CHAPTER 23

Italian Islam: Imam and Mosque Today

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Introduction

Millions of Muslims have become, in relatively recent years, citizens of Western countries. As well as their being a minority, they experience life, for the most part, in deeply secularized societies. Further, in several areas of the West, Islam is not a religion of immigration any more, and Muslims may neither be considered, nor consider themselves, as foreigners. Today Muslims share all kinds of public spaces such as schools, workplaces, hospitals, prisons, even graveyards, with Christians, Jews, atheists, agnostics and the religiously apathetic. As well, the capital cities of the Muslim world are not only Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Tehran or Dhaka any more. Rather, cities like New York City, Chicago, Detroit, Toronto, Sydney, London, Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Lyon, and even Rome or Milan must be considered among the major cities of the Muslim world. And within this world there are mosques and Imams.

In this essay, I first explore the meaning of the term 'Imām' then discuss the function of the Imam in respect to the mosque and the leadership of community prayers. I then examine the figure and meaning of Imam in the Shi`a context before turning to a general discussion of the contemporary figure of the Imam, especially within Western and European contexts, and with a particular focus on the situation of Italy. I conclude with reference to recent developments and what that might portend for the situation of Italian Islam.

The Meaning of ‘Imam’

Imam or Imām, as the word should be correctly transcribed, is an Arabic term, specifically a present participle (Ism Fā‘il). Its meaning is the one who leads, who sets the pace. In the mainly nomadic pre-Islamic society the word Imām had the meaning of caravan leader or, indeed, anyone who owned a number of camels. In the Qur’an there are some twelve instances of the word (7 of which singular, Imām and 5 plural, A‘īmma)¹ with the main meaning of leader, example, model

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or even prototype. There are a few synonyms for Imām in Arabic, for example Ḥādī and Khalīfa. Ḥādī has a broader meaning. It may be translated as leader, or reference, but also a teacher at school, one who is a reference for his/her pupils, or any group leader, such as the front-man of a rock band etc. Khalīfa\(^2\) may not be strictly considered as a synonym. In fact, if Imām in the Sacred Book frequently means something close to direction or guide, the meaning of Khalīfa is leaning more towards that of successor.\(^3\) As early as the first centuries of Islam, the two terms started to become interchangeable. However, prior to that, the idea of ‘Imamate’ appeared for the first time connected to the Prophet’s succession.\(^4\) The Umayyads identified the leader of the community by the term Khalīfa, while the other term, Amīr al-Muʾminīn, which can be translated as ‘Prince of the Believers’, appeared soon after.

As far as the notion of ‘Imamate’, as a wider concept, is concerned the companions of the Prophet and the members of the Quraysh tribe had their own preference for a title.\(^5\) This was initially peacefully accepted, but the controversy originating with this issue caused friction with the supporters of ‘Alī and eventually led to the civil war which in turn gave rise to the first dynasty of the Muslim Empire (Mu‘awiyya and the Umayyads) in 661 C.E.\(^6\) However, the idea of Imām, and so the Imamate, never lost its prescriptive meaning. As early as the second century, it became a highly regarded title, even though it was not used with reference to the head of state (the Caliph). Paradoxically, since it had not been used as a title for the leader of the whole community, traditionalists, jurists (fuqahā’\(^7\)) and various savants (‘ulamā’) who claimed some kind of religious authority, ‘gained’ the title of Imam.\(^7\) Considering the above, it is interesting to note that the term has since attained a political meaning in many Muslim societies, although in the Qur’an it has little or no relationship at all with ideas of power and authority (more suitable for

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4 For Sunni Muslims, the Prophet did not nominate any successor as a leader of his religious and political movement, but had been the first (and, at that time, only) Imam and legislator (through the revelation he had received).
5 After the death of the Prophet, two main traditions were predominant: the Muhājirūn, the initial Muslims, who had made the Hijra from Mecca with Muḥammad and the Ansār, who lived in Medina, who had accepted the Prophet and then converted to Islam. Both Abū Bakr and ‘Umar belong to the first group.
7 Dictionnaire du Qur’an, p. 141.