Young Muslims in Europe - New Questions of Identity

Final Report

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"I went to Europe and found Islam; I came back to the Arab world and found only Muslims."[1]

Identity is complex, often rooted in and shaped by the situation in which we find ourselves. As the above quote suggests, familiar and unfamiliar contexts play a role in masking and unmasking the true underpinnings of an identity as some environments encourage us to explore who we are while others allow existing conceptions of self to go unquestioned. Situations in which everyone shares the same identity can allow one to forget the true significance of an identity or an aspect of that identity. In contrast, situations in which one is part of a minority group can challenge individuals and groups to question what they might otherwise take for granted causing them to re-assess the significance of a given identity. This can be seen in light of Barth's (1969; 1981) argument that identity is the result of an interactive process in which the differences between groups help define identity (also see Triandafyllidou, 2002). In contrasting ourselves with others, defining what we are not, we define what we are; we establish the markers or vessels that are central to that identity. These markers represent different forms and activities with varying levels of importance and relevance within a socio-cultural system (Barth, 1969). As such, vessels of identity offer a means for understanding the significance of the characteristics of an identity and its construction both by the identity holders and others. The position taken here is that in trying to understand the delineations and boundaries of an identity it is useful to look at the vessels from different perspectives, examining how these perspectives influence each other and ultimately the identity in question.

This study, which is part of a larger European project entitled "INTI: Young Muslims in Europe—New Questions of Identity" with studies carried out in Belgium, Germany and the UK, explores the evolving identities of young Muslims in Italy who are primarily first- and second-generation immigrants. Given that the target population is largely comprised of immigrants, it is composed of people who Triandafyllidou (2002) has referred to as individuals who neither belong to their country of origin, nor to their host country. The lack of a clear national identity is likely to contribute to the search for an alternative primary identity. The case of young Muslims in Italy provides a unique situation for understanding the role of other identities in the absence of a dominant national identity. This study seeks to understand the evolution of those identities and the role that religious and supra-national identities (i.e., a European identity) play as young Muslims discover and establish their concepts of self and social identities.

[1] Statement by an elderly Muslim sheik as quoted by a Muslim youth in Milan. Translated from the Italian by authors.

FIXED AND DYNAMIC CONCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY

There are different schools of thought regarding the malleability of one's identity. Some hold that an individual's identity is fixed at a relatively early age (according to the psychoanalytical school) whereas others, within the sociological tradition, see identity development as a constantly evolving process in which our experiences and the social context influence who we are (Hall, 1996). Jamiesson describes this position in noting that:

> "Interactions with others, the symbolic exchanges of gestures and language in which meanings are negotiated, shape and perhaps even make possible the inner dialogue that people have with themselves….Our sense of self is an ongoing product of everyday social interaction." (2002, p. 4)

According to this view, identity is not just who we are, but is constantly evolving and represents the culmination of our experiences as we influence and are influenced by the environment around us. Within this dynamic and fluid conceptualization of identity and identity development we pose the question of how the identities of young Muslims in Italy are transforming in relation to living in a predominantly Catholic country and coming of age at a time when Muslims are under more scrutiny than they have been in recent memory due to the events of 9/11 and subsequent attacks. These attacks represent one of the focal points of this research due to the worldwide ramifications of the events, especially for Muslims who have become subject to much greater scrutiny in the Western world. One can hypothesize that coming of age during such a time presents unique challenges, especially for a population that already faces an uncertain identity in terms of national belonging.

METHODOLOGY

This section spells out the specifics of the research carried out in Italy whereas a more comprehensive discussion of the methodology, its strengths and limitations, is provided in the introduction to this report.

Data collection was carried out using a combination of focus groups and open-ended interviews. The focus groups represent the primary means of data collection and were conducted with four categories of individuals: young Muslims, parents of Young Muslim, teachers, and social workers. The interviews were carried out with select individuals to supplement the information gathered in

the focus groups and explore certain issues in greater detail. The individuals who participated in the interviews represent a mix of focus group participants and others who did not participate in the groups. This combination allowed the inclusion of a wider mix of people and the possibility to explore issues in greater depth and touch on themes that people did not want to discuss in a group setting.

Table 1: Focus Groups and Interviews Conducted in Italy

	Rome	Milan	Turin	Total
Focus groups				
Young Muslims	1 (7F, 2 M)	1 (3F, 9M)	1 (5F, 5M)	3 (15F, 16M)
Parents	1 (8 fathers)	1 (5 fathers)	1 (9 mothers)	3 (13 fathers, 9 mothers)
Teachers	1	1	1	3
Social workers	1	1	0	2
Total	*4*	*4*	*3*	*11*
Interviews				
Young Muslims	1 (male)**	1 (female)	3 (1F, 2M)	5 (2F, 3M)
Parents	1 (father)	1 (father)**	5 (2 mothers, 3 fathers)	5 (2 mothers, 5 fathers)
Teachers	0	0	0	0
Social workers	0	2 (1M**, 1F)	2* (1M, 1F)	4 (2M, 2F)
Representatives of Muslim organisations	1* (male)	2* (1M, 1F)	0	3* (2M, 1F)
Total	*2*	*4*	*8*	*14*

* These individuals also fall in the categories of parents or young Muslims and hence are not included in the total number of interviews.
** Also participated in a focus group.

The focus groups and interviews were carried out in three cities: Rome, Milan and Turin. Each city has a sizeable Muslim population although there are some variations in terms of immigration histories, the biggest difference being that the Muslim communities in Milan and Turin are relatively more established that the community in Rome where nearly all of the young Muslims interviewed are first-generation immigrants. In total, 11 focus groups and 14 interviews were completed (see Table 1). The focus group with social workers in Turin was not conducted due to organizational difficulties; additional interviews were carried out in that city in an effort to compensate.

In total 35 young Muslims participated in the focus groups and/or interviews. The age ranged from 14 to 27 with the vast majority being between 16 and 22 years old. Countries of origin include: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Somalia, and Syria. Sixteen (46 percent) of the young Muslims were born in Italy, 10 of which live in Milan. Morocco represents the primary country of origin for young Muslims in Turin (9 out of 13)

whereas the participants in Milan are primarily of Egyptian origin (9 out of 13). In Rome the participants are more varied in terms of the countries of origin; Morocco and Tunisia represent the two primary source countries.

The focus groups and interviews involved a total of 28 parents, none of whom, with the exception of one Italian mother who converted to Islam, were born in Italy. This composition is fairly representative of the Muslim population in Italy in general (see Country Report for Italy), which is largely made up of first-generation immigrants from the Maghreb. It should be noted that in nearly all of the cases both parents are immigrants, the four exceptions being the Italian mother mentioned above and three Muslims (2 fathers and 1 mother) who have married Italians. In two of the four cases the Italian spouse did not become Muslim.

Target Group and Limitations

Recruitment of participants placed certain restrictions on the participant pool and hence limits the ability to generalize to a wider population of Muslim youth. The youth were recruited via a mosque (Rome) or an association for young Muslims[2] (Turin and Milan), which limits the participants to those who are not only practicing, but also quite active in their communities. A few individuals were recruited for interviews outside of these structures, but they did not participate in the focus groups. Parents were similarly recruited via mosques (Rome and Milan), a women's organization (Turin) and through community networks (interviews only).

Secondary school teachers were recruited via school districts that have a relatively high presence of Muslim students while social workers were recruited in various ways depending on the city, primarily utilising contacts through institutions that work with immigrants. These groups proved to be some of the most difficult to organize due to scheduling conflicts during the regular workday. Participation was lower than expected, but the consistency in the responses suggests that the findings are nonetheless valid and representative of the experiences of teachers and social workers who work with young Muslims in Italy. The findings also tend to support those of the young Muslims and parents despite being an "outside" perspective on the Muslim experience. It should be noted that while the vast majority of the social workers were non-Muslim Italians, there were some Muslim social workers who were also parents. The social worker who expressed the most divergent opinions in regards to the situation of young Muslims in Italy was an immigrant from a largely Muslim country who identified herself as being Christian.

[2] Giovanni Mussulmani d'Italia (GMI) or Young Muslims of Italy

Language Considerations and Interviewers

All of the focus groups and interviews were carried out in Italian. This did not prove to be an obstacle for most of the young Muslims since they had an excellent or very good command of Italian. It was however an issue for some of the parents and non-Italian social workers. These individuals expressed themselves relatively well in Italian, but had difficulty at times, which could have led to some misinterpretation and/or misstatements.

The quotes presented below are based on the authors' translations from the transcriptions. Efforts have been made to clarify the intent of the statement. Thus, in the case that someone did not speak Italian well, the translation attempted to capture the meaning rather than translating the individual's difficulties with Italian. The intent was to best capture the significance of the person's words.

FINDINGS

Identity markers need to be understood both in terms of the individual to whom the identity belongs as well as in terms of others in his/her social environment who may or may not share that identity (Barth, 1969, 1981; Triandafyllidou, 2002). For the purpose of this discussion we will focus primarily on identity markers for individual Muslims and for others in the community who do not share that identity (most of the autochthonous population in Italy). This essentially divides the discussion into two parts, that which relates to young Muslims and that which relates to the non-Muslim population in Italy. There is also a third aspect that involves the interaction between these two groups or, in the absence of direct person-to-person interaction, the influence that they have on each other through the media and other means of communication. Thus, the following report outlines the vessels or markers of a Muslim identity as seen by: (1) young Muslims and parents of young Muslims; (2) the non-Muslim population (based on reports by social workers, teachers, parents, and young Muslims); and (3) how these perceptions or notions of the markers of a Muslim identity interact and influence each other in what can be seen as a mutually reinforcing process. This means that the viewpoint and behaviours of non-Muslims, both in personal interactions and through the mass media, influence those of Muslims and vice versa resulting in what appears to be a polarization of opinions (and identity) in that the young Muslims either embrace their Muslim identity to a greater extent, as is true for many of the participants of this study, or increase the distance between themselves and Islam. This latter group was effectively excluded from this study due to recruitment methods, but were mentioned by all four groups of

study participants (i.e., young Muslims, parents, social workers, and teachers) suggesting that this is a very real, and sizable, segment of the Muslim population in Italy in need of future study.

Vessels of Identity

The markers of a Muslim identity can be placed on a continuum that goes from visible (public) to non-visible (private or personal markers). While most markers can be seen as falling in the middle of the continuum in that they are both visible and non-visible (e.g., prayer is a personal activity that becomes public and visible when carried out in front of others), it is important to note that the salience of a marker, especially for non-Muslims, is largely connected to its public visibility (e.g., the veil) and the extent to which it conflicts with Western values (e.g., the oppression of women). As a result, the relative importance attributed to any given marker appears to derive from a mixture of the visibility of the marker and its significance for "Western values". The discussion below addresses the various markers as seen by young Muslims, parents of young Muslims, teachers, social workers, and, indirectly, the media and general public.

The Veil and Other Visible Vestments of Islam

> "*For [non-Muslims] women always represent Islam. They are more apparent; they have the veil.*" (Young Muslim male in Turin)

The veil is perhaps the most visible marker of a Muslim identity for women if not for Islam in general in that, as the above statement implies, women are seen as representing Islam due to the visibility granted them by the veil. The veil then becomes a powerful symbol of what Islam stands for, with Muslims and non-Muslims often arriving at different conclusions. Amongst the Muslims, the wearing of the veil is first and foremost seen as an individual choice made by girls and women. This stands in opposition to the Muslims' perception of the "Western" view, which holds that the veil represents the oppression of women and, especially in the period immediately following 9/11, associates the veil with terrorism. This led to some cases in which Muslims who wear the veil were reportedly referred to as "Bin Laden" or "daughters of Bin Laden". It is within this context, which combines the choice to abide by a religious duty in adhering to the "rules of Islam" with the demonisation of Islam and its visible manifestations, that the veil takes on a new meaning. It is no longer simply a matter of religious practice, but has become a vehicle for expression and communication in the Muslim world. It is a means of rendering the condemned *more* visible in order to demonstrate what is repeatedly referred to as the "true Islam" and the "behaviour of true Muslims towards non-Muslims".

The choice of whether or not to wear the veil in Italy appears to be quite complex with various outcomes and reasons for the choices made. Young Muslims who choose to wear the veil do not necessarily face an easy decision, a fact that is exemplified by one girl in Milan who decided to delay wearing the veil due to 9/11 and the social reaction that followed:

> *"…9/11 happened and so I began wearing [the veil] during the second year of high school and so, nothing. I didn't begin wearing it during my first year because I was a bit…not afraid, but I thought that it would be better to wait until the second year. Also because this was my first year of high school. Going there, the events of 9/11 had just happened, this story with…the daughter of Bin Laden...I said to myself, no, we'll avoid these problems and so I began wearing the veil during the second year. But, for example, in regards to the fact that I feel proud, I feel very proud with the veil, while I walk…I like wearing the veil. I like it a lot! I like, anyway, obeying God. At the same time it's not… perhaps at the beginning I had some problems, but now, after five years, I am extremely happy that I decided to wear the veil…This is different from the girls who don't wear it…"*

This young Muslim faced her own struggle in deciding whether to include the veil in her life largely due to concerns about the reactions of non-Muslims following 9/11, concerns that were not necessarily unfounded as demonstrated by her experiences in using public transportation while wearing the veil in which people did not necessarily say anything, but she felt that they were afraid of her—a sentiment also expressed by others in relation to wearing the veil in public. Other girls who faced similar decisions did not necessarily reach the same conclusion although the vast majority of the study participants wear the veil. The few who choose not to wear the veil either feel that it is not a religious obligation or feel that it makes them objects of "*looks that are not very 'nice'*". This latter group expresses a desire to wear the veil, but elects not to do so due to social discomfort and perceived prejudices. There is a general sense that the veil elicits a fear response amongst non-Muslims and hence contributes to hostility and tension, even if expressed in silence via facial expressions and physical position, especially in confined spaces such as on public transportation.

Two other groups of young Muslims bare mentioning here in regards to choosing whether or not to wear the veil following the events of 9/11—(1) girls and women who previously wore the veil

and have *stopped* doing so and (2) girls and women who started wearing the veil *because of* 9/11[3]. These are examples of Muslims who have either rejected a marker of their identity as a means of decreasing their visibility or Muslims who have embraced a marker in order to increase their visibility. The former group is discussed by the participants, but, as mentioned previously, not included as participants themselves. The latter group, however, expresses an attitude that is in line with many of the young Muslims, male and female, in terms of the reaction to 9/11. This group of individuals, whether male or female, whose members have decided to externalise their faith by reaching out to non-Muslims in an attempt to demonstrate what it means to be Muslim (in addition to deepening their own faith and understanding of Islam). For this group of individuals, the veil and other visible features of Islamic practice represent means for young Muslims to show that they are proud of their faith, placing Islam in the public spotlight while attempting to move it away from the shadow of terrorism and associations with "*the few [Muslims] who use Islam to do things [that are prohibited by Islam]*" (young Muslim, Turin). Nearly all of the young Muslims express a strong desire to distinguish between the perceptions of Islam that arise from the actions of the few who misuse it, but have captured the media and public attention, and the "true Islam" that "*teaches us peace [and] respect for others regardless of their religion*" (young Muslim, Milan).

Young Muslim males are less affected by markers linked to appearance since wearing a beard does not appear to be very common amongst the Muslim population in Italy (only one father did so) and only a few discussed the repercussions of doing so. The beard is still pointed to as a marker of Muslim identity though, especially in relation to non-Muslims' views on these markers. The participants perceive the beard as being prominent in the minds of the non-Muslim population for which the beard is associated with terrorism and Bin Laden, as this father illustrates:

> *"I came here in '91 before the mosque was built. There were only some places for prayers and there were no problems until 2001. From 2001 up to today everything changed for the Muslim community…everyone is afraid of everyone, because maybe one dark person is a terrorist, but above all someone who has a beard is really, the look, the appearance of the person with* ***the beard is, for [non-Muslims], immediately Bin Laden, kamikaze****…"* (father in Rome, emphasis added)

[3] There is also an instance of a Tunisian immigrant who was forbidden to wear the veil in her country of origin, but does so in Italy, for which she is grateful. In a similar vein, several of the first-generation immigrants stated that they have more freedom to practice their religion in Italy than they did in their country of origin.

The beard then seems to be more a part of the idea of a Muslim man rather than a reality for Muslim men in Italy. As such, its relevance as a marker of a Muslim identity in Italy is more imaginative than real.

Clothing may be considered another highly visible marker of a Muslim identity, but this was given scant mention apart from the discussion about the veil. However, as with the veil and beard, clothing appears to be a more significant issue for the female Muslim population, particularly amongst the mothers who emphasized the importance of abiding by the verses in the Koran calling on women to cover themselves up. The mothers in the focus group in Turin argued that the veil liberates women and that it is Western fashion and the obsession with appearance that oppresses women, treating them as sexual objects for men rather than valuing them for their intelligence and who they are as people. It was also noted that wearing the veil, or in the case of one the mothers, the burka, elicits respect. However, this viewpoint was far from unanimous as illustrated by one mother who recounted the shame that her son felt in her presence, dressed in traditional garb, and his reluctance to be seen with her at his school due to things said by his peers[4]. Clearly, the reality of the situation comprises positive and negative experiences, both of which illustrate the relevance of the veil and to some extent clothing as markers of Islam. The veil then can be seen as the primary issue given the tendency for young Muslim women and girls to wear Western clothing, regardless of whether they wear the veil.

Prayer

> "*It's not easy being a practicing Muslim, that is a Muslim who prays at the correct times.*" (Muslim youth, Milan)

Religious observance through prayer has both public and private dimensions. Practice of the daily prayers is reportedly important to many of the participants and considered essential for "being a Muslim". In fact, one girl in Milan went so far as to say that someone who does not practice and observe the rules of Islam, particularly in regards to prayer, is not a Muslim. Others expressed similar views albeit less strict, emphasizing the importance of prayer and some of the difficulties that they have encountered due to the lack of mosques and prayer halls. And yet others asserted that it is not necessary to practice in order to be a Muslim. These contrasting viewpoints show different attitudes towards prayer with greater tolerance evident amongst the older generation.

[4] This mother went on to recount that upon discovering the reason for her son's shame she decided to speak to her son's class, an idea that was initially rejected by her son's teacher. She spoke to the class despite the teacher's disapproval at the end of which the students came up and hugged her, asking forgiveness and saying that they "didn't know".

This difference may be generational, or it may be due to the unique composition of the young Muslims who participated in the study—very active practitioners who on the whole appear to have become more observant since 9/11.

The place of prayer is also important, and this perhaps says more about the nature of Muslims in Italy than whether or not they pray. While many of the youth and parents desire a mosque or prayer hall in their local community, this is not necessarily seen as essential. As so many of the participants noted, "*We can pray at home*". What is perhaps more important is the sense of community that accompanies communal prayer, especially the calling to prayer. Several of the first-generation immigrants talked about the difficulties associated with not hearing the calls for the prayers and not being surrounded by individuals engaged in the same practices. This speaks to the importance of prayer (and other Islamic practices) in constructing a community and subsequently a common identity. Within this context, hearing the calls to prayer and accompanying others in doing so conveys a sense of common belonging and identity. The absence of such an environment does not necessarily change the desire to pray, but can influence the salience of prayer and other practices as manifestations of their faith. In the absence of these shared experiences, people not only continue to pray, but may become more adherent to prayer and /or other practices that they did not observe in their country origin as a means of compensating for the lack of community. This may manifest itself outwardly (e.g., women who begin wearing the veil) or inwardly as individuals engage in self-reflection and deepen their faith. One young Muslim (22 years old) in Turin expresses this in talking about his faith since coming to Italy at the age of 11:

> "*When I came here I became more attached to my religion because when I arrived I found people who had a faith that differed from mine. For example, during the period of Ramadan, everyone celebrated Ramadan [in Somalia]. The stores were closed and you didn't see people eating in front of you. Here during Ramadan you see everything open and people eat in front of you and do everything that they want in front of you—the non-Muslims. All of this makes you become more attached to your faith because you are the only one in the midst of a thousand people, and this increases your faith.*"

He articulates a feeling that was evident amongst other first-generation immigrants in talking about the significance in being one of many versus being the only one (or one of few). Community resounded as an underlying theme as to what people want and what they feel is lacking. The community helps define the boundaries of a Muslim identity and establish the markers of such an

identity within an environment that has been constructed to support Muslims. The apparent irony that study participants suggested, however, is that the same environment that supports a Muslim identity can in fact be overly supportive and leads people to feel very comfortable, effectively going through the motions without necessarily exploring the meaning of those actions or their faith for them as individuals. Being removed from a well-established Muslim community may feel like a deprivation for those who are accustomed to hearing the calls to prayer everyday, however, it also seems to create conditions under which people are no longer sustained by their rituals and fellowship with other Muslims, but must find the meaning of Islam for themselves. There is, as suggested by the elderly sheik quoted at the beginning of this report, a propensity to discover Islam on a personal level that can then be shared with others as Muslims (re)discover and (re)define themselves as individuals and a group within the Diaspora.

Language

As described in the National Report on Italy, the vast majority of the Muslim population in Italy has its origins in Arabic-speaking countries, which means that the religious and cultural languages often overlap. Given this, it is not surprising that language is presented as such an important marker of identity for parents and youth alike. Before going into what the respondents said in regards to language, it is important to consider some of the features of Arabic that contribute to its cultural and religious significance. The complexity of the Arabic language and its multiple written and spoke forms renders it quite unique in that the written (classical and modern standard) and spoken Arabic differ notably. While there are numerous spoken forms of Arabic (30 regional/country dialects), the two written forms do not differ by region or country[5]. Classical Arabic is the original language of the Koran. It is said that translations, including those in modern standard Arabic, are not only translations, but also interpretations, the implication being that the Koran written in classical Arabic is the only true version[6].

The participants in the focus groups and interviews did not always separate religion and culture in their discussion about the importance of language. What became most evident in regards to the parents was the distress they feel over the lack of adequate opportunities for their children to learn Arabic, whether spoken (some expressed their disappointment in not having a place where their children can learn Arabic after noting their own failure to teach their spoken dialect at home), written or unspecified. One father in Rome expresses this general sense of lack in talking about the absence of Arabic lessons or schools:

[5] See http://www.omniglot.com/writing/arabic.htm
[6] See for example http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Articles/quran/ieb_quran_chittick.html

> *"The difficulty is not that I can't find a place to pray; the difficulty that I encountered is finding a place for my children, where they can study our language and religion. This is the primary thing that I suffer from. The religion can be practiced at home, but the difficulty is that the children cannot study Arabic."*

This father separates learning the religion from learning the language, but there is an implication on the part of some that being able to read Arabic is a central part of being a practicing Muslim as stated by this mother in Turin:

> *"[My oldest daughter] is a practicing Muslim. She has also attended the Arabic school. She knows how to write, because for us there is the Arabic language and the dialect. The Arabic language, someone who has not studied it cannot understand it…and someone who has not studied…anyway, she has studied Arabic. She can read and write in Arabic. She is able to read the books directly without help."*

While parents differ in their emphasis it is clear that they tend to see the spoken and written forms as very important for their children if they are to maintain the central aspects of the culture from their country of origin as well as practice Islam. There is a suggestion that the language is somehow so integral that its importance does not need to be explained as indicated by a father who simply stated, "*[My children] certainly feel Roman, but they speak Arabic.*"[7] This seems to indicate that the language one speaks "makes" the identity—a notion that was often mentioned by young Muslims who speak both Arabic and Italian (see discussion that follows).

Amongst the youth language appears to serve different purposes. It is both a means for them, personally, to identify with a specific nationality (e.g., Italian or Egyptian) and a means for group inclusion and/or exclusion. On a personal level, Muslim youth, and to some degree parents, see a link between the language being spoken and the individual's identity in that context. For example, one Moroccan boy noted the following:

> *We who have multiple identities know how to manage those identities based on the context. When I am in a Moroccan context, in that precise moment I feel*

[7] This father's children were born in Italy and have an Italian (Roman) mother, but, according to the father, have taken a great deal from his culture (Palestinian) and are practicing Muslims. He sees his children as combining the best of both cultures.

> *Moroccan. Whereas when I am with a group of Italians I don't see why I have to think in Moroccan. Also when I'm in class and the teacher asks me a question. In that moment I am Italian. I think in Italian and respond in Italian.*

His self-identity is rooted in the context and means of communication and thus varies as the context varies. The same concept was expressed by other young Muslims who linked the language spoken with a certain environment or situation and hence with identity. Thus, they may spend most of their time speaking Italian, but speak Arabic at home or with family in which case they identify more with their country of origin and feel Moroccan (or Egyptian, Syrian, etc.) rather than Italian. Language helps them navigate their various identities and serves as one more means of delineating one from the other as well as re-enforcing the corresponding identity.

Language is also related to group boundaries as it can be used as a means of excluding non-Arabic speaking Muslims. This usage was not discussed by most of the study participants, who speak Arabic, but was mentioned by the few who do not. In one instance there is the case of an Italian boy who became intrigued by Islam following 9/11 and then adopted[8] the religion. He reported that youth in the local mosque would switch from Italian to Arabic when they wanted to exclude him remarking that:

> "*I have never felt like I was one of them…There is a sense of exclusion when they speak Arabic or when they don't want you to be in on the conversation, they begin speaking in Arabic amongst themselves.*"

This is only one case, but it demonstrates the power and importance of Arabic as a marker of a Muslim identity, albeit, a Muslim identity that primarily has its immediate origins (the youth are either first- or second-generation immigrants) in the Arab world.

In the other case, an Italian-born Muslim girl of Somali origin asserted that she does not like going to local Muslim youth centres or participating in associations because she does not speak Arabic and feels excluded because Arabic is often spoken. She, however, did not indicate that the other youth spoke Arabic with the intent of excluding her or others. These are two quite distinct cases, indicating both intentional and (presumably) unintentional forms of exclusion, nonetheless, they

[8] The word adopted is used here rather than converted since the participant stated that he had not technically converted. Although he had been raised in a Catholic environment he did not previously identity himself as Catholic. As a consequence, he says that he went from not having a religion to becoming Muslim.

demonstrate the power of language as a marker of group belonging and how it can be used to delineate within group differences.

The Non-Muslim View on Language and Immigration

> "*How is it possible that you, a Muslim, speak Italian so well?*" (Young Muslim illustrating what some claim is a commonly held stereotype amongst non-Muslims.)

Whereas speaking Arabic can be said to be a marker of a Muslim identity for the Muslims in the study, *not* speaking Italian well is said to be a marker in the minds of non-Muslims. Several of the youth talked about encounters with teachers and peers in which individuals are surprised at the fact that the individual is a Muslim *and* speaks Italian well:

> "*I see this with my friends at university. We can discuss things in a relaxed way, even for an hour, and everything is fine. Then when it's time to present yourself, because at times it happens that introductions are made after having discussed things a bit, when they understand that I'm not Italian, that I'm not even Christian, that I am Muslim, some are surprised. Others ask why I speak Italian so well. Others begin to change their attitude and there's nothing you can do*." (young Muslim)

There appears to be an underlying assumption amongst the autochthonous Italian population that Muslims are by nature foreign. In fact, place of birth and country of origin are both significant markers, in the minds of Italians, of being Muslim.

Place of Birth and Country of Origin

Place of birth in combination with where one grows up is often considered a determinant of nationality. This reasoning is quite clear in the minds of many parents who see their children as being Italian or, put in a somewhat different way, as having Italy as their home due to the fact that many of their children were either born in Italy and/or grew up there. In this sense, Italy and Italian culture is what the children know, whereas the parents' country of origin represents a place for holidays. A father in Rome makes this point quite clear in talking about his own son for whom he cannot imagine a life outside of Italy:

> *"My son is 21 years old. He is currently attending a training course to become a pizza baker…this boy wants to do something…He grew up here and works here. [Boy's name] doesn't want to return to Morocco. I swear, where can this boy go? He is staying here. He will marry here…"*

On the part of the parents there is a sense that place of birth and where children have gone to school outweigh other factors in determining their children's national identity[9]. This, however, does not necessarily correspond with the perceived attitudes of the autochthonous population for whom place of birth and childhood experiences may not be enough to outweigh the apparent foreign and Muslim markers such as names[10] and skin colour. The result is a conflict between the views of young Muslims and their parents and how the majority of the population views them. One father speaks of this contradiction in the following way:

> *"…when the children find themselves faced with contradictions, lets say, when they find themselves in a society where respect doesn't exist, where one is accused because one's name is Mohammed, because of one's name, one's [skin] colour, because of one's origin. Naturally these children who are born here, they're not Algerian or Senegali or Egyptian. They're Italian and want to be treated as such."*

From the parents' perspectives their children's nationality should not be a marker of a Muslim identity, whereas it appears that the autochthonous population associates race/ethnicity and country of origin with being Muslim. This is supported by reports by all groups of participants who emphasize that in the Italian mind Arabs and only Arabs, especially Moroccans, are Muslim. In the words of one social worker in Milan, "*Islam is Moroccan, a Moroccan is Islam*". This means that members of the non-Muslim autochthonous population are often surprised when they encounter someone who is Muslim and an immigrant, but is not Arab, as has been reported by Muslims of Somali origin. It also places young Muslims in difficult situations as they are blamed for and questioned about things that do not involve them. As social workers in Milan recounted, the youth often respond to these situations with statements like, "*What do we have to do with all of this?*" or "*This means nothing to us!*" There is a sense of injustice and indignity in the young Muslims' responses as they feel compelled to answer for the actions of others solely because they

[9] Parents also express a desire for their children to maintain aspects of the culture from the country of origin.
[10] One of the fathers recounted the story of a young man named Mohammed who decided to leave Italy and return to his country of origin because he felt completely ostracised by Italian society despite the fact that he had been the best student in his class, had "done everything". The young man attributed the treatment he received to his name—Mohammed.

claim the same religion. Some question why this is the case when Catholics do not have to answer for the actions of the IRA in Ireland, thus underscoring the apparent absurdity of the situation.

This association between foreignness and being Muslim also places young Muslims who were born in Italy in a difficult situation in that they are neither fully accepted as Italian, even if they feel Italian, nor accepted in their country of origin. They are to some extent stateless, as expressed by this young Muslim in Turin:

> "*In the sense that you live in Italy, everyone views you as a foreigner. Then you go back to Morocco and say, 'maybe this is my home', but you never feel at ease and you realise that this isn't your home either. And so, you ask yourself, 'where is my home?'"*

The implications of this lack of a clear national identity young Muslims are not entirely clear. While there are some who express uncertainty about who they are, there are others who state that they embrace both national identities as well as their Muslim identity without difficulty. The consensus that emerges irrespective of confusion in regards to a national identity is that the Muslim identity is primary whereas national identity may be more contextual as expressed by this youth:

> "*When I am with Muslim friends I feel more Syrian than Italian. When I am with Italians, I feel more Italian, but I always [feel] Muslim."*

Amongst this group of youths being Muslim appears to have trumped other identities although it would be incorrect to say that it is the only identity that matters since conflicts between Muslims with different countries of origin are reportedly not uncommon in schools. In fact, teachers see the conflicts as being a more significant issue than problems between Muslims and non-Muslims. According to the teachers a minimal amount of conflict exists between their Muslim and non-Muslim students whereas discord between Muslims belonging to different national groups is relatively common. On the one hand there appears to be a sense of common purpose that ties Muslims together regardless of where they come from. On the other hand, the study participants point to other markers, such as nationality, that can divide individuals within the Muslim community.

Gender Roles

Gender roles represent a difficult aspect of a Muslim identity with apparent inter-generational differences. While the Muslim participants said relatively little in terms of gender roles, apart from decrying the image of Muslim women as oppressed, their participation in the focus groups was more revealing. In comparing the focus groups with young Muslims with the groups with parents, there appears to be a marked intergenerational difference in terms of the interactions between men and women, boys and girls. The groups with young Muslims did not necessarily illustrate any significant differences in terms of the level of participation in the discussion. While there were some differences in the gender-balance of the various groups (e.g., the group in Rome was predominantly female whereas the group in Milan was predominantly male), this does not appear to have had any significant impact on participation as both boys and girls participated actively in the discussion in all groups. There was also vehement opposition to the notion that Muslim girls and women are subservient or submissive (by both genders) and discussions about the veil inevitably led to the affirmation that it was *their* choice whether or not to wear the veil.

The parents, however, represent a different reality. None of the groups included both mothers and fathers as participants. The groups in Milan and Rome included only fathers even though the researchers were initially informed that mothers and fathers would participate. The focus group conducted in Rome is particularly interesting in that both parents arrived at the home where the interview was taken place, but the mothers spent the time in the kitchen and only the fathers participated in the group, claiming to be speaking for their wives as well as for themselves. The reason for the absence of mothers in Milan is not clear as they did not show up for the focus group and none of the participants seemed to know why. The only group that involved mothers was all female and took place in Turin where the participants, who were very engaged in the focus group, noted that they would not have spoken if their husbands had also participated.

These mothers also emphasized the freedom that the veil (or other covering) grants them and asserted:

> *"Western women are conditioned, conditioned as to how they have to be, how to dress…they are submissive in the sense that men have to want them.*"

As another mother put it, Western women are "*slaves and objects for men*". In the minds of these women, the ignorance in regards to Islam and perception that "*Muslim women are submissive*" should in fact in be reversed in the sense that the behaviours and practices that are seen as oppressive of Muslim women are in fact liberating whereas the Western obsession with external

beauty and fashion is a marker of a society and culture that represses women by sexualizing them and rendering them objects who have to make themselves desirable in the eyes of men. The mother of Italian origin (in Turin) explains the changes that she experienced in the following way:

> "*Before I became a Muslim I saw a lot of things that did not work well and asked myself why. It was all about who was skinniest, who was blonde…They were all conventions and I didn't believe in these conventions. Islam has finally set me free. God tells me to reveal myself only in front of my husband. It's like a train that practically hits you, because, for my culture it wasn't like that. In fact, it was anything but that*".

Gender roles are one area where culture and religion become nearly inseparable as religious duty and local tradition have become intertwined over the centuries. Confusion about what corresponds to religion and what corresponds to culture is not limited to the non-Muslim population as the mothers illustrate in their discussion about a highly controversial gender issue—female circumcision. This practice, they argue, is not supported in the Koran, which says that women should derive pleasure from sex, but had become linked with Islam and taken on significance to the point that "*if a woman wasn't circumcised, no one would marry her. She was excluded, marginalised. It was a taboo*" (mother in Turin). In this case, culture and tradition eclipsed religious edicts in creating a tradition that was associated with Islam despite having its roots elsewhere.

The interconnection of religion and culture in regards to gender roles and the oppression or freedom of women makes it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to clearly identify the extent to which Islam dictates female subservience. It is however an incredibly important consideration due to the controversy and conflicts that arise from media portrayals of Muslim women as oppressed and subservient (as reported by Muslim and non-Muslim participants) and the general view that they are forced to wear the veil (as opposed to doing so as an act of obedience to god) and controlled by their husbands, fathers and brothers. The Muslim participants in the study have repeatedly underscored that this is damaging for Muslims and unfairly represents them whereas some of the teachers expressed concern about the control exercised over Muslim girls. Irrespective of these differences in opinion, is evident that some gender roles in which the husband speaks for the wife do exist, at least amongst the parents. What is less clear is the extent to which this applies to the current generation of young Muslims and how gender roles will play out as the current generation of young Muslims marry and form families.

Terrorism and Stereotypes

> *"The mass media plays an important role in propagating fear. The mass media wants to frighten people. Many Italians who had friendships with Muslims of foreign origin have broken off these friendships. They're no longer friends. It depends a lot on TV. They see a woman with a foulard and she is perceived as a kamikaze or something similar."* (father in Rome)

As discussed above there is a fair degree of overlap between the markers of a Muslim identity in the minds of Muslim and non-Muslims; however, there are some markers that are unique to non-Muslims. The most notable of these relates to the demonisation of Muslims as terrorists, which, according to all of the participants, is largely the result of ignorance and portrayals of Muslims by the mass media. Muslims and non-Muslims alike are unanimous in their contention that the mass media has enormous negative influence on the public image of Muslims. The overall picture portrayed is one of a mass media that is responsible for the creation and proliferation of stereotypes that generally focus on perceived differences between Muslim and Western culture and the perceived threat of Islam. Whether speaking with young Muslims, parents, teachers, or social workers, the comments always focused on mass media depictions of Islam and Muslims in which terrorism and Islam are one and the same.

While this represents a marker for non-Muslims it has strong implications for Muslims in that it influences their behaviour and own identity formation. As noted previously, young Muslims tend to fall into groups, those who have distanced themselves from Islam since 9/11 and those who have sought to increase their faith. This can largely be attributed to the negative perceptions of Muslims in recent years and thus represent two polar opposite coping techniques. The young Muslims repeatedly talked about their desire to demonstrate to others that the Islam depicted in the mass media does not accurately reflect them or the "true Islam". These efforts to dispel the myths that they see and hear means that they become more active as Muslims and become more involved, on a personal level, with Islam as this young Muslim in Milano, who was born in Italy, states:

> "*Sometimes [being Muslim in Italy] means having to walk with your head held high and fighting to defend [your] principles and [your] religion. It means getting on the tram in the morning to go to school and feeling yourself being observed by everyone, hearing people express prejudices…or simply being the subject of curiosity. People often ask me why I wear the veil. These are people who watch the news on TV and perhaps think that I am a terrorist without understanding that*

Islam is a religion of peace. But being Muslim in Italy…means being convinced of why you are a Muslim in order to be able to explain it to someone else."

For this young Muslim and others like her, there is a bi-directional relationship between the stereotypes of Islam and Muslim as terrorists and their own connection to Islam. In her case having to explain herself and her religion means that she has to truly understand what Islam stands for and means to her. It is insufficient to accept things on face value simply because it has been done that way in the past, creating the need amongst a group of the youth to personalize Islam as they search for its meaning through a process of self-discovery. This effectively makes Islam more central in the lives of this segment of the population.

Young Muslims and their parents are not alone in seeing things this way. In fact, social workers and teachers both reported observing the same phenomenon following 9/11. One of the social workers in Rome, who is himself Muslim, describes his own experience in explaining the situation that the younger generation faces:

"*There is another aspect. The return to tradition was also driven by the need to differentiate oneself from the label [of being a terrorist]. It became an argument in dealing with the external environment, traditions and hence the redefinition. As a Muslim I was somehow forced to differentiate myself in regards to particular experiences or reflect on relationships with others and the fact that not all Muslims are terrorists.*"

This social worker emphasises the impact of the association with terrorism on himself and other Muslims by focusing of the efforts to differentiate oneself. While this does not represent all young Muslims, it describes the study participants quite well. However, there is another large group of young Muslims who, according to the social workers, are not particularly attached to their religion or practice it discretely.

Beyond Borders -- Living the Values of Islam

The universal nature of Islam came up repeatedly. Many of the youth pointed to their desire and efforts to show the world what the "true Islam" is by respecting the rules of Islam. While definitions or articulations of the "true Islam" were often quite vague, there is a strong sense that for young Muslims this means respecting Islam as well as other cultures and religions, while demonstrating the peaceful nature of Islam and its adaptability to any national culture. For young Muslims it seems to mean demonstrating piety, openness, and being willing to engage in dialogue

with others about Islam. This comportment represents one marker for Muslims who see it as the "*correct means for Muslim to interact with others*". As stated by one young Muslim in Milan:

> "*I really believe that Islam is a cosmopolitan religion. Because of this, as a Muslim, I consider the world to be my homeland.*"

This young man, who was born in Italy, exemplifies what might be considered a tendency to go beyond the national. He sees himself as being not only Italian and Muslim, but also a citizen of the world—a feeling shared by other young Muslims who expressed a connection with a community that is not limited to national borders. According to this view, Islam is a universal religion that can be "*lived anywhere*" as one young Muslim put it. Islam, with the accompanying Muslim identity, appears to be the basis for a primary identity that is not rooted in place. This allows those who sometimes feel Italian and sometimes identify with their country of origin to feel as though they have one identity that they can relate to all of the time. As one girl in Milan stated, "*I feel 100% Muslim, Muslim, Muslim*" while her national identity switches between Italian and Egyptian. While youth differ in the extent to which they feel at peace with multiple identities or feel that they are undergoing an "identity crisis", the commonalities between the cultures and "values of Islam" are seen as helping them navigate the world. Their multiple identities and experiences allow them to "*…bring together two cultures to create a new, richer culture*" (Muslim girl, 15 years old, Turin). This is an idea that was often repeated by parents who see their children as being in a position to take the best from two cultures and create something new.

The fact that some of the youth are having a difficult time dealing with multiple identities cannot be ignored however. For these individuals there appear to be some overlap, but also conflict. They often talk about the benefits of bringing together two diverse cultures and see the potential to view things from a different perspective in that some things have both positive and negative dimensions. A young Muslim in Milan demonstrates this in talking about his internal identity conflict:

> "*Being an Italian-Arab-Muslim gives me the possibility to see the Eastern world and the Western world through a critical and constructive lens. What are the worst aspects [of being a Muslim in Italy]? An identity crisis due to my being both Muslim and Italian…One question torments me. Who am I? Where am I heading?*"

His words suggest that while there may be fair amount of agreement as to what it means to be Muslim, or rather, a practicing Muslim, the internalisation of these markers in relation to other aspects of the self is a much more troubled process resulting in angst and uncertainty. This is certainly not uncommon amongst adolescents and young adults, but the situation amongst young Muslims in Italy (and Europe in general) is arguably more acute since they face issues of identity that their non-Muslim peers do not.

The data is very limited in this particular study, but it seems that Muslims of Italian origin are likely to find themselves in a different situation as they do not need to deal with conflicts in national identity and are less visible as Muslims. However, they may face another struggle as they have to explain to their family and friends, who are often ignorant about Islam, *why* they became Muslim. The limited data on this subject that is available for this report suggests that Italian youth who become Muslim face difficulty in (1) being accepted by the immigrant Muslim population and (2) in explaining their choice to the non-Muslim population. The result being that they are to some extent outsiders in both communities.

Do Muslim Youth Live the Values of Islam?

It is difficult to generalize from the experiences of one or two people. Nonetheless, the experiences collected for this project offer some insight into in-group dynamics and the importance, or lack thereof, of certain markers. In fact, the Italian Muslim youth indicated that the exclusion and harassment that he experienced (including having the police come to his house after someone from the mosque informed them that he had weapons and bombs in his house and was involved in a terrorist organization) was perhaps partly due to the fact that he, while attending the mosque, often questioned his Muslim peers about their behaviour in relation to the rules of Islam. In the youth's mind many of his Muslim peers do not follow the rules of Islam and are unwilling to engage in a discussion or accept criticism from others, stating that:

> "*[The Muslim youth] go out dancing, drinking. In this case, what sense does it make to say that you're a Muslim?*" (stated with emphasis)

His assertions do not resonate with the reported personal behaviour of the other young Muslims in the study, but it does agree with comments from teachers, social workers and young Muslims in referring to ignorant Muslims who "*don't know anything about Islam*". Not surprisingly there is differentiation within the Muslim community in terms of socio-economic status as well as adherence to Islam and knowledge of Islam. This implies that what is an important marker for one Muslim, may not be important for another Muslim as is evident in divergent decisions in regards

to the veil: some wear it as a means of obeying god; others do not wear it due to a sense of demonisation and/or discrimination or a desire to distance themselves from Islam; and yet others do not wear it because they do not feel that it is a religious obligation. Similarly, there are some Muslims who argue that one must pray five times a day at the correct times, avoid pork and alcohol, fast during Ramadan in order to *be* a Muslim whereas others do not see the necessity of these behaviours.

The fact that there are differences in opinion does not necessarily mean that the markers discussed here are completely invalid, but that they need to be considered as group indicators and not as individual absolutes. Despite the often heard refrain that there is "one" Islam, there is great disagreement about the proper interpretation of Islam. The resulting image of the young Muslim community is one in which the message presented to outsiders includes the concept of universality and in-group differences. This occurs because young Muslims seek to achieve three diverging and contradictory goals: (1) distinguish themselves from Muslims who commit acts that they do not agree with while demonstrating the plurality of the Muslim community, (2) present Islam as a universal religion and (3) argue that Islam can be adapted in a way that respects the laws and local culture anywhere in the world.

Markers of an Italian or European Muslim Identity

> "One of the most important and contentious issues is whether [a European] identity can at all be formed." (Fossum, 2002)

The ultimate goal of this study was to understand the nature of identity development and transformation amongst Muslim youth in Italy in terms of the formation of an Italian and/or European identity. Before addressing this issue it is necessary to consider the statement above by Fossum. If, as is often claimed, a European identity does not exist, then is it reasonable to expect individuals who are considered "foreign" at the national level to develop or have such an identity? Given the lack of consensus as to what such a European identity would entail, one has to wonder how the Muslim youth could ascribe to it. Interestingly enough, the research indicates that while there is not necessarily a strong sense of *having* a European identity, there seems to be a fair amount of consensus as to what it *means* and the belief, on the part of young Muslims with an immigrant background and their parents, that it is possible to form such an identity. It should be noted that the youth were asked to provide written responses in regards to questions about what it means to be a Muslim in Europe prior to beginning the focus group. Thus, any agreement or consensus from this aspect of the research is not attributable to the process of the focus group.

Discussion about the subject during the groups with young Muslims and parents is of course subject to exchange that occurred during the focus group.

> "*Unfortunately [young Muslims] are not very trusting. The youth today, from what I have seen, I don't think that they will [develop a European Muslim identity]. They are either all Muslim or all European. Unfortunately I see in the young Muslims, at least amongst those in Italy, which is the reality that I know, it's not that they're ashamed, but they tend to become more European and Italian. They tend to act like Italians, that is if Italians go to the disco, then [the young Muslims] go to the disco.*" (young Muslim in Rome, Italian origin)

The quote above brings out the mix of challenges and tendencies that young Muslims with immigrant backgrounds in Italy face. Is it, as some have argued, possible to take the best of both worlds and create something richer? Or, is it as this young man argues, impossible to merge two cultures, while retaining the core precepts of each? The question remains as to what gets brought into the mix and whether being a European Muslim means adopting the lifestyle of European youth and eliminating the core principles of Islam or retaining the core of Islamic practice with the "Western" values of freedom and respect. This study indicates that both of these processes are occurring amongst different segments of the population. There is a strong belief, especially amongst the parents, that the children can bring together the two cultures and create something richer. For these parents it is possible to maintain traditions at home and live as Italians outside the home as expressed by this mother in Turin:

> *"…in my house, and this is also normal in every Muslim family, we are Moroccan, Arabs and Muslims. In my house there is my culture, there is my religion and there are my traditions. However, elsewhere we live normally with the others…and we don't have these problems with diversity—that we are Muslims and the others are Italians, no [we don't have these problems]. There is respect on both sides, on my part and on that of the Christians. We don't have problems. We have never had problems."*[11]

This choice between cultures, or aspects of cultures, is not always an easy one though and seems to be the greatest struggle that the young Muslims face as they talk about the desire to be true to their religion while also respecting and embracing aspects of Italian and/or European culture. There is a sense that it is important to not forget what Islam is while engaging in a cultural

[11] This mother, while stating that neither she, nor her family have encountered difficulties does note that some Muslims, especially women wearing the chador, encountered problems following 9/11.

exchange. Being a Muslim in Europe means, "…*exchanging my cultures with others…it means spreading Islam and showing people the true 'figure' of Islam, not that which it appears to be, but the true Islam*" (16 year-old girl, Egyptian origin, Milan). This sentiment was expressed by many of the youth who see a European Muslim identity as carrying with it a "burden" and great "responsibility" as it is not only about living their private lives, but demonstrating to others that "true Islam" stands in opposition to the common stereotypes and media images.

The desire to demonstrate, explain and enlighten requires a very activist role and is quite possibly a reflection of the characteristics of the young Muslims who participated in the focus groups—all of whom are active in their communities. This is especially true in Milan and Turin where the youth were recruited via an association for young Muslims that devotes most of its activities to changing media images of Islam and Muslims. It is less evident amongst the young Muslims in Rome who were recruited through a mosque. The young Muslims in Milan, almost all of which were born in Italy, were the most strident and vocal in their desire to show others the true Islam. It is unlikely however that generalizations can be made to segments of the Muslim population that were mentioned by the various study participants, individuals who are seen as being in Italy primarily for economic reasons and having neither the desire, nor the skills to integrate themselves into Italian society.

A look at peer relations with non-Muslims further demonstrates some differences between the youth, as exemplified by one girl of Algerian origin,

> "*I don't feel like an Arab-Muslim, I have always lived in Italy. For me being a European Muslim means being like all the other girls who live in Europe the only difference being that my religion is Islam*."

For this young Muslim and others like her there is no incompatibility between her religion and her Italian and European self since nationality and religion are two separate and non-conflicting identities. Others, however, are not so at peace with being European or Italian and seem to want to remain apart. This last group represents a relatively small percentage of the young Muslims who participated in the study and arguably represent another "class" of Muslims that was discussed primarily by teachers and social workers as individuals who only spend time with other Muslims and usually with peers from the same country of origin. These individuals are described as belonging to a Muslim population that is primarily concerned with working in Italy for a period of time and then returning to their country of origin. Hence, they are less concerned with integration and assimilation within Italian and European culture. Deductions about this group in

regards to the prospects for a European Islam are difficult to make and highly tentative. What can be said here is that the Muslims in Italy represent not only numerous countries of origin, but also different socio-economic classes and means of practicing Islam. Solely on the basis of the select group of young Muslims who participated in the focus groups it is clear that their experiences range from a sense of complete integration to marginal acceptance, to an utter lack of acceptance by the non-Muslim Italian population. This latter group tends to not have any Italian friends and sees the Italian population as being unwilling to engage in a dialogue and try to understand where the other is coming from.

At this point it is not evident whether a European Muslim identity will emerge for a large segment of the Muslim population. There is however a clear tendency amongst a portion of the population to seek out the commonalities in Islam and what they see as European values (e.g., respect for others and their cultures) in shaping their sense of self. It is these commonalities that can be seen as markers of a European Muslim identity as it is forming in Italy. As for being Italian, this is an identity that many of the participants report having. For them (and for the parents) this identity is largely determined by where they were born and grew up (in Italy) and by sharing Italian culture in terms of habits (e.g., going shopping or listening to music) or ways of interacting with others (e.g., socially correct behaviour in public spaces such as elevators).

CONCLUSION

The discussion by some of the youth regarding the special status granted them by virtue of being Muslim and hence having an additional identity and set of experiences or, in some cases, burdens, can be interpreted in light of Taylor's (1994) argument about the impact of dislocation and atomisation on the human need for recognition. The immigrant status of nearly all of the young Muslims places them in a situation where they are not necessarily afforded recognition for their national identities (at least as seen by non-Muslims), a situation that may drive them to emphasize their Muslim identity, with the intent of showing the world around them the "real Islam". These same youth may suffer "if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (Taylor, 1994, p. 25). Taylor's thesis provides an apt explanation for the observed behaviour amongst many of the Muslim youth who gravitate towards one extreme of the spectrum. These are the young Muslims who identify more as Muslims on an individual level and become strident and vociferous in defending Islam publicly in an attempt to debunk the common stereotypes of Muslims (e.g., as terrorists, oppressors of women). This misrecognition by others, as Taylor puts it, appears to be quite influential in shaping Muslim identity amongst Muslim youth in Italy as, at least amongst study participants, their

reactions to their environment are not only about behaviour, but are also part of identity development and evolution.

The social context is also an important factor in considering recognition and/or misrecognition. As Barth (1969, 1981) argued, the social context appears to be crucial amongst young Muslims in defining what it means to be Muslim in general and what it means to be a Muslim in Italy. This is perhaps best illustrated by the changes in behaviour amongst first-generation immigrants who have become more attached to their faith after coming to Italy whether in terms of deepening their belief on a personal level or as a behavioural change that brings their Muslim identity into the public arena (i.e., girls and women who did not wear the veil in their countries of origin, but began doing so in Italy). This public display speaks to a need for recognition, which Taylor (1994) and Honneth (1995a, 1995b) see as a pre-condition for the formation of an identity. If one sees identity as the result of interactions with others in which similarities and differences determine not only what an identity entails, but also where the boundaries lie between it and other identities, then recognition by others (in this case non-Muslims) can indeed be seen as essential for identity formation. If one follows this reasoning, then the situation of the young Muslims in Italy at present represents this quest for recognition of what they consider to be their true selves (on an individual and group level) on the basis of the markers that *they* value as opposed to the misrecognition that they report encountering on a regular basis.

The primary question is what form this quest takes. Does the search for a clear identity(ies) lead young Muslims in Italy to become Italian or European or does it lead them to separate themselves from larger society? The research carried out in Italy suggests that many of the young Muslims who participated in this study do consider themselves to be Italians. Many of them feel that the only difference between themselves and their non-Muslim peers is their religion. This, however, is not a universally held perspective as evidenced by youth who feel ostracised at times or on an almost constant basis. If we are to speak of young Muslims in general, then we must also consider the young Muslims who did not directly participate in the study—the young Muslims who reportedly do not adhere to Islam or have moved away from Islam in response to the events of 9/11. The overall picture provided by this project is, not surprisingly, one in which the youth in question vary significantly. In answer to the question of whether a European Muslim identity is possible, the answer seems to be yes. The caveat is that it may only apply to a small portion of the Muslim population. A second caveat is that such a supra-national identity may emerge due to the failure of some youth to have a solid national identity. In this sense, the identity confusion that some of the youth report experiencing and sense of alienation can lead the youth to adopt, as a primary identity (see Jamiesson, 2002) either their Muslim identity, which appears to be the case

for many of the youth, or a European Muslim identity that would provide them with a sense of geographical as well as religious belonging.

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