



Viewpoint

Planning, pluralism and religious diversity: Critically reconsidering the spatial regulation of mosques in Italy starting from a much debated law in the Lombardy region



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ABSTRACT

Religious diversity has significant consequences on the urban environment, and primarily because of the new spaces that it entails. These spaces engender complex problems of regulation, including specific issues related to urban planning. This article will mainly consider the current situation in Italy. Its focus will be on the region of Lombardy, in northern Italy, and on the newly-introduced regulations governing the construction and location of minority places of worship (and of mosques in particular). The example of the region's planning policies and regulations offers an opportunity for a critical rethinking of certain fundamental issues related to urban planning for multiculturalism and diversity. In this perspective, the article stresses the importance of focusing also on the role of planning and building rules and laws in order to protect and promote (religious) diversity and pluralism.

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1. Introduction: pluralism, religion, and urban planning

In recent times, regulations governing religious practices in European cities have generated widespread debate in many countries. In fact, the growing religious diversity of many cities has significant consequences on the urban environment; consider the new spaces that it entails (e.g. places of worship and burial grounds) and the new forms of expression in public (e.g. types of dress connoting a particular religious conviction, such as the Islamic veil or the Sikh turban). These spaces and forms of public expression engender complex problems of regulation, including specific questions related to urban planning.

In these circumstances, the otherwise abstract issues of cultural pluralism and religious freedoms suddenly become concrete and urgent in specific urban contexts (Moroni & Weberman, 2016). Consider, for instance, when a religious minority applies to the local council for planning permission to build a place of worship: in many cases, in several European countries, such applications run the risk of encountering forms of resistance – for instance, by local authorities, politicians or grassroots movements – and the objection to the proposed scheme is often framed in terms of planning issues (for some examples in various countries, see for instance: Dunn, 2001; Gale, 2005; Gale & Naylor, 2002; Germain & Gagnon, 2003; Isin & Siemiatycki, 2002; Jonker,

2005; Kuppinger, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Landman & Wessels, 2005; Qadeer & Chaudhry, 2000; Saint-Blancat & Schmidt di Friedberg, 2005; Torreken, 2013; Vahed & Vahed, 2014; Villaroman, 2012).

Many planning theorists have attempted to untangle the complex web of issues concerning urban pluralism and diversity in Western cities, sometimes doing so with specific reference to religious diversity (Burayidi, 2000a, 2015; Binnie, Holloway, Millington, & Young, 2006; Dwyer, 2015; Dwyer, Tse, & Ley, 2016; Eade, 2011; McClymont, 2015; Murtagh & Ellis, 2010; Qadeer, 1997, 2016).¹ The main aim of this article is to contribute to this debate on planning and religious diversity. Questions of religion in the urban space are very specific. They differ from cases in which other major issues of diversity in Western cities (for instance, sexual preferences) are at stake. However, it seems to us that some of the ideas presented in this article (see in particular Section 4) can be extended to other instances in which complex problems of conflicting diversities arise, in particular when spatial regulation (e.g. building rules, zoning ordinances, and urban policies) is used as a tool to manage, directly or indirectly, these questions (see for instance Chiodelli 2017; Mazza, 2016, Yiftachel, 1998 for some examples of the use of spatial regulation to govern ethnic and social diversity).

In particular, this article stresses the importance of focusing theoretically not on positive actions, but on the role of planning and building

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¹ For a discussion on the differences between religion diversity and religion pluralism see Giordan and Pace (2014). Usually, 'pluralism' refers to the normative-regulatory level, while 'diversity' refers to the descriptive-empirical one.

rules, which is sometimes neglected in the discussion of many planning theorists on questions of pluralism. The starting point of our discussion is the case of a new planning law governing the construction and location of places of worship in the Lombardy region of Italy.² Although the issue concerns various religious minorities, this article will focus on Islam and hence on the construction of mosques, which in Italy (as elsewhere) is a frequent target of local government opposition. What concerns us here is not so much the current legislation of the Lombard authorities per se, as the example that these regional regulations furnish for a critical rethinking of some fundamental issues currently affecting several Western countries and cities. In fact, the planning restrictions introduced by the Lombardy region are similar to restrictions in force in other Western countries (see for instance Gale, 2005, on the UK; Kuppinger, 2014a, on Germany; Torrekens, 2013, on Belgium; and Villaroman, 2012, on Australia).

The article is divided into four sections. The first section briefly describes the characteristics of religious diversity in Italy and its spatial repercussions; the second focuses on the case of the regulations governing the construction of places of worship in Lombardy, Italy. These two sections are mainly empirical and interpretative. The third section contributes to the field of planning theory by describing ways and means to guarantee pluralism in cities through new planning rules. It suggests some theoretical guidelines for reforming planning systems in order to promote and protect (religious) diversity. This section is mainly critical and normative. The last section draws general conclusions.

2. The factual and legal context: religious diversity in Italy

2.1. Immigration and religions in Italy

Compared with other European countries, the phenomenon of immigration is relatively recent in Italy. It was not until the 1970s that the country began to see a flow of immigrants, an influx that peaked in the 1990s. In 1971 the number of immigrants residing in Italy stood at around 120,000 (barely 0.2% of the population). In 1991 this figure was 356,000 (around 0.6% of the resident population). By 2016 the proportion had risen to 5,026,000 (8.3% of the overall population) (ISTAT, 2016).³ According to projections by ISTAT (2011), the number of immigrants in Italy will significantly increase in the coming years: the proportion of immigrants will rise to 14.6% in 2030: that is, 9.5 million immigrants out of 63.5 million residents.⁴

These immigrants coming to settle in the country also bring customs and religious beliefs that differ from the traditional Catholic ones. According to IDOS – Centro Studi e Ricerche (2016), 32.0% of immigrants in Italy are Muslims (1,609,000), 30.7% are Orthodox Christians (1,541,000), 18.1% Catholics (908,000), 5.0% Protestants (255,000), 3.0% Hindus (149,000), 2.2% Buddhists (111,000) (on this topic, see also ISTAT, 2015). Hence, Italy is today characterized by a stable population of non-Catholic residents, for the most part immigrants (the number of Italian non-Catholic worshippers is still very small),⁵ including a sizeable number of Muslims (Allievi, 2000a, 2000b). Islam is not only the religion practised by a third of the immigrants in Italy; it is also the country's second religion after Catholicism (Introvigne & Zoccatelli, 2013).

² A very similar law has been recently approved (April 2016) by the Veneto Regional Council, Italy (Regional Law 12/2016).

³ These data do not account for immigrants illegally present in Italy, who, according to Caritas and Migrantes (2012), today number around 500,000.

⁴ Obviously, these data do not take into account the so-called 'second generation' (immigrant children who are born and grow up in the receiving country). At present, second-generation immigrants in Italy are not significant in quantitative terms. However, their number is increasing rapidly (Caritas & Migrantes, 2012; ISTAT, 2012). For a theoretical overview on the features and specificities of immigration in Italy, see for instance: Bonifazi (2007); Colombo (2012); Sciortino and Colombo (2003).

⁵ For instance, Italian converts to Islam number about 70,000 according to the Italian Union of Islamic Communities; Italian Jews amount to around 24,000 (Pace, 2013b).

The fact that, in recent years, Italy has experienced a shift from a Catholic majority to a tapestry of diverse religions (Pace, 2013a) is inevitably causing radical changes in the Italian social fabric, since Italy was for centuries a staunchly Roman Catholic country (and Catholicism continues to be the principal religion practised by those born in the country).

Despite the significant growth of the number of migrants, Italy does not yet seem ready to cope with this ethnic and religious diversity, in particular from the point of view of public institutions. We shall analyse the questions related to national, regional and local legislation concerned with religious diversity in the following sections. Here we point out that the backdrop to the legal and planning issues that we will investigate is, more generally, the lack of a coherent model of integration of (or relations with) migrants in Italy, so that "conflicting approaches have prevailed in different moments, characterizing different laws" (Allievi, 2010a, p. 91). A sort of 'implicit' approach to integration has emerged. It is characterized by spontaneous and uncoordinated measures focused in particular on regulating labour recruitment at the national level, and leaving the other aspects of migrants' inclusion to be managed by local administrations and civil society organizations (Caponio, 2010; Russo Spena, 2010). Another feature of this 'Italian model' is the fact that "there has been a tendency towards seeing emergency measures as the norm and of representing the arrival of immigrants in terms of invasion. This latter point has strongly conditioned relations between institutions and migrants, and the perception of migrants among the host society" (Russo Spena, 2010, p. 166). These characteristics of the 'Italian model' also emerge clearly when we consider planning questions related to the construction of new mosques: as we shall show, this issue is still treated as an emergency matter.

2.2. The urban dimension of religious diversity in Italy

The significant and permanent presence of non-Catholic immigrants in Italy has major consequences also on the urban space. One of these consequences is the emergence of new places, some of which are specifically assigned for religious purposes (e.g. places of worship and burial grounds), while others are related to a particular practice influenced by religion (e.g. *halal* butchers). Further novelties include new patterns affecting both individual behaviour (dress codes like the Islamic veil or the Sikh turban), and collective ones (such as collective rituals linked to religious practices or calendars) in the public sphere and space, as well as the appearance of temporary spaces characterized by the codes or sensitivities of a specific religious minority – for instance, an area of a park where a group of Muslims gathers regularly at certain hours of the day (Agrawal, 2008; Allievi, 2000b; Becci, Burchardt, & Giorda, 2016; Chiodelli, 2015; Gökarkınel, 2009; Knott & Vasquez, 2014; Knowles, 2013; Kuppinger, 2014c).

In Italy, Islam in particular is having a significant impact on city spaces. One of the principal Muslim spatial 'markers' affecting the urban landscape is represented by Islamic places of worship (Chiodelli, 2015; Bombardieri, 2011).⁶ In Italy there are two main types of Muslim places of worship.⁷ The first is the purpose-built mosque (or formal mosque), usually in the classic form of a building complete with a dome, minarets and Arabic script or symbols. The second is the informal prayer-hall,⁸ which is usually smaller, sometimes temporary, often arranged in a former warehouse, private apartment or shop (Allievi, 2010b). The informal prayer room responds to the Muslim's everyday liturgical needs, but it does not achieve the objective of establishing the public recognition and

⁶ See Pace (2013c) for an overview on the places of worship of various religious minorities in Italy.

⁷ For a discussion on types of Muslim places of worship in Italy and Europe, see Allievi (2009).

⁸ In the literature, they are sometimes also referred to as *musallah* (*musallay* in the plural).

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