of the Interior, and organized by the Flaminia Foundation of Ravenna, in collaboration with a university consortium, COIS, which brings together five universities on the national territory, and with the collaboration of the “Interdisciplinary Centre of Sciences for Peace” of the University of Pisa (Botti 2017). The course was aimed at non-EU citizens, resident in Italy for at least five years, with a good knowledge of the Italian language, designated by their religious denomination<sup>27</sup>. In 2018, at the prompting of the Prefecture of Brescia, a medium-sized city in the north of Italy, the University of Brescia organized, in collaboration with the Islamic centers in the area that are members of the city’s Interreligious Table for Dialogue with Islam, a “Training Project for Ministers of Islamic Worship” (“Percorso di formazione per ministri di culto islamico”) designated by the Muslim communities themselves, focusing on civic education (knowledge of the Constitution, Italian and international legislation on religious matters and on freedom of worship)<sup>28</sup>. More recently, in 2022, the “Training Course for Ministers of Worship and Spiritual Guides of Confessions without Agreement” (“Corso di formazione per ministri di culto e guide spirituali delle confessioni prive di intesa”) was held, again organized by the inter-university research center FIDR, under the patronage of the Ministry of the Interior, offered as part of the actions financed by the FAMI 2021–2027 program. This training course involved ministers of religion of different denominations (Sikhs, Protestant and Orthodox Christians, Muslims) resident in Italy and with different national backgrounds.

Finally, it should be noted that both the courses intended only for religious workers and leaders of Muslim communities, and the training courses aimed at Muslim and non-Muslim “ministers of worship”, do not deal with the training of aspiring imams and murshidats, as is the case in Muslim-majority countries and in those where Islam has more or less recognized institutions<sup>29</sup>. In Italy, as mentioned, the courses focus only on the training of those who already practice this profession<sup>30</sup>, according to the model of continuous training. This configuration leaves that part of the training offer “market” still free and open. Moreover, they do not include modules on the theological–doctrinal part. This issue does not seem to be much discussed in public discourse and, as explained above, it seems to refer to a legal framework that prevents public institutions from dealing in any way with theological topics. This concern has been expressed transversally both in academia and by Muslim associative actors. For example, one of the academic directors of a course of training for ministers of worship offered in Italy in recent years told us that theological disciplines and subjects are a “very sensitive” terrain and are precluded from State university education in Italy, unlike in other northern countries, because they are the exclusive competence of religious institutions. In this perspective, what remains open to university actors would be, on the one hand, the subject areas of the history of religions or theologies and, on the other hand, education in citizenship, peaceful coexistence and the values of pluralism. Similarly, the president of one of the national Islamic organizations lamented how, as far as the training of young imams is concerned, Muslim communities in Italy have failed to take advantage of the condition of exclusivity in this field which the law provides for them. In his words, Italian academics cannot address the training of religious

workers in religious matters, but rather training in intercultural and religious mediation, and updating imams on laws and the evolution of regulations. In this sense, he evaluates the type of training experimented in the PriMED project as an excellent strategy, also in virtue of the collaboration of Muslim communities, but one that only partly solves the problem of training religious personnel, being limited to the field of continuing education.

The last remarks refer to a second phase of university experimentation on the training of Muslim religious personnel, which was proposed by a public university (University of Padova) as part of the PriMED project. This was supported by the Italian government as part of a broader strategy of dialogue with Muslim communities and activation of policies to prevent violent radicalization. In fact, it proposed a different approach that specifically addressed Muslim communities (for the training of imams, ministers of worship and murshidat) and envisaged training not only in civic education but also open to the contents of the so-called Islamic sciences (or Islamic studies).

#### 4.2. *The PriMED Project: The History of the Project and Its Innovating Points*

The PriMED project was funded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research—MIUR within the framework of a call for proposals aimed at building university networks between Italy and countries adhering to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The cooperation between Italian universities and those of the OIC countries had already been established for years by some Italian universities, which were already networking through the inter-university research center FIDR<sup>31</sup>. In particular, the University of Padova, since the early 1990s, on the initiative of Prof. Enzo Pace, had already set up a laboratory (Research Group on Islam and Modernity—GRIM), which over the years had established collaborations with some universities in the Maghreb (especially Morocco) and some universities in the Mediterranean region (especially Morocco). However, for the creation of a network of Italian and OIC universities, the political will of the Italian government was decisive, which decided to support this path as a response to the need to initiate prevention policies against violent radicalization (and not to contrast it, since Italy, fortunately, was not hit by any attacks in those years when European capitals were burning). Italian universities have in fact suffered from a lack of resources allocated to international cooperation in the humanities and social sciences compared to those offered to other European countries such as France, Germany and even Spain. Another trend, conversely, followed the funding of the STEM area, where several European programs (Erasmus Plus, Marie Curie, ERC) had already been mobilized. In this regard, Ferrari (2020), one of the leaders of the project, underlines the importance of the action of the State, which, through this funding, has been able to firmly connect the issue of security “with a discourse on rights—starting with that of religious freedom—on citizenship and democratic coexistence”<sup>32</sup>. On a very concrete level, the State’s objective seemed to be to increase, through the exchange of experiences on the subject of prevention, the expertise of the humanities and social sciences to improve their understanding of the phenomenon of violent radicalization and to draw up action plans in cooperation with public institutions, civil society and Muslim communities<sup>33</sup>.

For this purposes, the Ministry of University and Research committed a total funding of five million Euros for three years, which, through a competitive tender, was then divided among the first winning networks: (1) “PriMED—Prevention and Interaction in the Trans-Mediterranean Space” (“PriMED—Prevenzione e interazione nello spazio Trans-Mediterraneo”; ID 82382, led by the University of Piemonte Orientale); (2) “F.O.R.w.A.R.D.—Training, research and development of community-based strategies to prevent radicalization and support integration” (“F.O.R.w.A.R.D.—Formazione, ricerca e sviluppo di strategie ‘community based’ per supportare l’integrazione e prevenire la radicalizzazione islamica”; ID 85901, led by the University of Siena); (3) “PRaNET - Prevention of Radicalisation Network” (“PRaNET—Prevenzione Radicalizzazione”; ID 80834, led by the University of Bergamo)<sup>34</sup>.

PriMED implemented actions to establish and nurture scientific cooperation between the consortium universities (12 Italian and 10 from OCI countries) on the topics of radicali-

sation and integration (first axis of action). It also provided training for managers and staff working in public administrations and services in the social, health, education, security and economic sectors (second axis of action). Of the three projects that won ministerial funding, however, only PriMED also targeted the training of Muslim leaders and religious personnel in cooperation with Islamic organizations. Moreover, it fully implemented the concrete objectives of the call for proposals with the creation, at the end of the project, of a network, called the PriMED-Network, which is still active with training and research projects.

#### *4.3. Toward a New Model for the Training of Muslim Religious Actors*

This last axis was articulated in an educational offer at different levels, targeting different audiences. In the first year of the project, a new, renovated edition of the first-level university Master course in “Studies of Islam of Europe” was offered at the University of Padova (“Master in Studi sull’Islam d’Europa”) with a new subtitle: “Knowledge and Practices for Religious and Intercultural Mediation” (“Saperi e Pratiche per la Mediazione Religiosa e Interculturale”)<sup>35</sup>. The Master course had already been held at the same university since the 2012–2013 academic year and for three years. In this new edition, it was aimed at the general population of university graduates and scholars who had a personal, study or work interest in the topic of Islam in Italy and Europe. At the same time, it also sought to reach an audience of religious leaders and people who are actively involved in Muslim communities, associations and organizations in Italy, whose members also came from O.C.I. (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) countries, and who already hold at least a three-year degree obtained in Italy or abroad. If the degree was obtained in non-EU countries, it must be accompanied by the declaration of value issued by the competent Italian institution.

In the same year, an “Advanced Training Course for Imams and Murshidat” (“Corso di Alta Formazione per Imam e Murshidat”)<sup>36</sup> was also offered that was specifically intended for Muslim religious personnel who already act as imams or murshidat in Muslim communities. The aim of the course was to specifically train and update religious personnel who play the role of religious guide but also mediate between religious communities and public organizations and institutions. In this case, only a high school diploma, obtained in Italy or abroad (in the latter case, certified by the competent authorities), was required to be admitted to the course.

During the same year of the project and in the following year, two other training courses for Imams and Muslim Ministers of Worship were offered: a more “general” one of 60 hours and another<sup>37</sup>, of 30 hours, that specifically addressed Muslim religious actors operating in the prison context<sup>38</sup>. These two courses were delivered through the provision of the “Course for Lifelong Learning” (“Corsi per l’apprendimento permanente”), envisaged by the proposing university, which, unlike the Master’s Course and the Advanced Training Course, does not necessarily require the possession a particular qualification or producing a document recognizing its value, as it is sometimes extremely complex to obtain in sufficient time to attend the course. Moreover, due to the pandemic emergency, which occurred at the very same time of the conclusion of the two previous courses (the Master and the Advanced Training Course), it was decided to opt for a completely “distance” form of attendance. Furthermore, neither internships nor the writing of final theses or papers were envisaged—only a final exam to verify the acquired knowledge. Finally, because of ministerial funding, the courses were offered free of charge to participants. These conditions, in the view of the organizers, would have made it possible to reach a target group of participants who, although interested, did not or could not enroll in the Master’s or Advanced Training Course due to a lack of educational requirements or geographical remoteness. Moreover, the distinctive feature of these courses, compared to others offered in the academic sphere in Italy, was the choice to specifically address Muslim religious personnel, offering training structured, as mentioned, according to the format of continuous training (not qualifying for the profession), which was interdisciplinary in nature, i.e. which, in addition to the knowledge of the social and legal sciences, also embraced the Islamic sciences, in other

words, theological knowledge. This was made possible by the involvement of university faculty members from the OIC project partner countries and from other universities in the Islamic world as guest professors. The two editions of the courses for Muslim religious personnel (the “general” one and the one for those operating in the prison context) were attended by forty participants each (some of them attended one course in the first year and the other in the second year) with Italian or foreign citizenship and from different countries (in addition to Italy, from Albania, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Macedonia, Morocco, Senegal, Syria, Sudan, Tunisia, Yemen, former Yugoslavia, and Somalia). Although the conditions of access, as mentioned above, also favored the participation of people without specific academic qualifications, in the first year, many participants had a high level of educational: 9 out of 80 had obtained a PhD, 13 had a Master’s degree or other postgraduate qualification, and 25 had attained at least a Bachelor’s degree<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, most of them stated that they had already attended training courses on religious subjects or specifically aimed at imams and ministers of religion, in Italy or abroad, and that they had at least ten years of experience as imams or murshidat. An anonymous questionnaire on initial expectations<sup>40</sup> also made it possible to investigate what had motivated people to enroll in the courses. The answers can be traced back to four main themes. One was the importance of having an academic education. The second was the possibility of being trained in the Italian language in order to be able to carry out one’s function in the Italian context. Another motivation related to the appealing interdisciplinary nature of the offer and, in particular, the interest in the sociological perspective on Italian and European Islam, the juridical perspective and the knowledge of the Italian institutional context. Finally, participants referred to what we might call personal motivations, of “service” to their own community, and relational motivations, linked to the opportunity of coming into contact and establishing relationships with other operators in the religious field.

The training offered by a public university in the context of the aforementioned project was configured as an action that “disrupted” the previously established order within the religious field. Firstly, it was in relation to the choice of including in the curriculum of a public university a teaching module on Islamic sciences, which had no precedent in the Italian panorama. Secondly, it was because of its place in a framework of justification, also in terms of the capital concretely mobilized (the funding received), referring to policies for preventing violent radicalization. Such an “uncomfortable” position could have offered the flank to attacks from different fronts within the academic context but also, and above all, from the national Islamic communities themselves. At the same time, the decision to have taken certain choices reflexively, in the design and implementation phases of the training proposal, could explain the actual neutralization of potential sources of conflict between the parties involved. In particular, having conceived the course as a “continuous” and not an “initiation” or “qualifying” training for the role would seem to have constituted, both for the university and for the Islamic communities, a guarantee to protect the general principles of the secularity of the State and religious freedom, enshrined in the Constitution, and a demonstration of respect for the self-determination of religious groups with regard to the criteria and methods of recognition of their ministers of religion. Furthermore, a crucial step in these courses was the preliminary negotiation with the national Islamic organizations. This caution made it possible to jointly assess the opportunity to present this proposal and agree on the objectives of the training and their involvement in the different stages of the process. Two of the main organized Islamic organizations in Italy signed a letter of adhesion to the project, while two others were involved at a later stage. All of them, then, actively participated in the recruitment of participants, inviting religious personnel affiliated with their organizations to enroll in the course, and they attended, with their representatives, the official inauguration of the courses, also in the presence of the authorities of the involved Ministries, the academic authorities and the course directors and coordinating staff. The same referents of the Islamic groups were subsequently also invited to seminars where they had the opportunity to present their organizations, answer

questions and receive the reflections of the participants. These working methods may have signaled, on the part of the academic actor, a willingness not to replace Islamic organizations in the field of training but rather a readiness to experiment and explore new models and possibilities for future collaboration. Finally, the participation as trainers on topics that are closer to the Islamic sciences and “theological” content of academic authorities from Muslim majority countries would, on the one hand, have “covered” the absence of faculty members “inside” the Italian university with specific knowledge of these topics and, on the other hand, would have made it possible to enhance the partnership with prestigious universities in the Arab–Muslim world from which many course participants come.

## 5. Conclusions

Italy represents a peculiar and interesting scenario to observe how new ‘assemblages’ (Groeninck and Boender 2020) regarding the training of Muslim religious personnel are taking shape in a context where a significant presence of Muslim residents is not yet accompanied by a complete legitimization of their place in public space and full institutional recognition. We have described how, in the religious field, the issue of the training of religious personnel has acquired central importance in recent years, becoming the subject of some concrete actions, conceived and realized by various social and institutional actors, but also of an open debate between the State, the academic sphere and the Islamic organizations. If, on the one hand, the field of religious education could be configured, therefore, as a space available and “occupiable” by Italian Islamic organizations, in fact it increasingly takes on the aspect of a contested field (Bourdieu 1971), even if not in hostile or openly confrontational forms, and of a “market” (Berger 1967) open to the vested interests and interventions of other actors. The State, in its various facets, seems committed to guaranteeing respect for the principles of secularism, non-intrusiveness and safeguarding religious freedom enshrined in the Constitutional Charter. At the same time, while recalling the securitarian concerns that have marked relations with Islam in Europe over the last 20 years, it has repeatedly expressed the will to “regulate” this presence through the establishment of commissions for relations with Islam, the funding of projects to prevent and combat religious radicalism and the drafting of bills on the figure of the Imam and on the training of Muslim religious personnel, which, however, have never been approved. Moreover, because of their relations with national bodies in their countries of origin and with transnational groups, Italian Islamic organizations are promoting new training programs that, unlike what has been proposed so far (which took the form of individual training events, of either a seminar or a more popular format), are being structured into proposals that aspire to take on the academic model. On the other hand, the public university, like other non-governmental organizations, having received special State funding, had already committed itself to proposals for so-called “civic” training aimed at ministers of religion of non-Catholic faiths, which was also in collaboration with Islamic organizations themselves. More recently, the publicly funded experimentation in the PriMED project allowed a public university to offer training programs for Muslim religious personnel that, alongside sociological and legal teaching modules, and they also included some teaching modules in Islamic sciences.

The Italian public space thus seems to have taken on the profile of an interesting sociopolitical laboratory: what would have been a merely security-driven action has been transformed into a horizon of new potential and generativity, enabling the creation of new collaborative plans thanks to the farsightedness of institutional managers and engaged academic staff. To cite just an example, the PriMED network, a long-term product of the PriMED project, continues to stimulate collaboration and has come to offer three editions of the International Master in “Religion, Politics and Global Society”, which is delivered in Arabic and English and realized in partnership between the University of Piemonte Orientale (Italy; administrative seat), the University of Padova (Italy; teaching seat) and the International University of Rabat (Morocco) with the involvement of a faculty of professors from the network. This was possible and may also constitute a model for other countries, because it was precisely the actors in research and the scientific knowledge



production who led this project, which was based on a public policy interest in security solutions. In this sense, Italy differs from other European countries, and not only where projects on violent radicalism were developed by the Ministries of the Interior and partly by the Ministries of Defense, with the collaboration of the security agencies. In Italy, also thanks to this experience, these institutions have undoubtedly made their contributions, but what has prevailed is the search for new horizons of inter-institutional collaboration and interest in dimensions that are intrinsically linked but which other projects seem to systematically ignore. In an article published on the website of Oasis, an international foundation dedicated to the study of the Muslim world, one of the leaders of the PriMED project emphasizes the innovative nature of this project, which combines attention to the issues of radicalism and international terrorism, envisaged by the call for proposals, with “analyses on the integration processes of Muslims into the Italian social and institutional context and, in particular, to an articulate reflection on the ability of the right to religious freedom to effectively fulfill its political function of civic mediation”<sup>41</sup> (Ferrari 2020). It was therefore possible to combine several plans in one action.

In the specific field of the training of religious personnel, the PriMED project was able to develop a very innovative strategy that was useful in overcoming one of the obstacles indicated by Diez (2020, p. 51) in his study on the training of imams in Italy, namely the formal one, which refers to the issue of “theological” teaching within State universities. In fact, this very constraint, which should be inscribed, as we have pointed out, both in the framework of the traditions of the relationship between Church and State, and in that of a law<sup>42</sup>, has been overcome through scientific cooperation with the universities and research centers of the OIC. In practice, doctrinal and theological subjects were addressed by specialized professors—researchers. This operational model was successfully tested during the PriMED project and is assuming the profile of a device approved by the MUR and the universities, which secular or religious training centers as well as Islamic organizations can refer to. This format has also been used in other projects, such as the Training Course for Imams, Murshidat and Muslim Ministers of Worship Operating in Hospital Context<sup>43</sup>, which was promoted by the University of Siena and the University of Padova. It is precisely this operational model that can be adopted by all those countries where there is a political tradition of secularism that gives religious institutions the custom and the privilege to take charge of theological teaching (e.g., France, Spain, Portugal, etc.).

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## Notes

- 1 This last course, which had the same characteristics as the previous ones but was aimed at a target group of religious actors operating in a different sector (hospitals), was carried out at the same university (University of Padova) and was also directed by the second author of the article (M.K.R.) but after the conclusion of the aforementioned project. It was paid for with funds from another project (“F.O.R.w.A.R.D.—Training, research and development of community based strategies to prevent radicalization and support integration”), which was also financed by the same ministerial fund but coordinated by another university (University of Siena).
- 2 The multi-year action–research was conducted within the framework of the following projects: PRIN Prot. 20228R992T “Islam and Muslims in Italy: Actors, Social Space and Relations between Religious Communities and the State” (2023–2025, Coordinator M. K. Rhazzali, University of Padova); MIUR-ID 82382 “PriMED—Prevention and Interaction in the Trans-Mediterranean Space” (2019–2021, National Coordinator R. Mazzola, University of Piemonte Orientale); Drafting of the fact sheet on Italy for the international report published by Vinding, Chbib, and Country Correspondents. 2020; PRAT “The socio-religious leadership of imams in Italy in a European perspective” (2012–2014, Coordinator E. Pace, University of Padova).
- 3 The documentary material includes draft laws around the figure and training of imams; advisory documents and policy agreements drafted at ministries of the Italian State, either by scientific advisory bodies or Islamic organizations; press releases, news and other information published on websites and social media pages of Islamic organizations; and media news.
- 4 In particular, in the process of conceiving, planning and realizing the training proposal presented here and implemented with the active contribution of the authors of the article, 11 ethnographic interviews were collected by M.K.R. with the referents of the most representative Islamic organizations in Italy, with a particular focus on the analysis of the training profiles of imams in Italy, and with the referents of the Islamic organizations represented in the Council for Relations with Italian Islam, which explored the training needs of the Muslim communities and their expectations regarding the realization of the course. Ethnographic notes were also drafted with respect to the exchanges and discussions with the relevant stakeholders, like other colleagues and scientific partners of the larger project within which the courses under study were realized and course participants.
- 5 The final satisfaction questionnaire was administered anonymously in paper format to the participants of the Advanced Training Course as part of the normal process of monitoring the quality of the educational offer. The questionnaire on initial expectations was administered anonymously and voluntarily to course participants on the digital platform used for the training. A first part explored the reasons for enrolling, their general expectations on the course and their preferences about the topics to be covered. A second part, on the other hand, asked for information and an evaluation regarding previously attended courses that had been attended in other contexts. Some details on the response rate to the questionnaire are given in endnote 40 later in the text.
- 6 Article 8 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic states: “(. . .) (2.) Religious confessions other than the Catholic Church have the right to organize themselves according to their own statutes, insofar as they do not conflict with the Italian legal system. (3.) Their relations with the State are regulated by law based on agreements with the relevant representations.” (Our translation).
- 7 The text of the Concordat was amended in 1984, with the signing of the Villa Madama Agreement, to adapt it to the social and legal changes that had intervened in Italy following the establishment of the Republic and the entry into force of the new constitutional charter. Among the most relevant changes, we can mention the deletion of the reference to Catholicism as the state religion, in line with the constitutional principle of religious neutrality (Art. 3 and 8), the provision of the right to not avail oneself of the teaching of the Catholic religion (previously established as mandatory) even though it is provided in State schools (not in universities), and the abolition of some special privileges and exemptions, including in financial and tax matters.
- 8 Since 1984, 13 confessions have signed an agreement with the Italian State, including several Christian churches, two Buddhist denominations (the Italian Buddhist Union UBI and the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai IBISG), the Union of Jewish Communities in Italy (UCEI) and the Italian Hinduist Union, Sanatana Dharma Samgha.
- 9 For a critical reading of the concept of radicalization and its use in public rhetoric, see (Fadil et al. 2019).
- 10 Since 2005, in fact, the succeeding governments, through their ministers, have established, as consultative bodies: “Consulta per l’Islam Italiano” (“Council for Italian Islam”; Interior Minister Pisanu), which was confirmed the following year and then integrated with “Consiglio Scientifico” (“Scientific Council”) for the implementation of the “Carta dei valori della cittadinanza e dell’integrazione” (“Charter of Values of Citizenship and Integration”; Interior Minister Amato), chaired by prof. Cardia; “Comitato per l’Islam Italiano” in 2010 (“Committee for Italian Islam”; Interior Minister Maroni); Conferenza permanente “Religioni, culture e integrazione” (“Permanent Conference on Religions, Cultured and Integration”; Integration Ministers

Riccardi and then Kyenge), in 2012; “Tavolo permanente di consultazione con le rappresentanze musulmane” (“Permanent Consultation Table with Muslim representatives”) and “Consiglio per le relazioni con l’Islam Italiano” (“Council for Relations with Italian Islam”), in 2015 (Interior Minister Alfano).

- 11 We can mention, in this regard: “Carta dei valori della cittadinanza e dell’integrazione” (“Charter of the Values of Citizenship and Integration”; Ministero dell’Interno 2007); “Relazione sull’Islam in Italia” (“Report on Islam in Italy”; Ministero dell’Interno, Consiglio scientifico per l’attuazione e la diffusione della Carta dei valori della cittadinanza e dell’integrazione 2008); “Parere su Imam e formazione” (“Advice on Imams and Training”; Ministero dell’Interno, Comitato per l’Islam Italiano 2011); “Rapporto n. 1. Ruolo pubblico, riconoscimento e formazione degli imam” (“Report No. 1. Public role, recognition and training of imams”; Ministero dell’Interno, Consiglio per le Relazioni con l’Islam Italiano 2016) and “Patto nazionale per un Islam Italiano” (“National Pact for an Italian Islam”; Ministero dell’Interno, Consiglio per le Relazioni con l’Islam Italiano 2017).
- 12 The process of approving and promulgating a law in Italy involves several steps, which must be carried out by both branches of parliament.
- 13 The initial explanatory memorandum of the Draft Law states that “(…) On the other hand, our country is completely lacking in curricular traceability of these imams, whose origin and training is sometimes difficult to know. The idea of setting up a register of imams is a first step toward rationalizing this sociological corporation; if, for example, the Ministries involved in the matter—public education, justice, the interior—wanted to organize a training course on our constitutional law or didactics for them, we would have no organic instrument to identify the recipients.” (Draft Law no. 2950 of 25 July 2007 ‘Establishment of a register of imams in Italy’).
- 14 This expression refers to a predominantly political and journalistic use of a label that appears to be particularly suggestive and evokes an image of bricolage and improvisation and of a lack of formalization of the role.
- 15 *Hafiz* means a person who knows a sufficient part of the Qur’an by heart (not necessarily all of it) to be able to perform this role with credibility. The fact of knowing how to psalm is considered a real plus.
- 16 See Dawson (2011) for his analysis on the religious economy model and, in particular, on the approaches of William Bainbridge, Roger Finke, Laurence Iannacone and Rodney Stark (Finke and Stark 1992; Iannacone 1997; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Stark and Finke 2000).
- 17 Università di Bologna, CISDI—Centro di Ricerca Interdipartimentale di Scienze dell’Islam, [cisdidotorg.wordpress.com](https://cisdidotorg.wordpress.com) (last accessed 11 September 2023).
- 18 University of Bologna, King Abdulaziz Chair for Islamic Studies, <https://site.unibo.it/kais/en> (last accessed 11 September 2023).
- 19 University of Palermo, Abdulaziz Saud al-Babtain Chair of Arabic Language and Culture, <https://www.unipa.it/Istituita-la-Cattedra-Abdulaziz-Saud-al-Babtain-di-Lingua-e-Cultura-Araba/> (last accessed 11 September 2023).
- 20 University of Rome 3, Al-Babtain Chair for Peace, <https://www.uniroma3.it/articoli/pre-al-babtain-chair-for-peace-a-roma-tre-la-presentazione-18682/> (last accessed 11 September 2023).
- 21 The Association of Muslim Imams and Religious Guides, like other affiliated associations or direct emanations of their leaders, is directly connected to the UCOII ([https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unione\\_delle\\_comunit%C3%A0\\_e\\_organizzazioni\\_islamiche\\_in\\_Italia](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unione_delle_comunit%C3%A0_e_organizzazioni_islamiche_in_Italia); last accessed 20 December 2023). This association is leading the Bayan Centre Project. The association’s headquarters were moved from Rome to San Giovanni Lupatoto, where a building was purchased, with the aim of using it for training activities. The purchase was announced in the local newspapers and was accompanied by the controversy of public opinion, which was worried about the rise of a mosque. At that time, the leaders of the association explained that it would only be their headquarters where they would organize training courses for imams and religious guides in cooperation with universities and public institutions, <https://www.veronasera.it/cronaca/scuola-imam-san-giovanni-lupatoto-via-garofoli-4-dicembre-2015.html> (last accessed 20 December 2023).
- 22 Italian Institute of Islamic and Humanistic Studies Bayan, website <https://www.bayan-edu.it/> and Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/bayanistituto/> (last accessed 11 September 2023).
- 23 See, for the announcement of this project, the website of the Italian Islamic Confederation itself (<https://www.conf-islamica.it/confederazione-islamica-italiana/nascita-di-un-nuovo-centro-culturale-polifunzionale-presso-ledificio-ex-nebiolo-di-torino/>, last accessed 2 May 2024).
- 24 Confederazione Islamica Italiana (Italian Islamic Confederation), “Nascita di un nuovo centro culturale polifunzionale presso l’edificio ex- Nebiolo di Torino” (The birth of a new multifunctional cultural center at the former Nebiolo building in Turin), September 2021 (<https://www.conf-islamica.it/confederazione-islamica-italiana/nascita-di-un-nuovo-centro-culturale-polifunzionale-presso-ledificio-ex-nebiolo-di-torino/>, last accessed 2 May 2024).
- 25 Royame du Maroc, Ministère des Habous et des Affaires Islamiques, Institut Mohammed VI pour la formation des Imams Morchidines et Morchidates, <https://www.habous.gov.ma/fr/institut-mohammed-vi-de-formation-des-imams-pr%C3%A9dicateurs-et-des-pr%C3%A9dicatrices/4340-institut-mohammed-vi-de-formation-des-imams-morchidines-et-morchidates.html> (last accessed 18 September 2023).
- 26 “The 2014–2020 Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMF) is a financial instrument established by EU Regulation No. 516/2014 with the aim of promoting integrated management of migration flows by supporting all aspects of the phenomenon:

asylum, integration and return.” (Ministry of the Interior website, <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/immigrazione-e-asilo/fondi-europei/fondo-asilo-migrazione-e-integrazione-fami>, last accessed 30 October 2023; our translation).

27 See the project website on this subject ([https://corsoculti.it/?page\\_id=6](https://corsoculti.it/?page_id=6), last accessed 30 October 2023).

28 Corriere di Brescia, “Un Corso al Centro Islamico per formare I Ministri di culto. Promosso da Prefettura e Università per approfondire gli aspetti giuridici” (“Course. A course at the Islamic center to train ministers of worship. Promoted by the prefecture and the university to deepen the legal aspects”), 3 October 2018, <https://brescia.corriere.it/referendum-autonomia-lombardia-e-veneto/notizie/corso-centro-islamico-formare-ministri-culto-b5d6e394-c6f9-11e8-8ba5-9eaeac74b23.shtml> (last accessed 30 October 2023).

29 In these cases, the courses are intended to train imams and female guides for the exercise of their profession after recruitment at religious institutions. However, they require as a prerequisite a Bachelor’s degree (which is usually on Islamic Sciences or Islamic Studies, or even Fundamentals of Religion) that is offered by religious universities (very few) or by State universities in modern teaching (usually in Departments within the faculties of Letters and Humanities). This model concerns the case of official Islam (Bras 2014), while for unofficial Islam (self-managed Islam, in the countryside and rural centers), aspiring imams (there are no female figures) attend schools called ‘Atiqa (translatable to “ancient”) that are not always connected to the official Islam system. The Kingdom of Morocco presents a special case, as it has included them in the official system by establishing a control and homogenization of training courses.

30 However, in the Italian context, the “profession” of imam is mainly based on voluntary work or, if paid, is not “officially” recognized. Almost all communities, in fact, are not accredited as “moral entities” (only the Islamic Cultural Centre of Italy, which belongs to the Mosque of Rome, and recently the UCOII). The amount of the salary, therefore, is either paid irregularly, transferred in cash directly from donations, or, if regular, fictitiously concerns, for example, the administration of the related Islamic cultural association (this is the prevailing legal status of Muslim places of worship in Italy) or the cleaning of the premises.

31 See the FIDR Inter-University Research Centre—Italian Forum Democracy and Religions website (<https://irc-fidr.it/>, last accessed 2 May 2024).

32 Our translation.

33 It was Budget Law No. 205 of 27 December 2017 that envisaged the funding and dictated its objectives. In Article 1 paragraph 664, it provided that “In order to incentivize undergraduate and postgraduate education projects envisaged and organized in the implementation of cooperation agreements between Italian universities and those of States that are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, with which Italy has signed cultural, scientific and technological cooperation agreements, €1 million is allocated for the year 2018 and €2 million for each of the years 2019 and 2020 in favor of the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research.” (Our translation). This measure, while not explicitly addressing the issue of radicalization, related to the European Parliament’s (2015) resolution of 25 November 2015 on the prevention of radicalization and recruitment of European citizens by terrorist organizations (2015/2063—INI), citing it in the preambles, both here and also in the ranking of the allocation of funds.

34 See the text approving the ranking list of the winners of the fund winners: <https://www.miur.gov.it/-/approvazione-graduatoria-nell-ambito-del-bando-di-concorso-costituzione-di-reti-universitarie-italiane-in-attuazione-di-accordi-di-cooperazione-tra-le> (last accessed 2 May 2024).

35 See Master in Studies on Islam of Europe, University of Padova, <https://primed-miur.it/en/master-in-studies-on-islam-of-europe-2019-2020/> (last accessed 11 June 2024).

36 See Advanced Training Course for Imams and Murshidat, University of Padova, <https://primed-miur.it/en/advanced-training-course-for-imams-and-murshidats> (last accessed 17 June 2024).

37 See Training Course for Imams and Muslim Ministers of Worship, University of Padova, <https://primed-miur.it/en/training-course-for-imams-and-muslim-ministers-of-worship-2020/> (last accessed 11 June 2024).

38 See Training Course for Imams and Muslim Ministers of Worship Operating in the Prison Context, University of Padova, <https://primed-miur.it/en/training-course-for-imams-and-muslim-ministers-of-worship-in-prison-context-2020/> (last accessed 11 June 2024).

39 Information on the educational level has been provided by the candidates when enrolling for the course.

40 The anonymous questionnaire was embedded in the Moodle teaching platform used for the courses. It investigated motivations and expectations toward the course in which participants had enrolled but also asked questions about previous training and experience as imams and ministers of religion. Unfortunately, it was only completed by part of the participants: 26 participants out of 40 enrolled in the general course and 17 out of 40 in the course for imams and ministers of religion operating in the prison context.

41 Our translation.

42 As supporting evidence, the Italo Mancini Higher Institute of Religious Sciences was founded within the University of Urbino. Its website reports: “When in 1969, under the decisive impulse of the Magnifico Rettore Carlo Bo, the University of Urbino gave life to the Istituto Superiore di Scienze Religiose (Higher Institute of Religious Sciences), a simple but culturally relevant objective took shape for the first time: to bring theology into the public university, in other words, to widen the cultural, spiritual and problematic area in the university, making the front line of hope sharper” (Our translation). See <https://www.uniurb.it/ateneo/persone-e-strutture/istituti> (last accessed 2 May 2024).

- <sup>43</sup> Training Course for Imams, Murshidat and Muslim Ministers of Worship Operating in the Hospital Context, University of Padova, <https://primednetwork.eu/training/> (last accessed 11 June 2024).

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