



## ISLAM AND THE INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN ITALY

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I would like to begin by thanking WUJA and JRS for this invitation, initially address to Imam Yahya Pallavcini who has been called to make the pilgrimage to Mecca as the only Western European guest, among 1,400, of H.R.H. Salman As-Saud.

You too have just finished a small pilgrimage from Gubbio to Assisi, places of the patron saint of Italy, Saint Francis. Today we are called upon to speak together as Christians and Muslims on the phenomenon of migration and integration in Europe.

In my contribution, as a member of an organization of Italian Muslims, I'd like to touch on briefly the following points:

- religious identity
- security
- economic sustainability

1) The first reflection is to consider the religious identity of migrants and those who receive them, or even if we can so easily distinguish between Muslim migration and the European Christian context. Italy is different from the rest of Europe and it is not only a matter of numbers.

Data collected by ISTAT regarding immigration shows that in 2015, of the 5 million foreign residents in Italy<sup>1</sup>, more than half are of Christian faith, while Muslims comprise about 1.6 million, the remaining belong to Eastern religions, Judaism and atheists. While Italians of Islamic faith number around 150,000 out of a population of 60 million. Landings of migrants on the Italian coast in 2015 numbered about 150,000 persons<sup>2</sup>, which corresponds to same amount of annual population decline, nationally.

To maintain a religious identity in a secular context represents the greatest challenge of our time, and we should do this with other believers. If today some coastal cities in the south of Italy are able to virtuously deal with the refugee emergency, it is also due to a religious sensitivity and the historical, multi-religious experiences lived on these very coasts. In fact, Sicily in the middle ages saw the coexistence of Christians, Muslims and Jews. In Italy we have the oldest Jewish community of Europe and the presence of the

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.confronti.net/confronti/2015/11/litalia-delle-religioni/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unhcr.it/risorse/carta-di-roma/fact-checking/gli-sbarchi-italia-nel-2016-dati-smentire-lallarmismo>



Vatican. All of this context continues to have a spiritual relevance, not merely a historical, cultural and artistic one.

Nowadays, Muslims are asked to accelerate the processes of modernity that has brought other religions towards secularization, because it is believed that only the neutrality of the secular context can guarantee coexistence. I would hope that Muslims would respect other believers and non-believers, not because we are religiously “moderate and superficial” but because we are “intelligent and deep” thanks to our religion.

Then, the question emerges of to what extent Islam is seen as a religion in its own right as part of a tradition of Abrahamic monotheism or only as a set of rules to regulate food, clothing and politics. Unfortunately, there is an enormous responsibility on Muslims for having created this confusion. I don't deny that, at times, some have taken advantage of the situation in order to present Islam as the religion of foreigners, whose assumed backwardness or differences in culture and language, are mistakenly taken as proof of a religion that does not truly emancipate men and women and is, therefore, incompatible with “progress” and with Europe.

2) In this scenario, the problem of international security contributes to a creation of insecurities and fears surrounding the integration of Muslims in Europe, be they migrants, refugees, or European citizens with full rights. As believers we cannot take the place of politicians but there is much we can do as consultants in the scope of anti-radicalism and in the conduct of Islamic worship. What we have noted in the last 20 years in Italy is that some representatives of the political right have the conceptual categories to distinguish between what concerns the religious and sacred spheres and what, instead, is related to citizenship and security. However, the right is insensitive to equal dignity of religion and citizenship for all. On the other hand, some representatives of the left, who have full intentions of confronting these problems fall into demagogic positions mistaking those who are politically persecuted with the faithful followers. The general title of this meeting is “Time to Contemplate and Act” which gives us a certain urgency. It is now clear that without a meditation and mediation phase we will not be able to overcome the visceral political slogans that threaten to neutralize any meaningful action regarding migrants, refugees and religious communities that find themselves welcoming these people.

The Islamic community during the time of the Prophet Muhammad's life was also a community of migrants who escaped persecution by merchants in Mecca, which made them flee to Medina. In the history of Islam, we cannot forget episodes of violence related to the persecution of the faithful, the spread of misrepresentations that continue to modern ideologies. The verses of the Quran in which there are references to the war should be interpreted beyond the “letter that kills.” The risk otherwise is to use the divine truth to man's own use, leading some individuals to reverse the spiritual order of priority and adopt



violent behaviour and to damage other's dignity. Peace is a consequence, not a solution, just as the war is never a "necessary evil" but a departure from the order of creation. The peace that the prophets along with their disciples, companions and apostles have always sought and found is an effort that leads to a vision of the Divine.

3) How much peace will we have if we conceive of it only as social harmony? Surely, many economic speculators of wars have interests in lowering the concept of peace. The overwhelming geopolitical analysis often hides what reality is and what interfaith dialogue could really do.

As we cannot measure the religious identity from the numbers of migrants so, therefore, we cannot equate economic sustainability of welcoming newcomers with the contribution of migrants to European society.

In Italy the major part of the integration of migrants favors a real support to Italianization, instead of representing an ethnicization of society. Allow for a moment a trivial example, the kitchens of many Italian restaurants employ many Muslim cooks who do not intend to open Egyptian or Sri Lankan restaurants. The Islamic faith of the cooks do not prevent them from being good Italians, they are likely proud to be Italians. A similar example, on a more institutional level, is that of the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, a Muslim, who defended with great force the United Kingdom remaining in the European Union.

How many of these contributions can be monetized, weighted as either humble or outstanding, in the political or cultural economic development of a country? Sometimes our Western pragmatism creates the standards, also with regard to humanitarian aid, forgetting the spiritual dimension that is part of all human beings, regardless whether they have faith or not. The organization to which I belong, COREIS, has been seeking for years to represent and to mediate in order to clarify and build educational and cooperative bridges. We have often had to deal with the ambiguity of the policy and the lack of inter-religious sensitivity of NGOs, but we are not discouraged. We believe that the humanitarian emergency to which we must work together, each according to their own sphere of temporal and spiritual responsibilities, is to react intelligently and constructively to barbarization of societies. This was our message given to the UN World Humanitarian Summit which was held in Istanbul in May 2016.<sup>3</sup>

We don't have time to go into depth but permit me to name a few figures regarding the financial assistance of some of the charitable interventions made by the Islamic world. The IICO,<sup>4</sup> an organization that brings together charitable Islamic associations, during the second Donors' Conference for Syria<sup>5</sup> held in 2014 - organized under the aegis of the

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.italpress.com/editoriale-yahya-pallavicini/emergenza-umanitaria-e-le-religioni>

<sup>4</sup> [http://iico.org/Default\\_en.aspx](http://iico.org/Default_en.aspx)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ilmessaggeroip.com/dallitalia-38-milioni-di-euro-per-aiutare-la-popolazione-siriana/>



United Nations and Kuwait City<sup>6</sup> – gave \$ 400 million on behalf of Islamic NGOs including the British Islamic Relief (\$ 80 million), the Red Crescent of the United Arab Emirates (\$ 35 million) and the Thani of Qatar Foundation (15 million), while the State of Kuwait contributed \$ 500 million. In the same event for 2015 it has been collected 3.8 billion US dollars.

To conclude, the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca, the fifth pillar of Islam, concludes the Islamic year, a moment in which every Muslim pays alms, zakat, the second pillar of the religion. Every Muslim contributes 10% of their income, giving this to the poor. These donations should be done for everybody in need, because Sharia, the Islamic law, grants protection for non-muslims as well.

It is necessary that this charity is accompanied by a disposition of the heart to the Divine Mercy, one of the 99 Most Beautiful Names of God, Ar-Rahman, in this year of the Jubilee of Mercy in the blessed city of Rome, which sees us work together Christians and Muslims, men and women.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/kuwait-un-officials-pin-high-hopes-syrias-donors-conf>