Discussions in the public sphere about Islam in Europe have become more and more crucial in defining the symbolic integration of Muslim communities. Cultural conflicts related to Islam in the public space have erupted in many countries of Europe, mainly over Islamic symbols, which have become increasingly visible. Moreover, the content of discussions on immigration has tended to shift to the cultural and symbolic level: political actors, media, intellectuals, all focus their attention on some presupposed Islamic specificities. The immigrant, in many variable scenes, has progressively become “Muslim,” both in his/her perception by the host societies and in his/her self-perception. Clearly, the use of the religious argument in the public debate has led to the marginalization of other social issues, and many questions are more and more frequently debated on religious grounds. Immigration, in a word, tends to be “Islamized.” Reactive identities (i.e., identities defined in opposition to others) become more salient and “act” specifically as such in the cultural, political, and religious field—both for the immigrants and for the autochtonous populations.

It becomes important, then, to analyse the process by which the discussion on the presence of immigrants has gradually shifted towards identification on religious grounds, particularly as far as Islam is concerned. However, though much attention (including that of the academic institutions: studies, researches, papers, dissertations, etc.) has been given to Muslim individuals and communities in Europe, relatively little research has focused on the “other side” of the processes of integration. The reasons for this change are manifold. Some are connected with the world of migrations, and the process of progressive stabilization and settlement of migrants in the different countries, particularly with the passage from the first generation of migrants to succeeding generations of new Europeans. Then there are reasons connected with the emergence of Islam as a disruptive element, also on the symbolic plane: as a global geo-political actor from the local crises connected with Islam (Afghanistan, Algeria, Bosnia, Palestine, Chechnya, and many others) up to transnational Islamic terrorism and the impact of the terrorist attacks upon the Twin Towers, and then, still in the West, the attacks upon Madrid and London; as an instrument and interpretative category (from Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington onwards, in a very widespread literature, especially its more popular versions); and as a social and political actor of ever greater importance, particularly in the countries of origin of the European immigrants.

But there are also long-term reasons internal to the European West, which are not only specific to Islam but also more in general to the position of religion in society. The last thirty years in particular have led to a radical transformation of the religious “field” in various European countries, which have become more and more religiously plural. These changes were taking place in a period during which the presence of religion in the public sphere was, in contrast to earlier periods in the recent history of Europe, experiencing a resurgence. This resurgence was connected as much with processes of globalization and their cultural consequences as with the effects of the increasing visibility of “religion” in the media. It may even seem that in public discussion Islam has taken on a crucial role among other religions precisely because it is perceived to represent the most conspicuous case of “traditional” religion, resisting to be exclusively relegated to the private sphere. The debate on Islam, with the historical and symbolic overload it carries with it, has started to dominate public discussions about the “pluralisation” of Europe. Consequently, the public discussions about Islam seem to be the means by which Western societies discuss their recent and not yet fully understood evolutions and tendencies.

In this context, immigrants are increasingly seen as Muslims, rather than as workers, students, parents, children, etc. In other words, society tends to define them by their (pre-supposed) identities rather than by their social roles. Thereby, the category of diversity, but also those of otherness (if not extraneousness) and even incompatibility, are being re-introduced in situations where such categories had previously been excluded because they no longer made much sense. For instance, second generation new Europeans, who can no longer be considered immigrants and in fact have become less and less “other,” are now being “Islamized,” which means that they may well become reconstrued as “other,” different, and even extraneous.

This debate has progressively invaded the public space in several European countries: in politics, media, certain religious considerations, and popular essays. But elements from the public debate have entered sociological praxis and analysis as well. Though the Montecatini Workshop only partially succeeded in its attempt to attract new researches and new researchers on these issues (many of the proposals submitted fell out of the framework of the workshop theme), nevertheless it managed to offer a high calibre of presentations and discussions that have permitted an extraordinary rich debate on the different national cases.

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