

Home prayer, unattended funerals and social responsibility: Muslims in Italy and the coronavirus outbreak (March-May 2020)¹

Keywords

COVID-19, Muslims in Denmark, mosques, postsecular society,

Preliminary remarks: the public religious scene and the COVID-19 outbreak in Italy²

¹ As everywhere else, in Italy, too, the COVID-19 epidemic is still (26.02.2021) a massive issue on the public scene from both a purely medical and a general social point of view. Summer 2020 was characterized by a general relaxation of the restrictions imposed on daily life in spring, but by autumn, with the daily infection rate back on the rise, the Italian government once again began issuing a series of measures to limit general social interaction. However, the implementation of an overall strict lockdown on the order of the one enforced from March to May 2020 has been avoided. Throughout the article I will limit my analysis to the first period of the epidemic, i.e. from the beginning of the lockdown until the first reopening phase (9 March – 2 May 2020).

² On the impact of the government's anti-COVID measures on the religious life of Italian Catholics, and on the sensitive legal aspects contained in the prime minister's provisions, some scholarly literature is already available: see for example (Ferrari 2020); (Aderò 2020).

Abstract Sadly, in 2020 Italy was one of the countries hardest hit by coronavirus (by 26 February 2021 2020: 2,868,435 infected; 96,974 dead). All religious communities in Italy had to respond quickly and clearly to a common and invisible threat, while providing guidance and support to their local congregations and complying with government provisions in order to curb the spread of the virus. From 9 March to 2 May 2020, Italy's approximately 2.9 million Muslims, like all other residents, had to abide by the country's strict stay-at-home orders, refraining from going out except for emergencies and to buy food. In the present article, I will make use of selected texts published on the official websites of the *Unione delle Comunità e Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia (UCOII – Union of Islamic congregations and organizations in Italy – اتحاد الهيئات والجاليات الإسلامية في إيطاليا)* and of the *Associazione Islamica Italiana degli Imam e delle Guide Religiose (Italian Islamic Association of Imams and Religious Guides; الجمعية الإسلامية الإيطالية للأئمة والمرشدين)* to determine and discuss: 1) which practices of the Italian Islamic community were most affected by the epidemic, and 2) how Italian Muslims carried out various symbolic and social initiatives to demonstrate their active participation in the common fight against the spread of the virus.

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Italy has been one of the countries hardest hit by COVID-19. As of 26 February 2021, 2,868,435 cases and 96,974 deaths have been recorded nationwide, making it the country with the seventh-highest death rate worldwide, at 1,605 x 1,000,000 inhabitants).³

In an attempt to slow the spread of the disease and shield the healthcare system from a possible collapse caused by a quick and massive onslaught of patients, the Italian government adopted a series of increasingly harsh measures, culminating in an almost complete lockdown of the population on 9 March 2020. On that day, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte extended to the entire national territory the quarantine already implemented in Lombardy and 14 other northern Italian provinces, forcing the Italian population to stay home. In the following days, all commercial activity (with the exception of supermarkets and pharmacies), and all businesses and industries considered non-essential, were forced to remain closed. People's freedom of movement was drastically restricted, and every person found outdoors had to prove they had a valid reason to be on the move. At that time, the result was probably the largest and longest lockdown in the history of Europe, and certainly the harshest response taken in any region of the world (except China) against the spread of the virus. The lockdown was slowly and gradually eased starting 4 May 2020, as Italy embarked upon a partial normalization of social life.

During the almost two-month period of total lockdown, all collective activities were strictly forbidden. This general prohibition extended to all forms of communal religious rituals and practices, which were therefore completely banned. The Catholic Church fully complied with the government's injunctions⁴ and local bishops cancelled all daily masses and other indoor practices (e.g. baptism, marriage) and heavily restricted access to churches, even for individuals who only wished to pray;⁵ attendance at funerals was forbidden, and pilgrimages, devotional processions and other public rituals were suspended.⁶

The ban on collective ceremonies – especially those playing a relevant social role like Sunday morning mass, which is normally attended not only for its religious significance but also as an occasion to meet up with relatives and friends – had a profound impact on Italian Catholics. Masses were streamed online on several different portals and websites for the benefit of the faithful,⁷ but this solution could evidently not fully compensate the absence of physically perceptible social contact among the

3 Data obtained from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>.

4 “Church and state in Italy work together to prevent spread of coronavirus”, Vatican News, 9 March 2020 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-03/church-state-in-italy-cooperate-to-halt-spread-of-coronavirus.print.html>

5 As prophylactic anti-virus measures inside the churches, praying individuals had to stay at least one meter apart. Holy water fonts were emptied, making it impossible to perform spiritual/ritual cleansing before prayer (on these restrictions see Allen 2020).

participants, which is a constituent part of the liturgy.⁸ The images of closed churches, at a time when many believers expressed a dramatic need for divine support, had a tremendous psychological effect on the minds of Catholics, the consequences of which will have to be analysed in the near future.⁹

Church funerals (and funerary ceremonies in general) could not be held, and the inability to bid deceased relatives a final farewell had a major emotional impact on the population, and led to dismay and anxiety even in completely secular Italians. In some cities in Northern Italy that were especially hard-hit by the virus, authorities had problems storing the high number of coffins. Churches offered to store them, while the Italian Army volunteered to transport some of these coffins from churches and morgues to cemeteries.¹⁰

Muslims in Italy¹¹ (est. 2,600,000, or 4.3% of the population,¹² making it the country's second-largest religious community)¹³ were also directly hit by the strict lockdown ordered by the gov-

6 An analysis of the way local Church authorities implemented the set of norms issued by the central government could reveal the extent to which there was room for differences of interpretation.

7 See for example: <http://messeindiretta.altervista.org/>; <https://www.santantonio.org/it/live-streaming>; <https://www.sanfrancescopatrono-ditalia.it/messa-diretta-streaming-oggi>; concerning the canonical problem connected with streaming mass as a substitution for in-church mass, see the guidelines issued by the Conference of Italian Bishops (CEI): <https://chiciseparera.chiesacattolica.it/celebrare-in-diretta-tv-o-in-streaming/>. 8 The physical proximity of the attendees at a Catholic mass is exemplified in the ritual of exchanging “the sign of peace” (historically: “kiss of peace”), when the congregation shake hands with one another. The practice generally marks the beginning of the Eucharist in the Roman Liturgy (or of another other moment of the mass, according to the different traditions) and represents the unity and fraternity of the body of the Church before God. Church officials

have recommended to substitute it with an exchange of eye contact.

9 It should be mentioned that for Easter, the leader of Italy's opposition far-right Lega party issued a request to have Churches exceptionally opened – with certain health restrictions in place – in order to allow the faithful to attend the holy celebration of the feast. The Catholic Church did not officially support this politically motivated request, which was eventually dismissed.

10 On the dramatic situation in some areas of Northern Italy, see a first-hand description (Hornig-Stöhr 2020).

11 Sociologically and culturally speaking, Muslims in Italy comprise several different layers and groups (for example: recent converts to Islam, lifelong Muslims, local Italians, Italians from immigrant families, and newly arrived immigrants). For the purposes and the scope of the present paper, I will not distinguish among these different groups. I believe that, faced with a common threat, the various segments of the Islamic community in Italy largely blurred their internal cultural divides, even if it cannot be ruled out that in some instances

cultural and sociological background may have played a role in prompting different attitudes and responses to the crisis. This point could be the topic of further research.

12 A great deal of uncertainty still surrounds the total number of Muslims in Italy. Here I am using the figures calculated by Italian sociologist Fabrizio Ciocca (Ciocca 2019, 29-40; and see in particular his online updated statistical résumé Ciocca 2019b). The present article is not concerned with the history of the presence of the Islamic religion in Italy nor with the general cultural and sociological issues connected with the growth of Islam in the country. On both topics the available literature is vast. I will merely refer the reader to two introductory articles (Vincenzo 2010), (Roggero 2002), as well as to the full-fledged survey by (Ciocca 2019), which provides information and further bibliography.

13 Orthodox Christianity, the followers of which are estimated to be around 1.800.000, is the second-largest Christian denomination in Italy after Catholicism (Lauritzen 2011).

ernment. All the country's Islamic associations and groups immediately complied with the containment measures taken by the public authorities and halted all collective rituals, closing all mosques and prayer halls. Muslim scholars started streaming sermons, and giving talks and presentations on the internet to provide guidance to local congregations, who were urged to pray at home with their families.

While many aspects of Islamic daily life remained less affected by the COVID-19 emergency, the concerns of the Muslim communities had to focus on two fundamental Islamic rituals, which became impossible to perform under the lockdown: 1) the Friday noon congregational prayer (*salāt al-jum'ā*), with its characteristic Friday sermon (*khutba*);¹⁴ and 2) funerals, including bathing the corpse (*ghusl*) and the prayer for dead (*salāt al-janāza*).

In what follows, I will try to briefly describe some of the solutions that Italian Islamic communities found to the theological and practical problems connected with the temporary cancellation of these two constituent parts of their collective life. Along these lines, I will analyse how Italian Muslims communicated, both among themselves and to the wider society, their efforts to face the pandemic's spread through the country.

As a documentary basis for my analysis, I will select various written and audio-visual sources, mostly in Italian and partially in Arabic, available online and produced by the *Unione delle Comunità e Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia* (Union of the Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy: UCOII اتحاد الهيئات والجاليات الإسلامية في إيطاليا).

The absence of a single institution representing the majority of Italian Muslims, and the lack of a committee coordinating the existing Muslim groups and organizations, has made for a wide array of Italian Islamic associations, whose relationship with one another is often characterized by rivalry and competition.¹⁵ The conflictive relationships among the Italian Muslim organizations has prevented the Italian state from officially recognizing Islam as a religious community on the same level as other communities and denominations (e.g. the Lutheran Church, the Jewish Community, two different Buddhist groups, and many others), which have signed a memorandum of understanding – *intesa* in Italian – with the authorities.¹⁶

The *Union of the Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy* (hereinafter UCOII), which has often come under sharp

14 As the month of Ramadan started on 23 April 2020, the issue of the tarāwih supererogatory prayers was also raised.

15 About the different Islamic associations active in Italy, each of which represents a different social, cultural or theological/ideological fraction of the Islamic public scene in the country, see (Angelucci 2014), (Bombardieri 2014), (Piccinini 2019).

16 For the complete list of the religious communities and confessions which have signed an agreement-memorandum with the Italian state, see; http://presidenza.governo.it/USRI/confessioni/intese_indice.html. On the long-debated and still unresolved issue of signing a memorandum of understanding with an officially acknowledgeable and fully representative Islamic organisation in Italy there is a notable bibliography in Italian: see for example (Ferrari 2017), (Angelucci 2018), (Conti 2018).

criticism for its alleged ties to the Muslim Brotherhood (which the group has consistently denied),¹⁷ is probably the largest and certainly the most active Muslim organisation in Italy. UCOII, which manages 153 local associations, 80 mosques and 300 prayer halls, has for many years been a dynamic presence on the public stage, on the internet, and on social media, in a clear endeavour to gain followers, influence and prestige, in hopes of presenting itself as the sole reliable representative of Italian Muslims. During the most acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis, UCOII activated all the communication tools at its disposal to tackle and ease the bewilderment, dismay and fear spreading among Italian Muslims. In the perspective of the present paper, therefore, the texts and documents produced by UCOII have the advantage of being focused on the real, ongoing situation, and of directly aiming at achieving Islamic solutions to the problems facing Italian Muslim communities as a result of the pandemic and lockdown.

I will also make use of several documents in both Arabic and Italian posted on the Facebook page of the *Associazione Islamica Italiana degli Imam e delle Guide Religiose* (Italian Islamic Association of Imams and Religious Guides; الجمعية الإسلامية الإيطالية; للأئمة والمرشدين; hereinafter *Associazione*), founded in 2011 with the aim of providing educational support to local imams. The *Associazione* also functions as a committee of Islamic legal experts in charge of issuing fatwas for the Italian Muslim community. It works in close connection with UCOII, which treats to the *Associazione's* fatwas, analyses and statements as valid legal perspectives that believers can safely follow.

I will critically scrutinize the selected corpus, following the common practice of textual analysis in a religious-oriented context.¹⁸

Pray at home and stay safe! The issue of the salāt al-jum'a

As the mosques were shut down due to the lockdown order issued by the Italian government, the country's Islamic communities were deprived of one of their main centres of congregation and communication. To keep alive their connections with the faithful, all Muslim organizations in Italy ramped up their online activities, providing the public with live and recorded speeches and sermons, mostly aimed at analysing the situation and pro-

¹⁷ Some press sources from 2017 point to significant Qatari economic backing for UCOII (https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2017/02/02/accordo-islam-italia_n_14572256.html).

¹⁸ See for example: (al-Azami 2016); (Wijsen-von Stuckrad 2016).

viding reliable advice to face the unusual and dramatic circumstances. After closing all its mosques and prayer halls on 5 March,¹⁹ on 6 March UCOII opened a special hotline, along with a WhatsApp number, to take questions from local Muslims.

The need to strictly comply with the guidelines issued by the government was repeatedly underlined,²⁰ as well as practical information about the virus, how it spreads, and how best to avoid it.²¹

Campaigns and collective initiatives were launched on social media to nurture bonds among fellow Muslims stuck in physical isolation. In particular, at the beginning of Ramadan (24 April 2020), the Associazione launched the community campaign *Una moschea a casa nostra* (A mosque at home – في بيتنا مسجد) with the aim of transforming “our homes into an oasis of science, knowledge, engagement, and worship”. In connection with this campaign, the Associazione posted on Facebook a written document in Arabic and Italian giving instructions on how to organize a “family mosque” at home during Ramadan, accompanied by a selection of Hadiths that justified and supported the practice of home prayer in case of necessity.

It seems that large-scale use of social media allowed Muslims in Italy to rapidly switch to a kind of “mixed online/domestic modus”, which offered a suitable environment to carry out the daily prayers and *du‘ā’s*, and to create a suitable spiritual atmosphere for Ramadan.²²

However, the strict Italian lockdown presented Muslims with a problem that the internet and social media could not easily resolve. As all the mosques and prayer halls were closed, it was impossible to perform the mandatory collective rituals on Fridays at noon: namely, listening to the sermon of the preacher and then carrying out the congregational prayer.

19 The faithful were informed about the closures through a Circular Letter to the Community (*Circolare Comunitaria* 01/2020) in Italian. The document was uploaded to UCOII’s website (<https://www.ucoii.org/2020/03/05/01-2020-disposizioni-emergenza-coronavirus-per-le-comunita-islamiche/>) and posted on the group’s Facebook page.

20 See the post in Italian on the Facebook page of the Associazione

on 9 March: *Carissimi vi chiediamo la massima collaborazione* (Dear all, we ask for your full cooperation). The Associazione posted on its Facebook page a link to the speech of the prime minister, where he declared the implementation of the nationwide lockdown.

21 Examples of the posts on the Facebook page of the Associazione: 10 recommendations in Arabic to prevent COVID-19 infection (7

March 2020); *Insieme con responsabilità e consapevolezza* (Together with responsibility and awareness): press release by the Associazione on its Facebook page, 10 March 2020.

22 See (Bongarrà 2020) and the 22 message by *‘Ibādāt athnā’ al-makth fi al-buyūt* posted on the Facebook page of the Associazione on 5 April 2020.

This thorny issue faced all the Muslim communities living in countries with a full lockdown in force. Speeches and even prayers could be easily streamed online so that the faithful could follow them live, but doubt arose about the legal value of a prayer performed by someone standing behind an imam whose presence is merely virtual.²³

The issue of praying behind an imam *in absentia* is not actually a new one in the Islamic world. Already the spread of radio brought the topic to the attention of important Muslim legal experts. Al-Azhar's shaykh Hasanayn Muhammad Makhlūf in 1950 issued a fatwa according to which "It is not sufficient to hear the *khutba* and the movements of the imam from a radio" to make the Friday communal prayer legally acceptable. The argument in support of this conclusion is that the prayer at noon on Fridays is valid only if performed collectively, as the Prophet himself performed it in a group setting. The faithful must follow the way the Prophet used to pray according to the Hadith: "Pray as you saw me praying – *Sallū kamā ra'yatumūnī 'usallī*".²⁴ The opinion of Makhlūf was contradicted by Moroccan Hadith scholar Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Siddīq al-Ghumārī (d. 1960), who in 1956 published a very dense booklet titled *al-Iqnā' bi-siḥhat salāt al-jum'a fī al-manzil khalfā al-midhyā'* ("Convincing people that the Friday communal prayer is valid when performed at home behind a radio set").²⁵ In the text, the Moroccan scholar posed only two conditions for the legal acceptability of this form of prayer: that the imam and the praying person are acting synchronically, and that at least two individuals are praying together behind the radio.

The debate on the possibility of praying *al-jum'a* in absentia and/or praying it at home by creating a small *jamā'a* ("group") with one's own family members was abruptly refuelled by the unprecedented obstacles of the COVID-19 pandemic and by the exponentially increased usage of online surrogates for many other religious activities.

Many Muslim religious authorities were urged to take a clear stance on this point. The overall result worldwide was that only a minority considered as licit a Friday prayer performed behind a virtually present imam and among a group of virtual congregants via a ceremony streamed online. This was the unequivocal position of Umar Al-Qadri, the head of the Islamic Centre in Ireland, in his fatwa issued on 12 March 2020.²⁶ Ahmad Kutty, head of the Islamic Institute of Toronto, with some reservations, sid-

23 The practice of uploading videos of *khutbas*, e.g. on YouTube, was already widespread before the coronavirus crisis: see (Hirschkind 2012).

24 The fatwa can be read in the collection *al-Fatāwā al-islāmiyya min dār al-iftā' al-misriyya*, volume 1, Cairo: Wizārat al-awqāf, 1980, 85.

25 The book was published in Cairo at the *Maktabat al-ta'lif*, n.d. The year of publication is not stated on the cover but can be gleaned from a date mentioned inside the book.

26 <http://www.islamiccentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/Fatwa-on-Permissibility-of-Online-Jumua-Taraweeh-during-Covid19-Islamic-Centre-of-Ireland-2.pdf> and the following <http://www.islamiccentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/Statement-after-Detailed-Fatwa-from-Shaykh-Dr-Umar-Al-Qadri-Final.pdf>.

ed in favour of the validity of the online *jum'ā*, but strictly as a temporary remedy to cope with the exceptional circumstances at hand.²⁷ Likewise, UCLA-based Professor Khaled Abu al-Fadl, head of the *Usuli Institute* in Los Angeles, streamed his *khutbas* and virtual Friday prayers on the website of the institute.²⁸

While dismissing the acceptability of online prayer,²⁹ some other Islamic authorities proposed holding the congregational prayer at home with a minimal presence of three people (including the imam), all of them members of the family, so as to respect the restrictions imposed on public gatherings. This view was supported by Texas-based Egyptian scholar Dr Muhammad Saleh, a religious adviser for Huda TV, who stated that three people were sufficient to establish a *jamā'a*, while the *khutba* could be limited to a series of simple invocations and pieces of advice.³⁰ The same position was taken by Saeed Qureshi, imam of the *Dar al-Islah* group in Teaneck Township of Bergen County, New Jersey, who published his own short guide on how to perform *jum'ā* at home.³¹ In the Arab world this kind of home *jum'ā* was considered licit by shaykh Khālid 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Rifā'i, one of the promoters of the website *Islam Way – Tariq al-Islam*.³² In India, renowned preacher Zakir Naik, founder of the international satellite channel *Peace TV*, also voiced his support for the acceptability of home *jum'ā*.³³

Still, the majority of Muslim legal institutions and experts considered unacceptable both the virtual prayer with an imam in absentia and the home *jum'ā*.³⁴ Most Muslim scholars stated that since the COVID-19 pandemic posed a serious risk to congregants' health, there was a legally valid justification to outright miss the communal prayer. Instead of the *jum'ā*, the faithful were

27 The fatwa is dated 2 April 2020: *On Holding Virtual/Online Jumu'ahs and Taraweeh Salats During COVID-19 Precautions* and it is published under <https://islam.ca/virtual-jumuah-and-taraweeh-during-covid>.

28 <https://www.usuli.org>.

29 For an interesting excursus on the challenges contained in the "virtualization" of the Islamic sacred sphere triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic see (Anwar 2020).

30 On Dr Muhammad Saleh see: <https://www.drmsalah.com/biography>; <https://www.huda.tv/>;

<http://www.hudaonlineacademy.com/?frcourse=1370547708>; the fatwa in English was released in a video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvaAzzFkQo8> and in a TV program on Huda TV (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17jRhLCWYro>).

31 <http://www.darulislah.org/index.php/simple-procedure-for-jummah-at-home/>

32 Arabic fatwa posted on the website *IslamWay* on March 23: <https://ar.islamway.net/fatwa/78132/>.

33 See for example his YouTube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_hwp2C_S_U.

watch?v=M_hwp2C_S_U.

34 See for example the *Resident Fatwa Committee of the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America* (AMJA), *The European Council for Fatwa and Research*; *The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowment* (UAE); al-Azhar University; the *Rābitat al-ulamā' al-sūriyyīn* (in the person of Muhammad Sulaymān Nasrallāh al-Farrā') and many others. A quick survey of the different positions taken by the Islamic authorities worldwide in connection with these two issues can be found in Yasin 2020.

invited to perform the normal noon prayer (*zuhr*) at home, as the proper requirements to do so could easily be satisfied anywhere, without the need to introduce undue innovations.

In Italy, the Associazione took a clear stance in a communiqué posted on its Facebook page on 3 March 2020 (in Arabic) and on 5 March 2020 (in Italian), when the lockdown had still only been implemented in Northern Italy. The incumbent risk for the life of the believers and the consequent closing of the mosques to limit the spread of the virus were considered legally sufficient justifications for refraining from the fulfilment of the duty of praying together in the mosque behind a physically present imam. Believers under lockdown were invited to perform the normal noon prayer in the safety of their own homes.

On 13 March 2020, the Associazione posted a fatwa in Arabic and in Italian, in which it reaffirmed that the ongoing health risk was a fully justifying reason to miss the collective Friday prayer. The justification was valid also in connection with the “three times” mentioned in the Prophetic saying: “Whoever neglects three collective Friday prayers out of indifference, God will seal his heart”, a Hadith which had raised the worries of the Muslims in Northern Italy, where the lockdown had already lasted for three weeks.

Neither the Associazione nor UCOII directly and specifically discussed the possibility of performing the *jum'a* virtually and/or at home: the recommendation for believers to perform a standard noon prayer at home implicitly contained the refusal of the two other hypotheses. However, the Associazione explicitly confirmed its dismissal of the virtual *jum'a* and of the home *jum'a* on 3 April 2020, posting a link to a fatwa issued on that very day by the International Union of Muslim Scholars, where the organization headquartered in Qatar affirmed that in countries where the *jum'a* ritual was prohibited, the preferable (*al-rājih*) choice was to pray a common *zuhr*.

At the same time, to reinforce the importance of praying on Fridays, on 3 April 2020 the Associazione posted a speech in Arabic and Italian by Aboulkheir Breigheche, an imam in Trento (Northern Italy),³⁵ which underscored the importance of Fridays. In this way, Italian Muslims were reminded of the unique significance of Friday as a special day in the Islamic conception of time, despite the impossibility to duly and fully honouring it.

35 Aboulkheir Breigheche, a medical doctor of Syrian origin living in Trento, is an active (and sometimes controversial) personality in the Muslim communities of Northern Italy.

Funerals without attendance: the challenge of a solitary farewell

A further set of problems that the Italian Muslims had to face under the lockdown concerned funeral rituals. The measures taken by the government to prevent the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus made it impossible to carry out all the basic practices that make up the Islamic funeral: washing the corpse, wrapping it in the shroud and praying for the dead at the burial ceremony. Moreover, the strict quarantine dramatically impacted the very few Islamic cemeteries available in Italy, the usage of which is normally first reserved for local residents. The impossibility of flying the bodies out of the country, or even transporting them freely within Italian territory, led to shocking episodes like the one in Pisogne (Brescia, Lombardy, Northern Italy), where the body of Muslim lady who died on 18 March 2020 remained at home inside the coffin for a week. It was not possible to transport her to the cemetery of Brescia until 27 March 2020, when she was finally buried.³⁶

Starting from 20 March 2020, in an increasingly dramatic situation, UCOII and the Associazione started to look for solutions while launching the campaign *Degna sepoltura a tutti: non lasciamo indietro nessuno* ('A proper burial for all: no person left behind'). In a series of three live-streamed talks on 28, 29 and 30 March 2020, UCOII discussed the situation of the Muslim deceased with representatives of the local Islamic communities and presented proposals for immediate solutions. The situation began to noticeably improve as of early April, when new Islamic cemeteries were opened in Pontelongo, a small commune in the area of Padua (Veneto, Northern Italy), in Piacenza (Emilia-Romagna, Northern Italy) and Avellino (Campania, Southern Italy).³⁷

The doctrinal and legal background for performing funerals under lockdown in Italy was set in a fatwa issued in Italian and Arabic by the Associazione on 19 March 2020.³⁸ The main points of this juridical opinion are the following:

1) the *ghusl* can be substituted by *tayammum* or even completely skipped, if necessary. 2) The shroud (*kafan*) can be substituted by a common garment placed over the deceased's clothes, if possible; otherwise "the clothes they were wearing at death are themselves the *kafan*". 3) The *salāt al-janāza* ("prayer for the dead") can be performed by a single person in the presence of the body. Friends and family can carry out the *salāt al-*

36 The case was also covered by many different Italian news outlets: for example: <https://www.agi.it/cronaca/news/2020-03-24/coronavirus-musulmana-mortabrescia-7823443/>; <https://www.quibrescia.it/provincia/sebino-e-franciacorta/2020/03/26/pisogne-al-cimitero-la-donna-morta-vegliata-dalla-famiglia/559583/>

37 The exceptionally dire situation which Italian Muslims had to face in connection with the impossibility of carrying out funerals was also taken up by the international press: see for example <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/muslims-in-italy-struggle-to-bury-victims-of-the-pandemic-35030/>; <https://www.newframe.com/covid-19-shows-italys-lack-of-muslim-burial-spaces/>.

38 The fatwa was published on the Associazione's Facebook page on 19 March 2020. It can be downloaded as a PDF from the UCOII website: <https://ucoii.org/2020/03/19/coronavirus-fatwa-associazione-degli-imamper-i-riti-funebri>.

ghā'ib (“the prayer for the absentee”), which is a legally valid substitute for *salat al-janāza*, when the latter cannot be attended or performed. Finally, 4) the corpse should be buried in an Islamic cemetery but, should this prove impossible, it can also be buried in a non-Muslim cemetery.

These very flexible guidelines are in accordance with the positions taken by all the most renowned Islamic organizations in the world.³⁹ In particular, the Italian fatwa is directly inspired by a similar document issued by the European Council for Fatwa and Research at its extraordinary session from 25-28 March 2020. This institution, too, considered that the unprecedented circumstances allowed for a wide range of justifications for many practices that would otherwise be considered religiously unacceptable.⁴⁰ The UCOII also prepared a practical guide to the performance of funerals under coronavirus lockdown,⁴¹ where all the principles of the Associazione’s fatwa were implemented with reference to the concrete situations in which the local communities were forced to act.

It is interesting to note that the Italian fatwa does not address the issues connected with the possibility of granting the status of “martyr” (*shahīd*) to Muslims who die of COVID-19. By contrast, the text of the fatwa of the European Council for Fatwa and Research refers to a Hadith⁴² from which it can be inferred that a believer who dies of a pestilence (*tā'ūn*) will have a reward similar to that of a *shahīd*. Since COVID-19 can be categorized as a *tā'ūn*, its victims can be treated as *shuhadā' al-ākhirā* (‘martyrs of the Hereafter’).⁴³

Many institutions in the Islamic world have actually supported this view (for example the Egyptian *Dār al-iftā'* and the

39 For an interesting survey on how different Islamic authorities have coped with the problems posed by the pandemic for the performance of Muslim funerary rituals, see (Al-Dawoody-Finegan 2020).

40 See the source document in Arabic in the final communiqué of the session, fatwa number 19 in <https://www.e-cfr.org/blog/2020/04/01/>.

41 The guidelines for funeral rituals with instructions for the coronavirus emergency, in Italian, can

be downloaded at: <https://ucoii.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/VADEMECUM-RITUALITA-FUNEBRE-PER-LA-COMUNITA-ISLAMICA-IN-ITALIA-1-1.pdf>.

42 Hadith is transmitted by ‘Ā’isha and preserved in *Sahīh al-Bukhārī* (n. 5734): “Plague was a punishment which Allah used to send on whom He wished, but Allah made it a blessing for the believers. Everyone (among the believers) who remains patient in a land in which plague has

broken out and considers that nothing will befall him except what Allah has ordained for him, Allah will grant him a reward similar to that of a martyr”.

43 Formally, there are three different kinds of martyrs in Islam: *shahīd al-dunyā*, *shahīd al-ākhirā* and *shahīd al-dunyā wa-al-ākhirā* (*shahīd' al-ma'raka*). For a definition of each category see (Kohlberg 1997).

Dār al-iftā' of Dubai),⁴⁴ while underscoring the fact that the body of a victim of COVID-19 is that of a *shahīd al-ākhirā* and not that of a *shahīd al-dunyā wa al-ākhirā* ('martyr of this world and the Hereafter'). Therefore, it must go through the standard funerary procedure.

One might speculate as to why UCOII and the Associazione did not mention the possibility of considering COVID-19 victims as martyrs. The negative connotations that the word *shahīd*/martyr has acquired in the Western press, where it immediately evokes suicide bombers in the mind of less-knowledgeable readers, could possibly have played a role. The lack of any practical consequence on the funerary ritual for COVID-19 victims could also have pushed UCOII to avoid mentioning their potential status as martyrs.

Belonging to a common land: community suffering as forge of identity

Italy's unprecedented and dramatic experience with the COVID-19 pandemic plunged the whole country into a general state of dismay, discomfort, incertitude and anxiety not experienced in recent national history.

The prohibition on everyday interpersonal interaction, the impossibility of collectively using and enjoying outdoor and indoor public spaces, the restrictions on personal movement and public gatherings, and the suspension of all ceremonies and rituals which normally are carried out in groups, affected all the inhabitants of the country, irrespective of their religious, political or social positions. In a situation characterized by compulsory general isolation and a complete disruption of social ties, the nurturing of interpersonal connections became a collective problem to which expanded usage of all possible online tools could provide only a partial response.

It is apparent that Muslims in Italy made an immense effort to keep alive the bonds between isolated believers and their communities, on both a local and a national level. In this effort, moreover, Muslim organizations strived to communicate to the wider sectors of the Italian population the complex challenges facing their specific religious group, in an attempt to merge their own particular problems into the common and deeply felt bewilderment and pain affecting the society as a whole.

44 For the Egyptian *Dār al-iftā'*'s position, see the video where the Grand Mufti Shawqī 'Allām states that coronavirus victims will be *shahīds* of the hereafter, and therefore their bodies have to go through the regular funerary procedure on earth (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEApL_m_doI); for the Dubai *Dār al-iftā'*'s position, see <https://www.albayan.ae/across-the-uae/news-and-reports/2020-04-01-1.3818115>.

At the beginning of the harshest period of the lockdown, different sectors of Italian society began to spontaneously mobilize to create small public events, where people were able to foster and reinforce their collective bonds. A long series of evening flash-mobs were organized, where people came out on balconies, rooftops, and windows to sing together the national anthem, “Volare”, or other popular Italian songs, in an effort to find “a moment of joy in this moment of anxiety”⁴⁵ and to create a “community in the age of coronavirus”.⁴⁶ In a similar way, Italians were invited every day at noon to go out on their balconies or lean out their windows and join in a round of applause to thank all the doctors and nurses who were taking care of COVID-19 patients.⁴⁷ The motto *Andrà tutto bene* (“Everything’s going to be alright”) was written and repeated on social media, radio, TV, windows, shops and walls: it rapidly became a kind of secular mantra that people continuously reiterated to reassure and encourage each other.

In this framework of collective actions, UCOII, the Associazione, and many local Islamic associations also periodically organized and/or took part in collective activities to help people gather either virtually or in compliance with the government’s social distancing rules. Moreover, these initiatives were not specifically marked as Islamic, instead targeting the wider Italian public, which was directly involved, and aimed at merging the dismay in which the Muslims found themselves with the general suffering of the Italian people. Particularly important in this regard was the participation of the Muslim organizations in marking several national commemorations, during which people tried to reaffirm a sense of all belonging to a shared nation. Below I will simply list a series of such events, which I have selected from the Facebook page of UCOII and the Associazione.

On 19 March 2020, UCOII and the Associazione took part in the day of prayer for Italy launched by the Episcopal Conference of Italy (CEI), in which representatives from all Italy’s different religious groups participated. On 27 March 2020, UCOII’s president Yassin Lafram participated in an interfaith religious ceremony in the city of Bologna alongside the Chief Rabbi of the local Jewish community and the Catholic archbishop, to observe a minute of silence in memory of the victims of COVID-19.

On 28 March 2020 the Associazione posted a video produced by the Islamic cultural centre of Brescia under the title *In-*

45 (Horowitz 2020).

46 (Kozłowska – Todd 2020).

47 (Mackenzie 2020).

vocazione per l'Italia ('An invocation for Italy'),⁴⁸ a *du'ā'* in Italian, where the imam of Brescia, Amin al-Hazmi (of Yemenite origin), asks God to have mercy on the country and rapidly cast away the epidemic. On 12 April 2020, UCOII and the Associazione congratulated the Catholic faithful on the occasion of Easter 2020.⁴⁹

Besides the activities directly connected to religious life in Italy, UCOII and the Associazione promoted initiatives of general social interest to aid health officials in the fight against the pandemic. On 18 March 2020, UCOII's president Yassine Lafram invited all Muslims in Italy to donate blood to support hospitals and clinics. During the harshest period of the lockdown, UCOII and the Associazione periodically invited the faithful to collect money in order to buy face masks and distribute them among the population in several different cities and villages across Italy as a practical contribution to the common efforts to curb the pandemic.

To make clear Muslims' full participation in Italian society during the dramatic period of full lockdown, UCOII and the Associazione posted links to all the statements and press briefings by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, starting with his 9 March speech declaring the beginning of the nationwide lockdown. Finally, Yassine Lafram congratulated the Italian people on the occasion of Liberation Day, celebrated every 25 April. In Italy, Liberation Day is a deeply significant national holiday commemorating the end of the Second World War, of the Fascist regime and of the Nazi German occupation of Italy. Despite the lockdown, on that day some public ceremonies were organized to mark the date.

48 The video and the text can be found at: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1711321235675880&id=224862734321745&__tn__=K-R

49 The post raised some criticism by a small number of Muslims, who wrote negative comments to the post to the effect that a "good Muslim" should not congratulate non-Muslims on their religious festivities. These stray comments, however, were ignored in the thread. On the same day, the Associazione also posted the message that the Italian President delivered to the people on occasion of Easter 2020.

Conclusions. Alone and together: identity dynamics in the pandemic period

The COVID-19 pandemic remains a developing threat. In the summer of 2020, most of the world's countries started easing the draconian measures put in place over the past spring, allowing for a more or less limited reactivation of social and economic activities. In autumn, with infection rates again on the rise, many countries, including Italy, began doubling down once more, issuing new restrictions and prohibitions on social life. While complete lockdowns are more politically fraught than last

spring, the second and third wave of infections have seen them enforced in countries across Europe, and in Italy have brought renewed school closures and restrictions on domestic travel. Thus, every new day is faced with a mixture of hope and fear, while uncertainty hovers over the daily lives of most of the world's population.

It is still too early to begin a comprehensive assessment of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had across the many levels of collective life. Global responses to the challenge show a wide diversity due to the different health, economic and cultural circumstances across the areas hard hit by the pandemic, and the prospect of a common international response remains elusive. A time will come, however, when scholars from different branches of the humanities will be able to analyse the survival strategies and public health narratives developed by different human communities throughout the COVID-19 period.⁵⁰

The unprecedented situation Italians lived through from 9 March to 2 May 2020, and the severe and all-encompassing lockdown that the authorities imposed on the population, had a tremendous impact on the people's behaviour, psychology and social perceptions.⁵¹ In particular, the enormous difficulties that the Italian population had to face in order to retain structure in their daily lives, and the impossibility of engaging in normal social relationships, has engendered a deep collective trauma whose consequences and ramifications have yet to be fully understood. I hope that the very specific case I have focused on may provide a tiny but interesting contribution to a wider picture that will be more fully fleshed out in the future.

As a religious minority, Muslims in Italy under the spring 2020 lockdown had to face problems both specific to the community and common to all the population. The need to endure isolation and face the rupture of all normal social bonds was shared by Muslims and the Italian people at large. At the same time, trying come out of the solitude in which the population was forced had a specific importance for the Muslims: Islamic communities are scattered across different territories, neighbourhoods and rural areas, and the physical meeting on Fridays for the communal prayer plays a crucial role in maintaining the ties that bind this community together. Likewise, the impossibility of performing this fundamental religious duty most certainly had a crucial impact on Muslims' sense of unity and mutual proximity. The same can surely be said about the prohibi-

50 The scholarly literature on different pandemic dynamics is vast and multifaceted. On the narrative of pandemics, I have found extremely insightful the very recent book by (Davis-Lohm 2020) based on the events of the 2009 H1N1 influenza virus outbreak (the so-called "swine flu").

51 On the psychiatric dimensions of pandemics, see the beautiful collection of essays by (Huremović 2019).

tion on carrying out Islamic funerary rites: the general ban on funerals was a major blow to all Italians, and even non-religious people experienced grief at not being able to accompany their relatives or friends to their final resting place. For the Islamic community, this human sorrow was coupled with the pressing difficulty of even finding a place to bury the deceased or repatriating their remains. Although the situation has slowly improved, the ban on funerals inflicted a deep wound on the private and collective consciousness of Italian Muslims, and especially those living in small, remote villages, who were literally left alone with their dead.

The two organizations I have analysed reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic quite actively,⁵² and tried to use the crisis and the enormous challenges it posed to Muslims in Italy as a way to open up a deeper dialogue with Italian society, as well as to forge new connections both among the many local Muslim communities and with the general population as a whole.

The crisis was therefore transformed into an opportunity to redesign communal Islamic identity in Italy, and to embed it within a wider Italian framework: it is dramatic but also partially consoling to see how suffering became a catalyst for such a significant development in Italian society.

52 It is interesting to note how the activities carried out by UCOII under the lockdown elicited sharp criticism from another Italian Islamic association (*Centro Islamico Culturale d'Italia/Islamic Cultural Centre of Italy*), which manages the largest mosque in Rome. This organization, in an open letter signed by its head Abdellah Redouane (https://www.facebook.com/centroislamicoculturale/posts/3003764709659958?__tn__=K-R), accused UCOII of “riding the coronavirus wave as a marketing strategy, with 24/7 posts and announcements” (“Si è cavalcata la pandemia da Coronavirus per fare marketing con continui post e annunci, giorno e notte”). An analysis of the contrasts among the different Islamic Italian associations during the lockdown is, unfortunately, outside the scope of the present paper.

Danish abstract:

Italien er desværre en af de hårdest ramte lande af Coronavirus (d. 26. februar 2021: 2.868.435 smittede; 96.974 døde). Alle trosamfund i Italien skulle hurtigt og klart reagere til en fælles og usynlig trussel og samtidigt give vejledning og støtte til deres lokale menigheder og tilpasse regeringstiltag for at afdæmpe virensens spredning.

Muslimerne i Italien (ca. 2,600,000) som alle andre landets beboer skulle følge statsbestemmelser om at blive hjemme og afholde sig fra at gå ud, bortset fra nødsituationer og madindkøb (en nærmest fuldstændig lockdown).

I min artikel vil jeg prøve at finde ud og diskutere, 1) hvilke specifikke områder og praksisser i det italienske islamiske trosamfund blev mest påvirket af epidemi og samtidigt 2) hvordan de Italienske Muslimer iværksatte nogle symbolske og praktiske initiativer for at vise det italienske samfund deres aktive deltagelse i den fælles kamp imod virussen.

I min undersøgelse vil jeg bruge nogle officielle kilder (både skriftlige og visuelle) offentliggjorte af *Unione delle Comunità e Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia* (UCOII اتحاد الهيئات والجمالات الإسلامية في إيطاليا); *Union of de Islamiske menigheder og organisationer i Italien*), landets største Islamiske selskab og analysere dem i perspektivering til både den Islamiske religiøse teori og praksis og de nuværende italienske samfundsforhold.

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