

## Muslims and Social Participation in Rome

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### Abstract

The European <sup>3</sup>Faiths and Social Cohesion<sup>2</sup> project was conducted in Italy by the Parsec association. The question of Islam in this country has just begun to be considered (Candia, 2004) and the establishment of this religion is still rarely being considered at a local level and in a way that would allow the specific characteristics and qualitative aspects to be understood, and in particular, the actions aimed at eliminating the religious discrimination towards Muslims. Here's the case of social participation of Muslim immigrants in several neighborhoods of Roma.

**Keywords:** Rome, Italy, social participation, Muslim immigrants, Islamophobia.

The European “Faiths and Social Cohesion” project was conducted in Italy by the Parsec association. The question of Islam in this country has just begun to be considered (Candia, 2004) and the establishment of this religion is still rarely being considered at a local level and in a way that would allow the specific characteristics and qualitative aspects to be understood, and in particular, the actions aimed at eliminating the religious discrimination towards Muslims.

Both the size and the profile of the Muslim immigrant population have rapidly increased in Italy over recent years. This can be seen to be taking place at a faster rate than that described for the “Muslim Migratory Cycle” stages (Bastienier et Dassetto, 1993) that have been observed in other regions of Europe. During this period, Islam in Italy has been significantly transformed, as the direct

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result of the tension caused by the international political situation. On the one hand, the tensions results in prejudices being disseminated in the collective imagination and, on the other hand, deadlocks to a certain degree in the integration and dialogue processes between the Muslim organisations and the Italian civil society. In such a climate of generalised suspicion, religious discrimination towards Muslims can mainly be traced to the lack of agreement between the State and the representatives of Islam in Italy. Without such an agreement, Islam remains outside the Italian constitutional framework that regulates the relationships with non-Catholic religions.

Among the various reasons for this lack of dialogue, the main one is the lack of a unified representation of Islam in Italy as this representation is considered to be essential for this religion to be officially recognised. The Italian Muslim organisations can be seen to be divided between three different centres of interest: the ones that give priority to the interests of the Muslim immigrants, the organisations that give priority to the relationships with their homelands and, finally, the ones for Italians who have converted to Islam.

Despite the encouragement of inter-religious dialogues, after the Vatican II Council, Islam remains a direct competitor of the dominant religious culture in Italy due to the extent of its presence: it is already considered as the country's second religion in terms of the number of the faithful. It should be stressed that in a country where religion is not at all restricted to the private aspect, the hostility fuelled towards Islam is not aimed at the religious expression as such, but is rather saddled by old and new stereotypes and Islamophobic prejudices.

Even if various studies show that the majority of the country's Muslim residents do not consider their belonging to the religion as an essential aspect of their identity, it is undeniable that Italian Muslims are victims of Islamophobia which can be broken down in terms of prejudices, suspicions and denial of needs and cultural specificity. Islamophobia becomes more specific and explicit at a local level, mainly in the negative attitudes regarding places of worship (Rivera, 2003). The associations asserting to be Muslim attract tensions, or even conflicts, and in any case, various security investigations aimed at fighting against Islamic terrorism.

The local level is where the realities of everyday Muslim life are first formed. It is also essentially at this level that the relations and

negotiations are woven that affect the needs of the people and group that claim to represent Islam. In large cities, such as Rome, where a strong Muslim population is already present and visible, the Muslim associations that develop inter-community negotiations and communication initiatives are undoubtedly a place of intercultural convergences and instruments of social cohesion, while respecting the religious specific characteristics of the individuals or groups.

### **1. Islam in Rome**

The Muslim presence in the city of Rome is calculated to be 52,729 people (Caritas, 2004) out of a total population of 2, 800, 00 and an immigrant population of around 300,000. However, the illegal immigrants are excluded from this number as it is impossible to calculate how many there are. Even though this is a significant number, the Muslim places of worship are very recent and rare: there are only seven registered by the Christian humanitarian organisation, Caritas (2004). There are a greater number of mosques in the towns in the north of Italy (Casolo, 1992). The immigrants from countries with a majority Muslim population are scattered throughout the Rome urban area, although our empirical study shows a recent trend to concentrate in certain districts. In fact, the research carried out in Rome has allowed us find several examples of Muslim religious places among the best-known and frequented. The following panorama emerges:

- The most important building is the Islamic Cultural Centre, referred to as the "Great Mosque of Rome". It is run by the embassies of certain Muslim countries. Initially founded for the needs of the diplomats and businessmen, this mosque is located in the upper part of the city, near to the residential districts and far from the areas where the majority of the immigrants have settled. It has beautiful, huge spaces that are considered to be in line with its mission as a place of worship and to represent the institutions of the Muslim countries.

- The small mosques founded by the Muslims in the working class districts are more numerous. The Muslim immigrant presence in these districts is numerically significant and can be considered as being partly stabilised. These mosques are also places of cultural integration that help the immigrants to deal with the day-to-day difficulties of settling and adapting to their host

country. The establishments used for these places of worship are totally financed by the faithful: they are confined spaces and insufficient in terms of the public demand. In fact, these mosques are really centres of aggregation, solidarity and socialisation for the people that go there. Nearly all of them offer a religious, cultural and social service, and they therefore help to make up for the deficit in the lack of public welfare.

- There are also small prayer rooms in the places of residence of the Muslim immigrants. This is particular true in the squats. This clandestine occupation of space is part of a collective defence strategy implemented by immigrants who believe that they are enforcing their rights to a dwelling and insertion, together to their right to practise their religion. These mini-mosques are also true back shops of selforganisation of immigrants from various origins.

After several years, Rome City Council announced that it wanted to promote the different religious identities of the city's multi-ethnic population by means of cultural initiatives, which included the activities of the *Tavolo interreligioso* (inter-religious board), a commission set up with the Department for Schooling and Educational Policies, and the *Consulta delle religioni* (Council of the Religions), under the aegis of the director to the City Council for the policies on multi-ethnicity. The inter-religious approach is a hands-on methodology that allows the current hegemony of the Catholic religion, in particular in the schools, to be reduced and balanced. Furthermore, the inter-religious action is the opportunity to positively highlight the value of the extensive experience and religious tradition as important elements in the day-to-day life of the populations living in Rome. Religion is one of important meeting points for coexistence between the populations of different faith and cultures.

The activities of the *Tavolo interreligioso*<sup>65</sup> are aimed at bringing the education in line with the religious culture in the secondary classes. The partners take part in debates and meetings in the schools. The aim is to learn about the different religions and, therefore, to encourage the schools to deal with themes such as Islamo-

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<sup>65</sup> The parties signing the protocol to set up this board are: the Jewish Community of Rome, the Representative Committee of the Valdesi, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Salvationist Churches of Rome, the Italian Islamic Cultural Centre, the Maitreya Foundation of the Italian Buddhist Union, the Italian Hindu Union, the Congregation of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

phobia or religious fundamentalism in particular: given the current international scenario, these subjects are always an area to which the teachers and students can relate. In fact, the search for a fairer understanding of this phenomena has encourage the schools to develop and study important religious issues in greater depth, while ensuring that various sensitivities and religious are always represented in order to respect the universalist nature of the initiative. The aim is to make it possible to educate about the coexistence of religious differences. In fact, very little time in the school system is spontaneously reserved for programming activities relating to the fight against racism or religious discrimination.

There has been significant support for this project from the Roman schools: not less than 40 schools and 160 classes are involved each year. However, it can be seen that this initiative only rarely allows an in-depth study that goes beyond the dissemination of formal information about religious doctrines. The local religious communities feel there is a need for more frank meetings, exchanges or dialogues (Parsec, 2004). In fact, the case of Islam, for example, is, in this context, a “theoretical” subject of discussion and debate, as it remains distant in its expressions, its roots and how it is transformed in the host country (Allievi, 2003a). A “real-life” expression of Islam lacks appeal.

It will be noted that within this initiative, as in many others, the Islam Cultural Centre (the Great Mosque of Rome) is recognised as a privileged spokesperson by the municipal institutions while the faithful from the “district mosques” disapproves of its functions: *“they have everything in the Great Mosque, but they do not do anything... for example, after September 11<sup>th</sup>, the mosque played a very important role, organising meeting with journalists, intellectuals... We ourselves, with far fewer resources, organised the debates even though we were just volunteers, unlike the civil servants of the Great Mosque”*.

The lack of respect is mutual: the representatives of the Islamic Centre see themselves as the only representatives of a “European Islam” transcending the various cultural traditions of the immigrant populations. According to one of the centre’s representatives, *“Islam needs to be separated from these traditional expressions that characterise the mosques run by immigrants. (...) The immigrants are doing everything to hang on to the faith and culture of their country. That is a sort of ghetto life”* (Camilletti, 2004, 143-146).

However, considering that the discriminations suffered by the Muslims are not only religious, but are due to many other political

and socio-economic factors, it was decided to focus the observation and action part of the “Faiths and Social Cohesion” project on the small associations of the faithful: a similar level of involvement is only able to reveal the close links between religious discrimination and the general social vulnerability of the immigrant groups.

The participant observation work carried out in Rome was focused on the following:

- Religious practices and the difficulties for a group of recently immigrated Moroccan and Egyptian families to gain citizenship, transferred from a residential complex where they were squatters (Capo delle armi) to housing allocated by the City Council (Cinquina).
- The activities of a religious association founded by a group of immigrant Muslims who, after 10 years, run a place for prayer in the working class Centocelle districts.

### **1.1. From Capo delle armi to Cinquina: immigrant families and religious expression**

In 1994, the Rome Representative Committee for the Right to Housing occupied three buildings being built near to Ostia, a small coastal town in the metropolitan district of Rome, 30 km to the west of the city centre. Over 200 families, in other words nearly a thousand people, took over the empty apartments, including 80 immigrant families, the majority of whom were Moroccan or Egyptian. The isolation of the place in relation to the service and transport networks, the high density of inhabitants and great insecurity inside these abandoned buildings caused serious problems which drove the occupants to create a management committee. During 8 years, this committee not only has provided internal support for the residents, but has also managed to create a huge solidarity movement promoted by the local association and by the neighbourhood parish. When the city perceived and considered the squatter complex and its residents as a “foreign body”, that was likely to cause problems, the internal committee was structured and strengthened not only to maintain order, but also to ensure the coexistence and participation of everyone.

In this context, when the Muslim families expressed their need for relating to collective worship, it was welcomed as another initiative which could facilitate the socio-cultural integration of the residents, who were living in a marginalization situation. The Muslim group therefore organised a prayer room, an Arabic course for

the children and a small shop with *halal* products. The volunteers of those associations and the neighbourhood parish ran a playroom, opened a library, and provided schooling support for the children, together with various recreational activities. The neighbourhood school also organised different initiatives to welcome the Italian and foreign children living in the squats. The social networks created inside and outside the housing complex offered support through vocational counselling, looking for jobs, information about how health and social services operate, etc. In short, the community approach developed by the group of squatters, in collaboration with certain local players, has allowed the whole of this population to break away from their situation of living in the extreme fringes of society.

The experience thus concluded positively in 2002, with all of the families being allocated local authority housing. All the families were therefore transferred to various areas in the suburbs or outside Rome, but they were not allowed to choose their destination. Some families, in order to avoid totally becoming rootless, preferred to give up the housing offered and move to other parts of the town. The Capo delle armi population was therefore broken up, even if a notable group, including Muslim immigrant families, was transferred to the Cinquina district, to the extreme northern suburbs to the city.

The study was therefore moved to Cinquina, in order to analyse the way of religious expression of these families in the new housing context. Therefore, 40 families, half of whom were foreigners, were re-housed in a new residential complex where 65 other households from various zones had also settled. The district was also new and therefore lacking in services. While this situation was obviously an improvement for all the families with respect to being treated as citizens, it also constituted for some of them a significant loss of the landmarks and networks that were previously set up. In fact, a single bus operates from the city to Cinquina where the buildings that were not maintained by the management entity quickly deteriorated. Furthermore, the loss of the community dimension drove certain families into even more difficult conditions than when they were squatting.

In particular, the arrival of the new Muslim residents only increased the feeling of suspicion to be found after the arrival of these tenants. This atmosphere was partly fed by the effects of September 11<sup>th</sup>, to such a point that the local malicious gossip had

it that one of the terraces of a building was being used to store weapons. According to the former part-time imam of Capo delle armi, the first attempts by some Moroccans to collectively organise the Muslim religion in Cinquina had to be aborted due to the negative reaction of the Italian neighbours. He believed, an opinion that was shared by other Muslim immigrants that *“it is a difficult situation for all of us and in particular for the Muslims that are the victims of a negative view disseminated by the television that also speaks about the evil Muslims”*.

Muslim immigrants therefore pinpointed communal premises that could be used either as a prayer room or for giving Arabic courses to children. Nonetheless, in the absence of a tenants and an organisation to liaise with the council flats office, that was managing the property, the request to use the communal spaces has failed. In addition, another request to host Arabic courses for children, an initiative backed by the neighbourhood parish, was also rejected.

The teachers at the neighbourhood primary school which all the children attend, were the first to be involved in the “Faiths and Social Cohesion” project, even though they maintain that the Muslim families tend to want to make too much of belonging to their religion. This comment is mainly linked to the presence in the classes of young 13-year old girls who wear the yashmak. Another critical fact highlighted by the teachers was the request in writing from a father who asked for his daughter to be able to study the architecture of basilicas and of mosques...

The new social context of the families links practising Islam to forms of fundamentalism, unlike the self-management environment of the previous district. This attitude affects the public expression of freedom of the Muslim families. The most obvious example is that of practising religion being confined to the family environment when the Muslim wishes to pray in a group: by arguing the lack of suitable spaces for the Friday prayers or as a meeting place during Ramadan, the housing managers prevent any community expression of Islam. Another example is that of the children who deny or who hide the signs that could indicate their religious faith, stigmatised by the environment, in particular at school.

## 1.2. Centocelle, multi-cultural working class district

Centocelle is a district to the south-east of the city. It is a highly built up area and within easy reach of the city centre. It is a district which, as far back as the 50s, has witnessed the en masse arrival of migrants. From the 90s, the availability of reasonably priced housing has attracted foreign immigrants, who now account for nearly 3,500 people out of a population of 60,000 inhabitants. There is a significant number of immigrant families and the ratio of minors among the foreign population is 20%, one of the highest in the city. It should be noted that the rapid increase of rents over recent years has not slowed down the immigrant settlement process and the arrival of new households, thanks to the operating of the migratory channels.

The Muslim population has left its mark on the neighbourhood, in particular thanks to a mosque being founded in 1994: the *Al Huda* mosque. Numerous shops run by Muslims also exist in this highly populated area. Therefore, numerous Muslims from other districts shop here and the area is witnessing the increase of the linguistic and cultural landmarks or the informal places that are as a greater reference point for the Muslim population.

However, the living conditions of the immigrants are modest in Centocelle: there are many illegal immigrants and certain immigrants live on the real fringes of society, such as a hundred or so travelling salesmen who live in groups of huts together with the Rom nomads. The residents work in a variety of jobs: the men have jobs in the service sectors and the shops that they run into other areas of the city; the women are often happy in a less stable job in the sector working for families or cleaning, and long-term unemployment is common in their category. When explaining female unemployment, it is however difficult to precisely define which part is due to family traditions and which part to the derisory offer available on the job market (Jabbar, 2000).

According to the local social workers, the unfavourable social conditions of the immigrants echo the equally difficult one of all the local residents. Nonetheless, there is an absence of a popular network offering information, solidarity and support that could combine the ties of family, neighbours or proximity that are woven in the neighbourhood. The residents offer use the local charity and aid associations and, in particular, those that refer to the parish by way of "safety valves" in the case of a pressing need for basic items, clothes, help with schooling for the children, etc. The ab-

sence of registered and/or recognised neighbourhood associations, created by/and for the immigrants is in fact a handicap towards specific needs being met. Nevertheless, a city council representative spoke about “quality immigration” in this district when referring to the satisfactory insertion rates of the workers and the lack of cultural conflicts in the neighbourhood, public spaces, schools and other cultural activities.

The key element of the presence of Muslims in the district is the *Al Huda* mosque, the most popular in the city after the Islamic Centre (around 700 attend Friday prayer). This building was founded and run by a group of Tunisian refugees who formed an association: The Islamic Cultural Association in Italy (ACII), founded in the same year as the mosque itself, as a religious group. This “religious” status does not in fact reflect any legal status according to current Italian legislation: in fact, there is no recognition for Muslim associations. The people attending the mosque are very mixed, but mainly consist of Arabs, with over half being local residents. The mosque is particularly appreciated for the activities that it organises for children, but also because it has an area reserved as a meeting place and for commercial activities such as selling typical food products, for example. The space that is available for the mosques is a large hangar where there is a large prayer room, part of which is reserved for women. There is also an office, classrooms, a barber, etc. The main activities of the mosque are the religious and cultural training of adults and children, with multiple courses, as well as running a website whose main goal is to improve knowledge about Islam and to contrast the negative perception and image of Islam disseminated by the media. The mosque also organises a social secretariat that helps the indigent families thanks to the zakat collection or the calls for the solidarity to be shown by the faithful on Fridays. The weekly council meetings of the imam or the president of the association deal with theological issues or internal conflicts in the community.

The Islamic Cultural Association also tries to act as the liaison between the Muslim families and the host society, mainly by acting on two fronts: on the one hand, by urging the faithful to encourage the insertion of their families and their children and on the other hand, by collaborating with all the initiatives organised by the schools, institutions and any type of entities, relating to the inter-religious dialogue or knowledge about Islam. The mosque is therefore open to anybody, experts, press, citizens, etc, who wish to receive information and documents about Islam or about Muslims

in general. It is run by volunteers and donations from the faithful. The leaders of this mosque are seen to find it difficult to carry out the different normal activities of their association at the same time as promoting other one-off initiatives, including those that would provide their institutions with a higher profile and participation in the life of the city. The lack of financial resources is an obstacle to acquiring more suitable premises and to allowing a minimum salary for the leaders so that they can dedicate more time to their work. We can see that despite the local respect that the mosque of the Islamic Cultural Association receives, its contribution to what is sometimes referred to as “social peace” does lead to any financial or material support from any private or public institution. Worse still, all the applications submitted to institutions, such as the request for classrooms to teach Arabic to the children, for example, are systematically refused. According to the leaders of the association, *“no “citizenship” is recognised by Italian institutions in their case”...*

## **2. Dynamics and problems of Roman Islam in the light of the observations**

The activities of the project have highlighted the question of religious discrimination towards Muslims in Italy, in general, and in Rome, in particular. This discrimination is supported both by the absence of a legal recognition of Islam, unlike other religions present in Italy, and by the difficult cultural and social conditions of the majority of the Muslims living in this country. The convergence of these two facts led us to measure the degree to which the specific cultural and religious characters of the Italian Muslims are not recognised.

The goals of the “Faiths and Social Cohesion” local action were re-worked as we learnt more about the situation of Islam in Rome. Therefore, the religious dimension was sometimes very obvious and, at other times, confused with other types of discrimination, mainly cultural ones. This difficulty to unearth religious discrimination as such was also observed during the comparisons with the other European countries belonging to the “Faiths and Social Cohesion” network where Islam benefits from a constitutional recognition. However, in Italy, the local situation of the Muslims appears to be very affected by the lack of political clarity about recognising the Islamic religion, with this issue being further compli-

cated by the alarmist treatment of international current affairs in the popular media.

In the spirit of the population, but also of numerous social agents and teachers, the Islamic issue is now largely associated to the idea of terrorism and religious fundamentalism. According to certain witnesses in the school field, this hotchpotch seems to already be interiorised by certain members of the target population: therefore, children from secular Muslim families do not join in with their schoolmates who consider themselves to be believers and/or practising. This division leads, for example, to girls who wear the yashmak being stigmatised...

In addition, Muslim institutions are always under suspicion. Thus, the "official mosque" of Rome had to replace its imam following the publication in the press of an article about the violence that he was alleged to preach on Fridays<sup>66</sup>. With respect to the small mosques, the pervading idea is that they are "closed places that are detrimental to the social integration of the communities that go there". This view detracts from all the activities they however organise to help the families to socialise in their host country.

At Centocelle, as in other mosques, the religious and association leaders play down the difficulties that they come across as a religious community. They focus on the more positive aspects of their experiences and their steadfast desire to make a contribution to Italian society. In fact, the support of the project interlocutors (institutions, associations and Muslim leaders) to identifying the difficulties and problems linked to belonging to a religion has not been immediate. It was only with the increase in the activities organised with the Muslim partners that they have been able to identify and see the problems for themselves as the result of the discrimination regarding their religion, together with the links between these discriminations and their living conditions.

The interaction between the living conditions and the religious status of the Muslim migrants is an interesting point to develop. While in Cinquina, the immigrants, in general, and the Muslim immigrants, in particular, were perceived as "a foreign body" to the pervading social fabric, in Centocelle, the Islamic population enjoys a certain acceptance because they bring cultural diversity and contribute to the local commercial fabric. In the two cases, however, forms of religious discrimination have been seen, which,

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<sup>66</sup> Allam M., *La Repubblica*, June 7<sup>th</sup> 2003.

however, occur in different ways according to several variables: mainly, the size of the Muslim group, how well established it is, its level of organisation as a community of believers, etc<sup>67</sup>.

### **2.1. “Way of the cross” of the needs and rights of the Muslims at Cinquina**

The Cinquina case represents a typical case where the identity of the individuals and families, as well as their spiritual values, suffers from the indifference to the other populations in the same social context. It is a common situation, not only where the Muslims are in the minority, but also where their status as citizens is insecure. It is in this sense, that it is pertinent to highlight the links between religious discrimination and social exclusion. It is important to appreciate these nuances and interactions in order to avoid simplifying the problems of the Muslim populations in Italy, by only considering one or other variable. The Muslim population does not only suffer from discrimination linked to its specific identity, but also from a marginalisation that links it to a much larger immigrant population. Any action aimed at emancipating this minority has to take these many facets into account (Jabbar, 2002).

In Cinquina, the small Muslim community has not obtained adequate answers to its requests, such as adapting the public transport system to its needs. This fact has particularly imposed on the local Muslim women a drastic limitation on their being able to travel and their mobility being subordinate to that of their husbands, as hardly any of them hold driving licences and very few households have a car. This has only contributed to strengthen, in the mind of the local residents, the stereotype of the Muslim women, who is culturally dependent, while the reason is contextual (Jabbar, 2000). In another area, teachers coming up across communication difficulties with immigrant parents have quickly interpreted these problems as being a sign of the impossibility to integrate Muslims. However, the school has never taken into consideration the difficulties of the parents who barely speak Italian.

In these conditions, and not supported, for example, by the local parish, the Muslim resident have rather quickly abandoned the desire to create a space for collective prayer, as Mustapha Hhaboub, one of the leaders of this group, stressed in June 2003: *“It will be impossible to create another mosque because nobody would look*

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<sup>67</sup> Such observations are transposable to other areas of Rome: Torre Angela, Viale Marconi, del Pigneto, etc.

*after it. They all live in housing where they have to pay the rent and they have no money. They have even less resources to look after the mosque as when we were staying in the squats in Capo delle armi*". The few people behind the Cinquina mosque project believe that their new environment denies their right to religious expression and the collective practice of their religion. The "Faiths and Social Cohesion" project has shown that this feeling of exclusion and other frustrations exacerbate the religious identity of the interested parties (Kouider, 2003). The social conditions should therefore need to be restored that would allow the resident to define their communal needs and a communal initiative in the framework of dialogue with the residents from any origin.

The general goal of the project in this district has therefore been to insert the religious needs of the Muslim families in the framework of the right to citizenship, by mobilising the different local resources to obtain their recognition and taking them in charge following the example of other needs expressed by the residents:

- Highlighting the presence of immigrant families, the specific nature of their personal situation and their needs in terms of socio-cultural integration;
- Raising awareness among the representatives of the local associations and institutions in order to recognise to the cultural different by getting rid of the "practising Muslim = fundamentalist hostile to the host society" equation;
- Promoting the participation of the Muslim families by reinforcing their capacity to define their needs and identify suitable and competent spokesperson;
- Creating meeting spaces to promote dialogue and mutual knowledge

The schooling of the Cinquina foreign children had to be considered as a common problem for the different people involved: the very families, the schools, the local associations. An analysis of collective needs led to a training cycle for the teachers of the primary and infant schools. The goals were to provide the teachers with intercultural communication and education tools and notions, together with greater knowledge of cultural specific characteristics of the North-African immigrant families. The intervention team has above all targeted facilitating the relations between the Italian teachers and immigrant parents. A Moroccan mediator took part in the experiment during which the school teachers have had the

opportunity to express their perceptions of Islam and their feelings about their relationships with the families and the pupils. The discussions also covered the means for a better approach to the cultural and religious differences and their use within the schooling system. At the end of the session, the teachers themselves request to be provided with methodological and professional support, in the framework of a series of meetings to be organised with the families in order to define the measures that will allow greater participation of all of them in educational aspects.

At the same time, the neighbourhood's mutual aid associations and the local parish were involved in the study. Discussions were organised about the neighbourhood and the arrival of immigrant families with the help of the father of a family who offered to open a child-minding facility near to the council flats to look after the children after school. This proposal was positively welcomed: the City Council's social services supported it and the parish provided premises where, once a week, the children of the volunteers of the "Time Bank" would be looked after from then onwards. Furthermore, another local association, working with the City Council, offers the children the option of staying on at school one afternoon a week for a range of leisure activities mainly aimed at developing their Italian language skills.

After several months of similar turmoil, a notable positive change would be noted in the view that the local social services had about the presence and realities of the Muslim immigrant families, realities that had previously been classified as "explosive". This change is due to their direct confrontation with the families and therefore better knowledge about the living conditions of this group. This reflection that has emerged from this time of coming in contact with the realities has allowed the city council professionals to become aware of what these families need and to develop the idea of organising various activities aimed at the children and in particular at the women, who have been equally identified as having notably more difficulties in being in contact and socialising with the people outside the family (Ceccarini, 2004).

This very method of "contextualising" and progressive awareness has allowed the issues of the *use of the currently vacant communal spaces* to be studied collectively. In this framework, the heads of the Muslim families offered to circulate a petition for premises which they could use as a place to pray. This request has not been rejected as has always been the case previously, but has led to a

new debate with the non-Muslim residents. If this issue has still not been settled to the satisfaction of everyone, there is nonetheless the feeling of a slow evolution in attitudes, even if the right to a place of worship seems to still have to an inroad in the minds.

## **2.2. Constructing a positive profile in Centocelle**

The resources invested in Centocelle, as part of the “Faiths and Social Cohesion”, including a series of semi-structured interviews with the leaders of the local mosque, the health and social service staff, teachers and, finally, with certain local families. The considerations relating to the status of the local mosques in Italy have also been the subject of comparative interviews conducted in other Roman places of worship. Nonetheless, the most extensive information on the running of the associations and institutions, together with their mutual interactions were obtained from the observations made throughout the project.

In the neighbourhood, none of our different spokesperson expressed a negative opinion about the *Al Huda* mosque-association. However, the interviews revealed a form of indifference and the absence of a willingness to discuss this. If it is common knowledge throughout the neighbourhood that there is a mosque, there is a lack of awareness of who the leaders are and what their objectives or activities are<sup>68</sup>. The only exception is worth mentioning: there are two schools adjoining the mosque, which after nearly 5 years, are trying to set up, not without difficulties, a collaboration with the Muslim leaders by inviting them to speak about Islam in class and to organise visits to the Mosque in order to get to “*know each other better*”.

*Is Centocelle not proof of a reality that few people wish to discover and above all recognise that this is in their neighbourhood or in city? The recognition of a community organisation governed according to Muslim rules seems in fact to raise problems<sup>69</sup>: despite the signifi-*

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<sup>68</sup> A televised documentary by Liliana Cavani about the Centocelle neighbourhood shows the monk of the neighbourhood church going to visit the imam at the mosque. As the documentary stresses, it is the first time that these two people, so close to each other, have met. We can add that it was also the last time: there have been no other meetings after the camera went away.

<sup>69</sup> Even it represents the only immigrant association in Centocelle, its “religious” nature is seen by certain spokespersons as an elements that reinforces the “ghettoisation” of the immigrants, while, normally, the immi-

cant number of the faithful that worship there and its presence in the neighbourhood for over ten years, the mosque still does not appear among the partners involved in the local events, even those relating to inter-religious dialogue<sup>70</sup>. When it is necessary, the reaction is to turn to the Great Mosque of Rome<sup>71</sup>.

This aspect reveals the lack of knowledge about the Muslim religion and the confusion made with the organisation of the Catholic Church: great importance is granted to the hierarchical positions compared to the grassroots management of the religion. In fact, some claim that a “correct” interpretation of Islam does not envisage the obligation to pray at the Mosque, which therefore repudiates the need, for a territorial community, to have a place of worship, however modest, close to where they live. If there are various reasons for certain people to question the legitimacy of a neighbourhood mosque, it is however clear that the fear of terrorism and religious fundamentalism is what frequently underlies this attitude.

The sharp increase in the police investigations into the mosques and the negative and arguable analyses published by the press are among the major vehicles for the profile of the *El Huda* mosque in Centocelle. This type of profile is disastrous not only for the relationships with the local institutions, but also for the faithful themselves where dozens of them have already given up going to the mosques as they are frightened of being a victim of the security services (Gustinchich, 2004).

The maximum percentage of adult Muslim men that go to the mosque on weekdays is estimated at 10%. If certain believers show a preference for the Great Mosque of Rome, the only place of worship in the town that seems to be recognised by the institutions and where the Muslims are comfortably settled, certain studies and the large crowds on Fridays tend to show that function of a local mosque is specific for the Muslim immigrants. For example, even

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grant associations are appreciated for helping insertion in the host country.

<sup>70</sup> Therefore, the *Guide des quartiers* published by the City Council makes no mention of the mosque, neither in the “Places of Worship” section nor in the “Associations” section. Therefore, the *El Huda* association is totally excluded from the City Council information network, including information about public tenders for cultural and social activities.

<sup>71</sup> Certain local schools have organised visits to the Great Mosque of Rome, but not to the ones used by the parents of their pupils.

the Muslims who do not use the prayer room send their children there to attend the Arabic courses and listen to the readings of the Koran. Neither do they hesitate to go there for help, meet up with their fellow countrymen or for a wedding: which illustrate the identifying and social role that the mosque-association plays for the neighbourhood Muslims.

In the framework of the “Faiths and Social Cohesion” project, the key objective of the attendant actions at Centocelle was to eliminate the factors that slow down the relationships of the local structure with the Mosque. These factors include the lack of the internal organisation in the Mosque, the difficulties to plan the actions, to strategically manage the communication with the outside and to propose partnerships with other social players. At the same time, a second goal was set of raising awareness of the Centocelle institutions and associations in order to organise exchanges of opinions with the leaders of the mosque. The town’s teachers were also encouraged to learn about the cultures and religious in order to be able to discuss the points of interest and above all the communal action projects.

Right from the start, the action has benefited from the partnership with Rome City Council’s Department for Educational Policies. The focus has been on the educational establishments. Particular emphasis has been placed on supporting the creation of mutual knowledge relationships and collaboration between the various educational institutions and the parents or their associations. The organisation of a cycle of meetings about the mutual prejudices and mistrust between the teachers and the mosque leader has therefore resulted in a list of positive actions being drawn up to implement during the following academic year in order to answer the question: *“what collaborations should there be with respect to the education of the immigrant children?”*.

If the initiative was initially motivated by the individual attempts of single teachers (“to react to concerns”), the action has been able to be orientated towards a durable availability of the latter for an effective cooperation with the Muslim families, with each stating his point of view and, where applicable, their needs. In this new configuration, the local partners thus working together have requested a more stable cooperation with the organisers of the action-research and the public institutions involved in order to more effectively bring the families closer to the educational structures and help them to organise discussion groups with, for exam-

ple, the Muslim mothers. In addition, the teachers have deepened their knowledge about the Mosque, its objectives and resources to the point that during the last meeting that took place in the prayer room, they all complained about the confined quarters and asked *Al Huda* to demand a more suitable space and offered to be volunteers to collect the signature of the local residents to support this request.

Several “coaching” actions have also been given to the leaders of the *Al Huda* mosque: organisation of meetings with the Deputy Mayor for Social Services and the local associations, preparing a request for funding and an action project to promote the identity of the Arabic-Islamic young people, etc. “Visible” initiatives were also set up in collaboration with the local association: first meeting of the Rome group of the “Young Muslims of Italy” Association, In particular, the need was noted for training on how to prepare projects and requests for funding, as well as the importance of working on the external communication skills of the Muslim religious leaders. In fact, in order to mark its ten year anniversary, *Al Huda* planned a public meeting. This meeting organised on a formal basis with the involvement of various partners was well attended and was the opportunity for the profile to be established. During the meeting, the mosque leaders reiterated their undertaking to work on opening up more to the outside. The direct outcome is that the Mayor personally undertook to find a more suitable site in the neighbourhood for the needs of the mosque.

Finally, the latest type of interventions has affected the “second generation” of Muslims. After the Province of Rome had expressed their interest, roundtables were set up to discuss the needs of Muslim adolescents and their relationship with the mosque. This led to a list being drawn up of possible necessary actions that could lead to a request for a subsidy. Unfortunately, as the ACII-*Al Huda* association did not meet the formal selection criteria (in particular being registered among the associations looking after immigrants, no project could be filed. But the initiative has allowed a collective work method to be popularised and has clarified, in the eyes of the heads of the association, the administrative subsidy rules. The ACII officials are now considering amending their statutes in order to be able to benefit from subsidies from the local authorities for projects to promote the cultural and social integration of the immigrants.

### 3. Final considerations

In keeping with the results of other recent studies (Allievi, 2003b, Saint Blancat, 2002), this initiative shows that, in the Italian institutional context, the first steps should be taken for a non-discriminatory management of the religious diversities, together with a fair affirmation of their values. The keys that facilitate the social recognition and the access to citizenship for everyone, beyond the religious difference, are to be found both in the transformation of the running of the Muslim organisations and in establishing spaces where the people in charge of various philosophical and religious norms can come together to debate and work. In this setting, the public institutions, such as the schools or local authorities, for example, has to be stimulated to find the other in the expression of its diversity. Thus, one of the most conclusive results of the “Faiths and Social Cohesion” project in Rome is undoubtedly the setting up of the cooperation networks backed by common and durable interests for integration and peace.

If the strategy set up within the project is in accordance with the general principles of the recent Social Welfare Act<sup>72</sup> which envisages actions being planned on the basis of a needs analysis involving all the private and public agents in the area, it can be seen that only a critical reflection by the social players of their own interpretations of the Other and their relations with the Other can lead to an effective work of exchange and working together, even more so as the autochthones and immigrants, Muslims and non-Muslims, legal or illegal immigrants, etc. do not enjoy the same situation of equality in the political, cultural and social arena. In such a complex context, only a long-term, programmed and sustained contact can allow the mistrust to be transformed into real participation.

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