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Young people first! The multiple inscriptions of a generational discourse of Muslimness among Italian-Bangladeshi youths

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Abstract

'Our parents couldn't teach us the true meaning of what spirituality and faith can be!'. This assertion, made by a 24-year-old youth, epitomises the critical stance of a group of young Italian-Bangladeshi Muslims towards the religiosity of their former generation. Based on ethnographic research in Rome (Italy), this article illustrates the apparently oxymoronic characteristics of a discourse of Muslimness which, despite stressing the importance of a return to the primary sources of Islam, combines this attitude with a peculiar emphasis on 'integration'. I will show how this counter-intuitive combination is not only inspired by a scholarly concept of 'European Islam', but first and foremost it is grounded in the concrete life conditions of youths who are both well placed within the Italian society and animated by religious zeal. In this way, I seek to shed light on the mutual entanglement of religious stances and life experiences, and to point up the limits of 'exceptionalist' and 'literalist' approaches to the study of Islam.

Keywords: Bangladeshi diaspora; second generations; young Muslims; European Islam; ethnography

Introduction

> I have been following a page on the Prophet's deeds on Instagram, a few days ago I read that He treated everyone equally, adults and children... and that [once] they were sitting in a line, and there was also a child among them, sitting on the left of the adults [...]. They were serving something to drink, the Prophet approached the child and asked if he was fine with them starting from the right side, the adults' side. The child did not agree and He decided to respect his will[2].

This article is based on ethnographic research among young Italian-Bangladeshi Muslims in Rome[3], and deals with youths who, metaphorically, also want to be served first, as described

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[2] Interview with Mazidul, 7th April 2019. Mazidul is a 21-year-old civil engineering student involved with activities of the Giovani Musulmani d'Italia association (see below). All the interviews took place in Italian.

[3] The research is part of the ethnographic project *(Un-)typical utopias – Visions of the future from adolescents at Islamic schools in Bangladesh and Italy*, funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. I conducted 18 months of fieldwork: in mosques and madrasahs; at public events organised by, or involving the participation of, Islamic organisations (e.g. public protests, interreligious dialogue events, or public prayers and *iftars*); and social youth spaces. The methodology included extensive participant observation, structured interviews, focus group discussions (21 recorded interviews and 8 fgd), and free conversations, along with the collection of a wide range of materials (pamphlets, videos, poems). The research group involved youths of Bangladeshi descent from 12 to 27 years old, mainly boys and young men, who at the time of the fieldwork were, or had been, madrasah students. This article presents only part of the results and deals with a group of young men in their twenties. I have altered the names of my interlocutors, and other pertinent details that might offer significant clues, in order to protect their identities. Also the names of the mosques mentioned in this article are fictitious.

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in the *hadith*[4] quoted by one of my interlocutors in the epigraph. They are confident that they can lead their former generation to better understand both Islam and Europe, two apparently opposite concepts which they reconnect through a discourse of 'integrated' Islam. By engaging with their generational critique, and by navigating interdiscursivities and intertextualities (Stille, 2020; cf. Briggs & Bauman, 1992) between religion, worldly narratives on 'community', and other apparently distant repertoires, I seek to show how a transnational discourse of European Islam[5] is translated into a local discourse, and interconnected with specific biographical experiences and social scenarios.

Pious secularists, irreligious Muslims, and the 'true Islam' of the new generation

Beginning in the 1990s, Rome has had a large collectivity of people with Bangladeshi origins, whose internal divisions have fuelled the establishment of dozens of different migrant associations and 22 mosques[6]. In the 2000s, the emergence of a new generation of Italian-born children highlighted the need for a specifically 'Bangladeshi' education. This need resulted in the establishment of the first Bengali school, the Bangla Academy, in 2005, and the first madrasah, the Islamic Institute of Rome, inaugurated the following year. Subsequently, the number of madrasahs and language schools increased quickly, but in 2012 madrasahs began to take over, by surrounding three Bengali schools with more than a dozen religious educational facilities, and by attracting many students with their own Bengali classes. These events, which almost led to the disappearance of secular schools[7], epitomise a general, albeit moderate, shift towards Islam, which parallels similar developments in the UK and in Bangladesh itself. Nowadays in the Italian-Bangladeshi community in Rome, a religious piousness, particularly during topical periods such as Ramadan, is part of a strategy of distinction aimed at increasing social prestige, even in some secular households. This trend includes a focus on Islamic education for children, something which prompts contrasting reactions among the youngsters. Some experience attendance at a madrasah as an imposition, others as a duty, while only a minority demonstrate a lasting interest. The latter, as long

[4] According to Islamic tradition, a *hadith* is a record of the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.

[5] With the expression 'European Islam' I refer to the model of 'integrated' Islam proposed by my interlocutors in assonance with the theories of Tariq Ramadan (1999). This model differs from the definition of 'European Islam' as an intermingling of religion and street culture provided by Mushaben (2008).

[6] Rome is the second largest centre of Bangladeshi migrants in Europe and currently accommodates about 32,000 of the 140,000 Bangladeshis living in Italy (cf. Priori 2012; 2017). The geographic composition of this collectivity of people is quite varied, with many migrants from the districts of Madaripur, Shariatpur and Dhaka, while its social basis is constituted by small landholders and migrants from the urban middle/lower middle classes (cf. Priori 2012; Knights and King 1998). Islamic organisations have established themselves relatively slowly in Rome. The first secular actor, the Bangladesh Association in Italy, was founded in 1990, yet it took eight years for the first mosque to be established. Political and religious divisions, together with personal factionalisms, prompted a boom in the founding of new organisations. Rome hosts Bangladeshi associations who have organised themselves based on political allegiances, a place of origin in Bangladesh, or on a place of residence in Rome, and many overlaps and conflicts exist between them (cf. Priori 2012; 2010). Nobody has ever formally tabled the number of Bangladeshi secular organisations, at the beginning of the 2010s many migrants estimated there to be around 100 associations, while a census of the Bangladeshi mosques in Rome was conducted by Russo (2018).

[7] Apart from some others, which failed after only a few months, at the beginning of the 2010s there were three continuously active secular language schools in Rome: the Bangla Academy in the area of Torpignattara; and Pathsala and the Adorsho Biddha Niketon in Centocelle. Today, only the last is still active, while in contrast around a dozen of mosques organise madrasahs and various courses for children. While secular schools were/are hosted in spaces provided by Italian left-wing parties, mosques are located in self-organised, informal spaces, such as former garages, warehouses, or shops, and are not formally recognised as mosques by the Italian government, but rather as Islamic associations (cf. Russo 2018).

as they are males, would typically attend the *hifzo*[8] and, in a very few cases, become teachers.

This intergenerational process of religious enculturation inevitably includes discontinuities and transformative aspects. The first generation 'uselessly exported to Italy' Bangladeshi political and doctrinal juxtapositions, as my young interlocutor Tareque[9] polemically stated, yet how they address such beliefs today is quite contradictory. On one hand, adults such as parents and teachers try to not pass on these factionalisms to the next generation, who are mostly unaware of barriers between different groups[10]. On the other hand, though, they perform these internal divisions by avoiding certain mosques or imams. This kind of behaviour is criticised by the new generation, as a devotion by the older generation to a Bangladeshi logic which remains incomprehensible for many European-born youths (cf. Gardner & Shukur, 1994). In the area of religion, these criticisms are articulated in different ways. Those who perceive the madrasah as an imposition, for example, blame their parents for their commitment to traditions they perceive as foreign[11]. Others would simply appreciate a less 'Bangladeshi' (which in this case stands for 'competitive') educational model, in order to have more free time and less religious obligations[12]. In some cases though, these complaints take a more articulated form, criticising the religiosity of the 'adults', i.e. the generation of the 'migrants', from an Islamic point of view.

Despite many saying that they 'forgot everything once out of the madrasah', some youths end up taking advanced courses. *Hifzo*, either in Italy or Bangladesh, is a typical choice, but there is also a growing number of youths enrolling in Islamic secondary schools in the UK. Still others find an avenue to Islamic activism outside the religious educational system. As they reach their twenties, these youths increasingly start questioning the religion of the older generation. Some, criticise exclusively the popular expressions of Bangladeshi Islam, e.g. the Tablighi movement, while others embrace a more comprehensive discourse of 'true Islam', i.e. one juxtaposed against the Bangladeshi Islam of the adults, considered as a mere 'expression of South Asian culture' (Samuel, 2012: 145).

Many countries with large Muslim communities are currently witnessing a celebration of a more direct access to the primary sources of Islam, a 'religious turn' in which young people play a pivotal role (Sounaye, 2018; cf. Marks, 2013). In Europe, the main hub of this tendency lies in the UK, where a discourse of authenticity has surfaced within the Bangladeshi

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[8] The *hifzo* (*Hifzul Quran*) is a course of memorization of the Qur'an. The bulk of the children attending madrasahs complete only the regular curriculum (i.e. *Kaida*, *Ampara* and *Quran Nazira*), which generally takes several years, depending on the method and the students. The entry age varies, but is generally between 7 and 10 years.

[9] Interview with Tareque, 16th March 2019. At the time of the interview Tareque was 24 years old. He is an established artist and graduated from a prestigious higher education institute in Rome. He also participated in the activities of the GMI association.

[10] Many youths underlined this fact in the interviews. Saeed, for example, asserted that: 'The imams do not explain to the youths: "Look, we are all divided because we hate each other, because I follow these politics and the others follow another one". The youths are not aware of this' (interview 7th April 2019). At the time of the interview Saeed was 22 years old, a mechanical engineering student, and a key member of the GMI association.

[11] Many youths involved in the research had a very critical stance towards these 'traditions', as they feel that they are 'Italians' and not 'Bangladeshis'. Just to provide a concrete example, while explaining during an interview in February 2019 that he did not like cricket, a 14-year-old madrasah student shiftily pointed at a group of teachers and alleged: 'They, the Muslims, they watch cricket', marking in a single sentence his distance from Islam, from the adults, and from the Bangladeshi "national sport".

[12] It is worth noting that these boys and girls are doubly-burdened by both madrasah and public school. They attend the public school in the mornings and the madrasah in the afternoons, generally from 5:30 pm to 7:30 pm. During the school holidays madrasah lessons take place in the mornings, typically from 10:30 am to 2:30 pm.

community since the 1990s (Glynn, 2002; Kibria, 2008; cf. Werbner, 2004), eliciting intergenerational conflicts, both in Britain and Bangladesh (Rozario, 2011). This variegated movement has been described using labels which generally evoke scenarios of strict orthodoxy and aversion to 'Western modernity', like 'revivalism' or 'Islamism' (Turner, 2004). Yet, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, 'revivalism' has taken forms which utterly contradict this confrontational image, and instead encompass apparently oxymoronic intersections with 'reformist' discourses, which are capable of harmonising 'Islam' and 'Europe' to the advantage of youths from migrant families. A discourse of European Islam was already present in Italy in the 2000s, driven by transnational connections to the UK. These developments are receiving increasing, but still insufficient, scholarly attention (Hamid, 2011; Frisina, 2006), and testify to an emergence of a generation of youths who blend supposedly antinomic attitudes such as religious devotion and participation in the secular mainstream, both in Europe (Song, 2012) and other 'Western countries' (Dryzek & Kanra, 2014), and in 'Muslim countries' like Bangladesh (Hasan, 2017).

Transnational Islam, full-time Muslims, and "real people"

> I am aware that if I have a swig nothing serious happens to me but I don't drink it [alcohol]. It's different, it's not the act of having a swig, of having a taste that... then, I will want it again, I will fall into temptation again... I mean, there are many factors, both psychological and religious ones[13].

This ethnographic experiment is dedicated to a handful of young men between 21 and 27 years of age who stand out from their peers for their meticulous articulation of a discourse of 'integrated' Islam. Their attitude is atypical compared to that of other interlocutors in the research. Many youths who do not feel 'religious' stressed a quite normative concept of 'integration', i.e. one without an emphasis on 'true Islam', or Islam *tout court*. A discourse of 'integration' is quite widespread among Italian-Bangladeshi youths but, rather than attempting to harmonise Islam and 'Italian-ness', it generally promotes a stance against religion. On the other hand, young worshippers who, unlike the young men I am dealing with, had remained within the Islamic educational system, either as advanced students or teachers, generally put less emphasis on 'integration', and their criticisms of the older generation are more moderate, as they de facto hold an approach to religion which stands in continuity with that of the former generation[14]. Rather than a group in a socio-anthropological sense, the youths who feature in this article form a chain of friends and acquaintances attending the same Bangladeshi mosque, the Islamic Cultural Association of Rome (ICAR), with many of them being involved in the Giovani Musulmani d'Italia (Young Italian Muslims) Association (GMI), an organisation made up of young Muslims with different national backgrounds. Both the ICAR and the GMI are embedded in partially overlapping transnational and translocal networks[15]. The GMI in particular has been depicted as being influenced by the teachings of Tariq Ramadan (Dalla

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[13] Interview with Saeed, 7th April 2019.

[14] Of course, these observations have a purely heuristic value as personal differences and contradictions are quite normal, and even the youths who feature in this article are not perfectly aligned with each other, despite a remarkable ideological convergence.

[15] Both organisations have relations at the international level with the Islamic Forum of Europe (IFE). The GMI, in particular, constitutes the Italian avatar of the Young Muslim Organisation, which is the youth branch of the IFE. At a national level, the GMI is also the youth branch of the Unione delle Comunità e Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia (Union of Italian Islamic Communities and Organisations), a key Muslim actor, generally associated with the NGO Qatar Charity. The networks of these organisations are wider still. For example, the GMI distributes pamphlets from the Conveying Islamic Message Society, closely associated with the Al-Azhar University of Cairo, and bases its activities in Rome from Al-Farouq, an arabophone mosque.

Porta & Bosi, 2010), which are quite popular among young generations in the UK (Hamid, 2011). The circulation of religious material originating from the UK, trainers, and a few key members of the association who travel between the UK and Italy, are responsible for this transfer of knowledge, and many of the points made by the interlocutors are consistent with the writings of Ramadan (cf. Ramadan, 1999, 2010), although almost none of them knows who he is. Yet, I did not have the impression that youths embrace this ideology simply because they have been taught to do so. Rather, the discourses circulating within the GMI are perfectly coherent with their biographic experience, and provides a solution to the problem of "how to harmonise 'integration' and 'Muslimness'".

Once, a boy from the *hifzo* of one of the Bangladeshi madrasahs involved in the research posted on the social network Whatsapp a picture of him sitting in front of a video game console, to which the caption read 'This is the story of a boy who will become an ima[m]... ops! Wrong picture!'. The point is exactly that these youths want to also show the 'wrong picture' in order to give people the whole picture of their lives. Most of my interlocutors seemed eager to clarify that they are not "full-time Muslims". They use social networks not only to access or spread religious content (Bunt, 2003), and many explained that their engagement in Islam is a recent fact, highlighting periods of indifference. Others drew attention to hobbies which oppose the Western image of 'Islamic activists', such as Japanese anime or football. As observed by Schielke (2015), religion is not the only relevant part in the lives of Muslim people, and even 'activists' are seldom full-time activists. In the thick of social life Islam cohabits with other grand schemes (Schielke, 2010; cf. Ahmed, 2015). In some cases these different domains unfold like parallel lines which only meet episodically. For example, despite their religious commitments, these youths are not 'visible Muslims' (Tarlo, 2010), their attire is absolutely 'Western' and the *punjabi*[16] is a sort of 'Sunday (or better, Friday) best'. In other cases, Islam stands in contradiction with, and dominates over narratives such as consumerism and hedonism, creating rules and prohibitions to which one cannot automatically comply: you need a 'strong will'; and 'it is difficult', explained Saeed[17] for example (cf. Schielke, 2009). In yet other instances, discourses like religion and science are perfectly harmonised, not only on the basis of the 'scientific miracles' of the Qur'an (Unsworth, 2019; Gardner & Hameed, 2018), but also through reciprocal translations and forms of intertextuality[18]. This is perhaps not so surprising when we consider that the bulk of these youths are enrolled in scientific faculties, and that their relation with 'modernity' is one which is not mediated exclusively by religion, but rather it is constitutive and pre-exists their relation with Islam.

Previous research has already demonstrated that the relation between Islam and modernity is not reciprocally exclusive (Esposito & Burgat, 2003; Masud et al., 2008; Arjomand, 2011; White, 2012), and that 'revivalist Islam' is perceived by youths as a 'part of a movement of modernity' (Kibria, 2008: 262; cf. Schmidt, 2004). This article represents an attempt to

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[16] The *punjabi* (or *shalwar kameez*) is a typical dress generally considered to be the appropriate outfit for Muslim people in Bangladesh.

[17] Interview, 7th April 2019.

[18] An example of this intertextuality was provided by Asad, a 24-year-old Biology student, and key member of the GMI association, during an interfaith dialogue event in April 2019. While talking about possible actions to be taken in order to counter Islamophobia, he stressed the importance of being patient and offered an insightful simile by comparing Islamophobia to a disease. Pathological processes, he said, function quickly, just like Islamophobia, while healing processes (i.e. actions against Islamophobia) work more slowly, but are still successful in containing diseases.

highlight the biographical and social dimensions of this mutual entanglement, and to show that tradition is not only 'invented' (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), but that it can also be inventive.

In the next section I will shed light on how my interlocutors interconnect different aspects of their lives through a generational critique of the adult generation, leveraging an apparently oxymoronic concept of 'integrated' Islam which unpacks pre-established representations of 'purist' religion.

Integrating Islam

Through their generational critique these youths attempt to interconnect the general episteme of Islam with other existential domains, which they perceive to have been kept separated from religion in the case of their parents. In this way they assemble *series*, in the sense suggested by Deleuze (1970; cf. Foucault, 1969), i.e. diagonal lines of transformation which interconnect apparently inhomogeneous discursive orders, e.g. theology, infra-communitarian narratives, and football, establishing at the same time discursive relations with a complementary field of non-discursive practices, such as individual behaviour or social processes. This principle of reciprocal translatability often reveals intertexualities between primary sources of Islam and other aspects of life, as outlined by Maruf through a quote from the 'Sura of the Clot' (Q 96: 1):

> [...] the first word revealed in the Qur'an was 'aqra'. 'Aqra' means 'read!'. 'Read in the name of your God' [...]. We need to study, to understand things on our own. But let's imagine a society where Islam is a mainstream religion, [in these kinds of societies] parents teach Islam to the children through preconceptions, by hearsay[19].

These 'parents', who learnt Islam just 'by hearsay', are depicted as superficially religious, incapable of using religion as a 'model' for their everyday lives, according to Asad (see *infra*, note 18), or conveying 'the true meaning of what spirituality and faith can be', in the words of another interlocutor, Nazmul (see *infra*, note 20). Their religion is considered too 'Bangladeshi', sometimes even 'non-Islamic' by many interlocutors. In this way, the youths construct a 'true' Islam, in opposition to the 'cultural' Islam of their parents (Ramadan, 2010):

> Religion has always remained the same, and it is beautiful to understand it in depth, yet this deepest layer is covered by many others which represent what we define as 'the culture'. Hence, you can't see this deepest layer initially, you need to filter out lots of useless things[20].

This critique of cultural Muslimness interconnects both with a religious discourse and with a worldly critique of a former generation, whose behaviour is considered inappropriate not only because it is non-Islamic but also as non-Italian[21]. This more comprehensive discourse, which

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[19] Interview with Maruf, 3rd August 2019. Maruf was 22 years old at the time of the interview, had recently moved to the UK to complete his studies at a British university, and was not involved in the GMI.

[20] Interview with Nazmul, 7th April 2019. Nazmul is probably the most prominent member of Bangladeshi descent in the GMI. At the time of the interview, he was 24 years old, attended the faculty of architecture, and was working for a private firm.

[21] Rohan offers a perhaps extreme example of this attitude: '[In Italy] I have never seen people sitting by the roadside drinking. Why is it happening now? Because in Bangladesh it is customary, so they do the same here [...]. The Italians wear shoes, even in

stresses a moral dimension of being a "good", "normal", citizen, is built around a concept of 'integration' which does not exclude other forms of belonging such as Bangladeshi-ness and Muslimness[22], but rather constitutes an exhortation to mitigate the Bangladeshi-ness, or the narrow-mindedness, of the former generation. For Nazmul, 'the parents' do not have 'Italian friends', as they are not interested in 'exchanging views with the people they are surrounded by':

> We noticed a hindrance in the… the first generation, therefore we somehow tried to… to find a way to bypass these obstacles. I think it's a natural process […] which for me is that of integration[23].

For Mazidul, 'integration' should be part and parcel of an Islamic 'lifestyle', and represents the essence of the Prophet's teachings:

> [...] [Y]our lifestyle should not be harmful for the others, as He said. You have to be an open person always [...]. Hence you have to respect... for example, you respect the culture of the places where you go, you respect the people... basically you integrate yourself![24]

A relationship with a cultural, and confessional, 'other' is generally described as a chance to discover one's religiosity, 'because it is from diversity that you realise that you have something' (Nazmul)[25]. Saeed emphasises this point using a quote from the 'Sura of the Chambers' (Q 49:13):

> He 'made you people and tribes, that you may know one another' […] our ideal is to try to cohab… to reach out to the others. […]. [The former generation] think that they come here […] and they can do whatever they want. This is not true […].
>
> It is like doing a puzzle. There is a puzzle here, it is Europe, and you […] should try to insert yourself without forcing[26]

This passage, in which Saeed connects the need for adjusting religion to fit different places with a discourse on the (lack of) adaptation to Italy on the part of the adults, shows that the idea of an 'integrated Islam' can mean to assemble together apparently unconnected existential domains. These youths discovered 'true' Islam at a certain stage of their lives, a point when their dissatisfaction with the 'community', and even with religion, pre-existed. Their attitude towards formal Islamic education is a case in point. Many attended the madrasah as teenagers, but they complain they had been taught to read the Qur'an in Arabic without any

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the summer. Always in shoes! Then, the Bangladeshi guy arrives in slippers [...]. I don't want to talk about the *longhi* [*Bangladeshi dress particularly disliked by observant Muslims*] [...]. I understand that you are wearing your country's typical dress but not in the street. [...] these guys who smell onion, garlic... c'mon! In Italy you are not supposed to do so!' (Interview with Rohan, 3rd August 2019). At the time of the interview Rohan was a 27-years-old civil engineering student not directly involved with the GMI.

[22] Mazidul epitomises the intermingling of these different sources of belonging. During an interview on the 3rd of August 2019 he said: 'I want to mix up Bangladesh and Italy, which for me is better than being Bangladeshi *or* Italian'. Then he added: 'We are Italians... hence, being Muslims and being Italians will become an integrated thing'. This stance is also mirrored in his life-projects. In fact, he wants to move back to Bangladesh (his family arrived in Italy during his childhood) after completing his studies in Rome, in order to establish a company and to help the Muslim community of his native village.

[23] Interview with Nazmul, 7th April 2019.

[24] Interview with Mazidul, 3rd August 2019.

[25] Interview with Nazmul, 7th April 2019.

[26] Interview with Saeed, 7th April 2019.

understanding of its contents. As a result, none of them entered the *hifzo* nor developed a lasting interest in religion. Subsequently they came into contact with an 'integrated Islam' which promotes practices such as reading (and interpreting) the Qur'an in its Italian translation[27]. In this way, they could make sense of biographical elements such as their successful participation in Italian society (as university students, or as part of personal networks which surpass the 'Muslim world'), their discomfort with the 'adults', and negative experiences with religion which apparently had left a void in their lives.

Furthermore, for these youths 'integration' is a key trope in which a religious discourse overlaps not only with a discourse on community, but also with seemingly more remote domains such as football. For Akib, for example, the French national team is the perfect example of successful integration. This, in turn, creates another interesting series of discursive and non-discursive elements: The value of integration is grounded in the Qur'an, epitomised by the trajectory of youths who aspire to reach prominent positions, exemplified by their predilection for football rather than cricket (see *infra*, note 11), confirmed by the success of the French team, and contradicted by the behaviour of 'unintegrated' adults.

This variable geometry model of 'integrated' Islam does not only imply adjusting to different places, but also to different historical moments, namely to 'modernity'. The trope of 'modernity', like that of 'integration', enables theology and real life to intersect in a process of reciprocal translation, just as they converge in the exemplarity of the Prophet's life.

> [...] [S]o we try to imitate the Prophet's life, that's it, basically it's about your lifestyle... because Islam is not about... it's not about the past, because, let's say that it seeks to envision the past, present and the future, basically it's in constant evolution. [...] Since you have to imitate His life, and speaking of the nowadays, the modern era, let's say the digital era... you try to maintain a lifestyle which is not harmful for anyone, to have a good life but without the problems of our time[28].

In a similar vein, Asad explains that 'the world changes', and both Islam and Muslim people should change accordingly:

> Sure, we look at that golden age as a model but we try to understand the current context, to modern[ise]... and unfortunately the Arabs, but also the Bangladeshis themselves, do not agree. They think Islam is made of laws and that you are supposed to follow them. Which is true, I totally agree... but the world changes[29].

This religious argument also speaks to a more worldly generational discourse with respect to the adults. The 'first generation' is often depicted as misplaced, not only in space but also in time. Nazmul, for example, describes his parents as anachronistic subjects, victims of what Levitt would call an 'ossification effect' (2009: 1236), both in Italy and in Bangladesh:

> [...] [T]he world moves forward, everywhere. I think that the things that they learnt, the baggage they brought with them, I don't mean clothes and so on, I'm talking

[27] Reading the Qur'an in Italian is common practice among these youths. Moreover, many explained that they cannot completely understand the *Khutbah* (Friday's sermon) even when the preacher speaks Bengali. For this reason, despite having completed their Islamic tuition in other mosques (or through private lessons) they prefer to attend prayers at the ICAR, or at the mosque Al-Farouq (see *infra*, note 15), where an Italian translation of the sermon is provided.

[28] Interview with Mazidul, 3rd August 2019.

[29] Interview with Asad, 7th April 2019.

> about their perspective, the mentality, has not changed. Whereas people have changed in Bangladesh [...]. In fact, when they go there, they themselves are astonished and say: 'Oh my God, but... they have changed there!'[30].

Of course, the concept of an Islam which 'moves forward' together with 'the world' is in contrast with that of a religion which has 'always remained the same' (see above). Yet, it is precisely this apparently oxymoronic view which constitutes the signature style of a discursiveness of European Islam. Both religion and real life should be constructed with a productive tension between tradition and modernity, continuity and change, ideal models and contingencies, i.e. according to a dualist attitude which then enables these youths to address the problem of creating an Islamic lifestyle as an open-ended question, and to distance themselves from stereotypical images of an 'Islamic activist'. In this way, they can bridge the gap between religion and everyday life which they feel they have inherited from their parents, creating interdiscursivities which point in many different directions. A religious discourse overlaps with a discourse on the community, but is also connected to a scientific discourse, and a more general *weltanschauung*, as explained by Akib:

> Both from a religious and from a scientific point of view, I guess, we are characterised by dualisms. We have two eyes, two ears, two hands, and we also have rationality and emotionality. Then... ok, not everything is... you must be aware that not everything is black or white, there are many shades in between[31].

The excerpts which I have briefly presented in this section are characterised by two different modi operandi. On one hand, they are underpinned by a dualist tension which strives to create shades of gray, i.e. intermediate positions between the 'black or white' of supposedly irreconcilable opposites. On the other hand, they support the emergence of enunciations which 'trespass thresholds'[32] (Deleuze, 1970: 37) between discursive and non-discursive dimensions, and between different discursive domains. Although a religious episteme remains at the centre in organising this complex web of rhetorics and practices, these youths do not simply apply 'orthodox' Islamic principles to all aspects of existence (Roy, 2004), but also recognise the validity of non-religious repertoires: science, football, and 'real' life do not stand in opposition to Islam but are rather intertwined with it in a process of mutual validation, a multilayered regime of truth where religion is positioned in the middle as a *primus inter pares*.

Conclusion

Using generational critique as a guide for navigating the discourses of these youths enables us to recognise interconnections that would otherwise not be considered according to 'exceptionalist' or 'literalist' approaches to Islam (Schielke, 2010). Their religious enunciations are grounded in multiple inscriptions (cf. Deleuze, 1970): a religious discourse hinges on the Islamic corpus, on a narrative of the 'community', and on other discursive domains (e.g. biology, football, psychology), and at the same time is inscribed in the field of non discursive practices ("real" life, and its social conditions). In this respect, ethnographic research, insofar as it entails the collection of heteroclite data, can help us to observe how these different existential domains are summoned by my young interlocutors in a process of 'co-institution'

[30] Interview with Nazmul, 7th April 2019.

[31] Focus group discussion, Islamic Cultural Association of Rome, 3rd August 2019.

[32] All translations from Deleuze 1970 are mine.

(Amselle, 2001), which also affects pre-established juxtapositions between secular and religious domains (cf. Casanova 2011; Hoelscher, 2015). Rather than explaining the lives of Muslim people exclusively through Islam, we should take into account the complex and bijective relations between the textuality of religion and that of "the rest", so as to grasp a personal dimension of Islam (Jeldtoft & Nielsen, 2011), which is in turn socially determined.

A religious discourse stressing 'integration' and 'modernity' is embraced by these youths who are already 'well-integrated' in 'Western modernity', with promising careers and capabilities which were lacking in the former generation. If their parents have been forced to accept a subaltern model of integration, their sons experience a better structure of opportunities, which makes sense of (and is in turn endowed with sense by) their distinctive religious stance. Moreover, their emphasis on 'integration' is not only the product of a generational gap, it also reflects the situation of Muslim people in Italy and expresses a request for public recognition which leverages reassuring images so as to cope with Islamophobia (Mapril, 2014). The trope of integration is increasingly present among young Muslims in Europe, and sheds light on the role played by specific contexts in moulding the significance of religion, such as in societies where Islam is not the mainstream faith (Ryan, 2011). The universalistic and abstract grammar of Islam works as a 'determined corpus which varies according to the problem posed' (Deleuze, 1970: 32), and produces meaningful discourses only when it is embedded in particular lives and socio-cultural contexts.

The discourses of these youths do not assume confrontational tones but value dialogue with the 'other' as a chance to refine one's religiosity, and the fact that this apparently appeasing attitude is embraced by youths with promising careers is worthy of attention. Scholarly research has already highlighted that exclusion generates defensive attitudes among Muslim youths (Kibria, 2008; Glynn, 2002; Aminah, 2000), and my findings confirm those of authors like Klausen (2005; cf. Edmunds, 2010) as they show that wishes for an 'integrated' Islam are more likely to take root among those who are better placed within society. Islam is not confrontational in itself, but rather it can convey the political rage of marginalised people, while for others it can work as a bridge towards mainstream society.

Within the 'Bangladeshi community' of Rome, an 'integrated' Islam provides an instrument not only in the assembly of different existential domains but also in the organisation of a multilayered sense of belonging, based on three main possible identifications: Muslim, Italian, and Bangladeshi. My evidence does not confirm the views of those who observe that religion is superseding other forms of belonging (cf. Ryan, 2014; Jacobson, 1997), on the contrary, as observed by scholars who have dealt with Muslim youths involved civically in "non-Muslim" countries (Song, 2012), it seems that a humanitarian understanding of Islam enables creative combinations of different identifications (see *infra*, note 22). The Bangladeshi-ness of the former generation is not outright rejected by these youths, rather it is transformed and mashed up with Muslimness and Italian-ness to form a new horizon of belonging.

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