



Freedom for some?

It all started with one question: is freedom of religion actual freedom or is it only on the books?

By Yazeed Kamaldien and Elisa di Benedetto

Belluno, Italy. When Sharif Eissa opened his kebab shop in this small town in north-eastern Italy, he didn't expect it would close after five years. He left Egypt about 12 years ago to follow the woman he fell in love with. What he could not foresee was a growing prejudice against immigrants and Muslims that made it impossible for him to keep open a business.

“I couldn't stand the continual rounds and fines by the police, keeping my shop under control,” Eissa says. “They used to come every week, no matter the time and whether or not there were people inside. They even asked the customers for their documents.” Add to that the prejudices fueled by groups such as the Northern League political party, and, basically, Eissa says, “I had to give up my shop because of my religion.”

On the books, there are constitutional protections for freedom of religion throughout Western Europe. But laws throughout the region on everything from limits on Islamic dress to prohibitions on the building of mosques reflect what many regard as persistent persecution directed at Muslims.

Marwan Muhammad, volunteer spokesperson for the Collective Against Islamophobia in Paris, believes Islamophobia in France is “anti-black and anti-Arab discrimination recomposed in a religion context”. “There are right-wing oriented ideologies that say Muslims don't belong here and that Islam is against a European identity. They believe that Europe is for whites only. There is a denial of Muslims in France even though we make up 10% of the population.”

Just how pervasive the contradictions in the notions of religious freedom in theory and practice are, was revealed in a 2010 University of Munster study of more than 1 000 respondents from five Western European nations. More than four in five respondents from all countries expressed respect for freedom of belief, and at

least three quarters from each country agreed with the statement: “We must respect all religions.”

Yet consider also these findings: more than half of the respondents from the former East Germany and France said practising the Islamic faith must be severely restricted. So did more than a third of the respondents from Denmark, the Netherlands and the former West Germany.

Less than half of the respondents from Germany, Denmark and France approve of the construction of minarets. Only in Denmark and the Netherlands did a slim majority believe girls should be allowed to wear a head scarf to school if it is part of their religious tradition. In France, where the practice is prohibited, fewer than 10% supported the right of students to wear head scarves.

The idea that Muslims “must adapt to our culture” was backed by majorities from 73% of respondents in Portugal to 90% of respondents in the Netherlands.

Persistent prejudice

The hopes of Muslims in France were raised following presidential elections last year when Francois Hollande ousted Nicholas Sarkozy, who stirred tensions with anti-Islam and anti-immigrant rhetoric. But Muslims still report a long road ahead to acceptance. Muhammad says in 2011 his organisation investigated 300 cases of Islamophobia, of which 84% were against women.

Discrimination against Muslims in France has focused heavily on the hijab, or headscarf, that Muslim women wear. “The most visible symbol of Islam is the wearing of the hijab. Most racists perceive the hijab as a visual sign of hostility toward them,” he said.

Chamous Larisse, a nurse who works in Paris while completing her master's degree in social science studies, turned to the collective for advice when the manager at the hospital where she works asked her to take off the scarf that covered her hair.

“I was the only Muslim nurse and I was wearing the hijab,” she says. “Since then I tried to mobilise to struggle against this discrimination.”

It is an important issue, “because I am Muslim and I try to practise Islam as far as possible. God prescribed the hijab in the Qur'an.” Larisse views anti-Muslim prejudice in a broader context, as part of a post-colonial crisis in which Muslims who are also French are seen as threatening the nation's identity.

Muhammad agrees. “Some people don't want Muslims here. Or they want them to assimilate. They want Muslims to fit in because their religion and colour is not in line with what Europe is meant to be,” he says. “I reject that framework. I don't have to define myself according to those criteria. I belong here. I am French and Muslim.”

“Media have a crucial role in shaping people’s perceptions, especially in building prejudices and stereotypes toward Islam and Muslims. Both for ignorance and good faith, religion is often considered as the cause of crimes or related to events that have nothing to do with it, thus feeding tensions and discrimination.”

Restrictions on worship

The right of women to wear a veil is but one of many issues facing Muslims in Italy. Other areas of concern include the right of Muslim students to have halal food at school, harassment of businesses run by immigrants and laws regulating and even in some cases prohibiting Islamic butcheries or kebab shops. A special concern relates to the fundamental freedom of having an own place of worship.

“At the moment, only two of the five mosques in Italy – the ones in Rome and in Segrate, not far away from Milan – can be defined as mosques by Islamic architectural canons, while there are over 1 000 Islamic centres where Muslims gather for praying and reading the Quran. Here children can learn Arabic and women can meet,” says Husain Morelli, spokesperson for the Imam Mahdi Islamic Culture Centre in Rome.

“Most centres are not appropriate places for worshipping Allah. They are mainly garages or old warehouses and the rent is paid by the Muslim community, despite that places of worship should be guaranteed by the constitution.”

What makes it especially difficult for Muslims in Italy is that prejudice can be pervasive throughout the culture, fed by institutions from political parties to the media.

“Islamophobia in Italy expresses at different levels,” says Morelli. “Media have a crucial role in shaping people’s perceptions, especially in building prejudices and stereotypes toward Islam and Muslims. Both for ignorance and good faith, religion is often considered as the cause of crimes or related to events that have nothing to do with it, thus feeding tensions and discrimination.”

And those pressures take their toll on the Muslim community. “Some of the believers who used to come to the mosque are not coming here anymore, because they fear controls by the police,” Morelli says. “Some of them have been asked for support in collecting information about other Muslims. Moreover, going to the mosque can create difficulties or delays in getting Italian citizenship.”

Zahra, who spoke on condition of anonymity, converted to Islam in 2006, and is faithful in her worship. But she doesn’t wear the hijab at university or at work and only the people she trusts know about her conversion. “Living in a country where Muslims are a minority doesn’t help. People are not used to diversity and this affects everyday life,” Zahra says.

Eissa, the former kebab shop owner, worries about

how his children struggle with being both Italian and Muslim. “How would you feel if one of your neighbours didn’t want his son to play with yours just because of your culture and religion?” he asks. “I feel my son and my daughter are growing up in a big confusion between their Islamic culture and Italian lifestyle. They are very young but they already feel ashamed when mentioning their own religion, while they should live it with serenity and be proud of that, as well as of being Italians.”

Promoting dialogue

Many Western European Muslims hope that increased dialogue with and interaction among people of different faiths will lead to greater understanding. Morelli encourages Italian Muslims to actively participate in the community to build a positive vision of Islam. “Sometimes prejudices could be avoided by making Muslim people explain what Islam is instead of people who don’t know this religion,” he says.

Research supports the idea that getting to know your neighbour can go a long way to limiting prejudice. The University of Munster study indicated that having personal contact with Muslims was strongly related to favorable attitudes toward Islam in every country. For example, in the former West Germany, 38% of respondents who reported a lot of contact with Muslims reported very positive attitudes; only one percent of respondents who had no contact held very positive attitudes toward Muslims.

But there is a long way to go. In the European study, less than 10% of the respondents said they had a lot of contact with Muslims. As a seeming consequence, the study showed what comes to many of their minds when they think of Islam are discrimination against women, fanaticism and, somewhat ironically, narrow-mindedness. They don’t have notions of Muslims as peaceful and tolerant.

In France, Larisse is determined to push forward for equal rights for Islam. “I hope for the normalisation of the presence of Islam and Muslims. Islam and Muslims are here. I can’t understand why this tension exists,” she says. “I hope in future the presence of Muslim women, the mosque and Islamic practice will appear as normal in France.”

This article won first prize in the Washington-based International Centre for Journalists annual Joint Reporting Awards competition in April 2013.



Yazeed Kamaldien is a Cape Town-based journalist and photographer who has worked freelance and fulltime with newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations. His work can be viewed at www.yazkam.com and www.yazkam.wordpress.com. Contact him via yazeedkamaldien@yahoo.com



Elisa Di Benedetto is a freelance journalist based in Italy. She is interested in cross-cultural and cross-religious issues, and reported from Afghanistan and Lebanon both as embedded and independent journalist. She is one of the founding members of the International Association of Religion Journalists. bnldin@tin.it