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UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

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Luca Ozzano

Two forms of Catholicism in twenty-first-century Italian public debate: an analysis of positions on same-sex marriage and Muslim dress codes

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Abstract

There is a peculiar relationship between religion and the political system in twenty-first-century Italy. In particular, the collapse of the Democrazia Cristiana party has favored the rise of new political entrepreneurs eager to exploit religion as a legitimacy factor, while the Catholic Church has attempted to influence politics without the mediation of any specific political party. New debates involving religious values have therefore developed. This article analyzes the positions taken and the frames proposed by Italy's Catholic political actors in relation to two particularly telling issues, that of same-sex marriage and that of the Muslim dress codes. Its most striking finding is the presence in the Italian political system of two distinct forms of Catholicism in politics. One, promoted by the Catholic Church and followed by most centrist Catholics, is quite tolerant in terms of social and religious pluralism and supportive of human rights and social justice, but it emphasizes the 'traditional' heterosexual family as the cornerstone of society. The other, 'civilizational' form, promoted by the Lega Nord and some other center-right representatives and intellectuals, is based on an idea of Italian citizenship articulated in religious, cultural, and ethnic terms, and thus excluding those who are not members of this community. Here Christian identity is not defined by the Church's teachings, but rather represents a marker of Western civilization in opposition to Muslim civilization.

Keywords: Italy, LGBT rights, headscarf, Lega Nord, political Catholicism

Introduction

The relation between religion and politics in Italy has always been peculiar, mainly because of the presence of the Vatican in Rome. Between the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, it changed, moving beyond its Cold War form. First, the widespread corruption scandal that started in 1992, commonly known as *Tangentopoli*, marked the end of Democrazia Cristiana (DC), the Catholic party that had ruled Italy since the end of World War II. This, in turn, favored the rise of new political entrepreneurs eager to exploit religion as a legitimacy factor (Ozzano 2013), and religion-related issues became a tool in political campaigns to capture a supposed 'religious vote'. This trend was also favored by the 'diaspora' of Catholic politicians in parties belonging to both coalitions as a consequence of a new electoral law approved in 1993. This law assigned three-quarters of parliamentary seats through a majoritarian system, and thus prompted the formation of a bipolar party system, making an autonomous Catholic center much more difficult to maintain (Baccetti 2007; Galli 2004). During this period, the Catholic Church also became an influential political actor without the mediation of any specific political party, by promoting a 'Cultural Project' aimed at the re-Christianization of Italian society through the achievement of hegemony at the social-cultural level (Garelli 2006; Garelli 2007; Diamanti and Ceccarini 2007; Magister 2001). These new strategies of Italian political parties and the Church have also been dictated by broader developments in Italian society since the last decades of the

twentieth century, particularly secularization processes, involving a greater distance of individuals from religious institutions, and an increasing religious pluralization, as a consequence of both immigration from non-Catholic countries and a globalization of faiths (Garelli, Guizzardi, and Pace 2003; Cartocci 2011). In addition, the rising role of the media, as well as the development of a new international discursive context after 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’, and the influence of religion-related debates in neighboring countries, favored a polarization on sensitive issues related to religious values (Ozzano and Giorgi 2013; Ozzano and Giorgi 2016; Ozzano 2015; Giorgi 2013).

The new Italian debates about ethical-religious issues that arose in the 2000s concerned two particular fields: sexuality and bioethics, on the one hand, and religious pluralism and the role of religion in the public sphere, on the other. The first field included a proposed law on assisted reproduction and the 2005 referendum on it; the recognition of same-sex partnerships; the legalization of euthanasia, especially in relation to the Welby (2006) and Englaro (2008–09) cases; and abortion and the so-called ‘morning after’ contraceptive pill. The second field included debates over the presence of the crucifix in public schools, the Muslim dress code, and the location of non-Catholic, and especially Muslim, places of worship.

This article will analyze the role played by religious values and institutions in these debates, showing that two quite different discourses have developed in recent Italian politics based on different interpretations of Catholic doctrine and implying very different conceptions of citizenship. The first, proposed by ‘centrist’ Catholics belonging to different coalitions, is uncompromising on issues related to sexuality and the role of religion in the public sphere, but accommodating in relation to religious pluralism and the role of immigrant faiths. The second, proposed by the Lega Nord party (hereafter LN) and some right-wing groups, intellectuals, and journalists, is intransigent across both sets of issues and is marked by the frequent use of what many would term a ‘politically incorrect’ language. This article will reveal the differences between these two forms of Catholic politics by means of an analysis of Catholic actors’ positions in the debates over the recognition of same-sex marriages or civil unions and over the Muslim dress code. This analysis will also provide some insights into the current role of the Vatican as an institution and of Catholic values in the changing Italian political system.

Methodology

The analysis carried out in this article builds on a broader research project on Italian religion-related debates and specifically on a database of 2,062 articles published between 2000 and 2013 in major

Italian newspapers, including partisan publications, both on the center-right (such as *Liberò, Il Giornale, Il Secolo d'Italia, Il Tempo,* and *Il Foglio*) and the center-left (such as *L'Unità, Il fattoquotidiano, Pubblico,* and *Liberazione*), as well as mainstream, officially non-partisan newspapers (such as *Il Corriere della Sera, La Stampa,* and *La Repubblica*).¹ This broader research project was undertaken by myself and Alberta Giorgi, of the Center for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra and GRASSROOTSMOBILISE, Eliamep. Its main results were published in Ozzano and Giorgi 2016. View all notes Several other official documents, such as statements of Church representatives, other public documents of the Church, and political parties' electoral platforms, have also been consulted. The materials have been analyzed qualitatively, by first selecting newspaper articles dealing with the subjects of same-sex unions and Muslim dress code, and then using a text-driven coding scheme to code the frames that the actors employed, their claims, and their arguments. This analysis is based on the idea that the media represents a 'master forum' which acts as a meeting point for all other relevant political, social, religious, and scientific spheres, both because the players in all other forums also use the mass media and because all of them 'assume its pervasive influence' (Marx Ferree et al. 2002, 10), since it selects the legitimate actors, voices, and frames (Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson and Meyer 1996).

In terms of literature, the main reference is classic scholarship on discourse analysis and frame analysis. Discourse analysis is a well-established tradition of research in various social science disciplines, from the 1960s and 1970s onwards (Foucault 1975; Van Dijk 1993). Despite their different methodologies and objects of studies, works adopting this perspective share a concern for the verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication, with the analysis of texts and discourses focused on interactional moves and strategies. Particularly in political science and sociology, these studies generally share the idea that the meanings and concepts that we use in everyday life are socially constructed and are related to the power relationships between actors.

Frame analysis also has a long history in the social sciences, with an application in political science especially in the subfields of social movements and policy analysis. Frames can be conceived as analytical concepts used by actors to define specific situations, and they become particularly evident in situations of conflict, in which there are controversies between actors about how to frame a situation. Framing a situation means to set up the arena and the rules of a discussion, as well as its vocabulary and the arguments that are regarded as legitimate within it. Framing choices also imply choices between different courses of action. Frames are therefore strictly related to the positions of the actors and their interactions. In this context, then, we can talk about a discursive opportunity structure which is part of the broader political opportunity structure (Marx Ferree et al. 2002). This

kind of analysis can help us to outline the differences between the references to Catholicism made by ‘centrist’ Catholics and by ‘civilizational’ ones. In particular, it can reveal how they use the same reference to justify utterly different positions and policy proposals, by adopting a frame based on either human rights or identity.

The following sections of the article will analyze the two debates, firstly by describing their histories and discursive contexts, and secondly by analyzing the different positions of Catholic actors on the issues, their statements and language choices, the frames they adopted, and their policy proposals.

The debate on same-sex marriages or civil unions

The debate in context

Although in the nineteenth century Italy was regarded as rather more tolerant towards homosexual people than some northern European countries (Dall’Orto 1990), its Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) movements developed more slowly and later than in many other European countries. This was a consequence of both the Vatican’s influence and a traditional culture (especially evident during the Fascist regime) that preferred not to bring sensitive issues such as homosexuality into public spaces (Rossi Barilli 1999; Dall’Orto 1986). After the post-World War II democratization, right-wing MPs even tried to pass legislation criminalizing homosexuality, and only after 1968–69 was a full-fledged LGBT movement able to develop. At this time, the only party supporting it was the small Radical Party, and only later did the Communist and post-Communist left join the struggle, particularly with the creation of the Arci-Gay organization. LGBT rights, however, did not become a real issue in the Italian public sphere until the 2000 Rome World Pride event. This rally took place in the same year as the jubilee and raised lively discussions and fierce opposition from the Catholic Church. In 2001 Franco Grillini, a historic leader of the movement, was elected as an MP for the Democratici di Sinistra party (hereafter DS), and he was soon followed by other LGBT personalities in center-left and left parties, such as activist Paola Concia, the transgender performer Vladimir Luxuria, and the future governor of the Puglia region and leader of the Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà party (SEL) Nichi Vendola. As a consequence, draft bills aimed at legally recognizing same-sex couples began to be discussed in parliament. In particular, a law on same-sex civil unions was included in the center-left’s platform for both the 2006 and the 2013 elections. However, the narrow victories of the center-left and the divisions between their leftist and Catholic wings in both cases prevented the approval of such proposals.

Debates over this issue were also strongly encouraged by developments in other countries, first in Spain, where in 2005 the law on same-sex marriages promoted by the Zapatero government had come into force, and later in other European countries such as France and Britain. The widespread recognition of same-sex unions – all Western European countries except Italy and Greece legalized same-sex unions and/or marriages before or during the period covered by this study, 2000–13 – as well as the endorsement (at least since 2012) of US President Barack Obama (Wintemute and Andenæs 2001; Festy 2006; Kollman 2007; Paternotte and Kollman 2013; Waaldijk 2003) contributed to significantly changing the climate, and framed the options, of the Italian debate from its early to its later phases.

Catholic actors on same-sex marriages and civil unions

The positions of Catholic legislators and social actors on this issue were first defined by a 2003 document signed by Joseph Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. The document was entitled ‘Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 2003), and it was not only meant as a moral appeal, but explicitly aimed ‘to give direction to Catholic politicians by indicating the approaches to proposed legislation in this area which would be consistent with Christian conscience’. It mainly relied on the ‘natural law’ doctrine of the Church, which, according to the authors, made its proposals ‘addressed not only to those who believe in Christ, but to all persons committed to promoting and defending the common good of society’. The document defined marriage as ‘solely between a man and a woman’, and considered this definition a ‘natural truth ... established by the Creator ... [and] confirmed by Revelation’, and ‘recognized as such by all the major cultures of the world’. In contrast, it defined homosexuality as ‘against natural law’ and ‘a depravity’. Nonetheless, the document also drew a clear distinction between homosexual people, who ‘must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity’ and ‘every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard ... avoided’, and same-sex unions, which are ‘totally lacking in the biological and anthropological elements of marriage and family’ and are not conducive to the ‘procreation and survival of the human race’. According to the document, the legalization of same-sex unions is therefore ‘contrary to right reason’ and the common good, and would create an environment which is harmful both for the institution of marriage, seen as the cornerstone of society, and for the correct upbringing of children. Catholic politicians were invited to refrain from cooperating in the approval or implementation of laws on this issue, and the document was denounced by secular leftists as an unlawful interference of the Church in the Italian political system (Accattoli 2003).

Most of the Church then appeared to share the views of the ‘Considerations’ document. Even Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, a high-level prelate known for his open positions on other issues, was convinced that ‘the Church cannot recognize as true rights what in reality are only pseudo-rights’ (*Corriere della Sera*, July 5, 2000). However, when the campaign for the 2006 political elections began and the issue was first aired in Italian public debate, it became clear that many high-level prelates, such as Monsignors Luigi Bettazzi and Carlo Maria Martini, as well as influential Catholic publications such as *Famiglia cristiana* and representatives of Catholic civil society such as the Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Italiani (ACLI) president, Luigi Bobba, did not object to the provision of specific rights to same-sex partners (for example, regarding inheritance). Nonetheless, concerned about the Spanish law legalizing same-sex marriage, the Church objected to the bills proposed by the center-left coalition – not only the so-called ‘Patto civile di solidarietà (PACS)’, modeled on the French civil unions, but also the much less radical ‘Diritti e doveri delle persone stabilmente Conviventi (DICO)’ and ‘Contratto di unione solidale (CUS)’, closer to a ‘registered partnership’ model – on the grounds that they implied official recognition of same-sex partnership as an institution. Addressing the issue on many occasions, and particularly in a detailed speech given in September 2005, the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI) president, Camillo Ruini, insisted that such recognition would institutionalize a ‘small marriage’ no different from the legalization of full-fledged same-sex marriages (Ruini 2005). The Church’s representatives (particularly Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Ruini, and Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone) therefore engaged in lobbying activity through appeals to public opinion and meetings with the most prominent center-left Catholic legislators (such as Francesco Rutelli, Clemente Mastella, Rosy Bindi, and Prime Minister Romano Prodi) to try to prevent the approval of the bill (see, for example, *Corriere della Sera*, May 14, 2006; *Liberazione*, May 18, 2006; *Avvenire*, May 20, 2006; *Tempo*, June 2, 2006; *Corriere della Sera* and *Stampa*, February 4, 2007; *Il Giornale*, February 7, 2007; *Corriere della Sera*, February 13, 2007; *Repubblica*, February 19, 2007).

The Church’s position and campaign sparked a lively debate among Catholic politicians. On the center-right, in the early phases of the campaigns some voices – such as Gianfranco Fini, Stefania Prestigiacomo, and Sandro Bondi – supported the provision of some rights to same-sex couples, but most Catholic legislators refrained from participating in the discussion. When they did participate, they usually supported the Vatican’s position on the grounds that ‘the concept of family might be weakened’ (Berlusconi, *Il Giornale*, January 28, 2006) and ‘to defend the principles of natural law, the value of tradition, the ethical-religious dimension and the public role of Christianity’ (Pedrizzi, *Stampa*, January 16, 2006). Rocco Buttiglione’s statements on LGBT issues were also the reason for his rejection as an EU Commissioner by the EU parliament in 2004, and Buttiglione later

denounced the alleged ‘strong lobbies willing to impose, through the European Parliament, policies granting privileges to the homosexual minorities’ (*Stampa*, January 25, 2005). The center-right’s lack of involvement ended between 2006 and 2007, when most of the coalition engaged in a ‘crusade’ on family values against the Prodi government, and most center-right leaders moved towards pro-‘family’ positions, also on this issue, particularly by supporting the ‘Family Day’ rally in May 2007 (see *Corriere della Sera* and *Repubblica*, May 12, 2007).

Among center-left Catholics, some, such as Prodi and Bindi, defended the bills according to the idea that a PACS could not be regarded as a surrogate for marriage, and that legislators had to provide ‘rights to all citizens’, irrespective of religious creeds (Prodi, *Il Giornale*, July 21, 2005). But others, such as Clemente Mastella, chose to oppose any project aiming at a public recognition of same-sex partnerships, in order ‘to give inspiration and dignity to the Italian family [...] and to say no to any surrogate of the family’ (Mastella, *Il Giornale*, September 20, 2005).

LN politicians, although not very frequently involved in the discussion, were undoubtedly among the most outspoken supporters of the official position of the Vatican, seeing the recognition of same-sex partnerships as undermining the traditional family and thus the whole social order. What was striking in the party’s statements was the deliberate and explicit use of what many would regard as ‘politically incorrect’ language, including vulgar slang words such as *finocchio* and *culattone* to refer to LGBT people (see, for example, *La Padania*, September 22, 2005). The LN newspaper *La Padania*’s main headline on the Spanish law legalizing same-sex marriages, on 25 April 2005, was ‘*La favola di finocchio*’ (‘The Fairytale of Faggot’, playing on the assonance between ‘finocchio’ and ‘Pinocchio’). The most outspoken politician to adopt this language was the Minister for Reforms (2004–06) and Vice President of the Senate (2006–08), Roberto Calderoli, who declared that the institutionalization of same-sex partnerships ‘makes me laugh. The good God made us with different qualities: man and woman’ (*Repubblica*, September 4, 2005) and who called LGBT people ‘capons’ (that is, castrated domestic cocks) in a statement referring to the center-left minister, Barbara Pollastrini, whose surname means ‘little chickens’, and who had participated in a gay pride rally (*Corriere della Sera*, June 18, 2006). Again, commenting on the Spanish legalization of same-sex marriages, he stated, ‘I’ll always prefer a Spanish woman to a Spanish man’ (*Stampa*, July 1, 2005; in its Italian translation, ‘Spanish woman’ is also a slang word for a kind of sexual act between a man and a woman). Politically incorrect language, albeit in milder forms, was also adopted by some of the main center-right newspapers, such as *Il Giornale* and *Libero*, to joke about the divisions within the center-left coalitions and especially the disagreements among male center-left politicians, often called ‘divorces’ or the ‘end of their marriage’. Some conservative Catholic

commentators also engaged in provocative comparisons. For example, the well-known journalist Antonio Socci entitled an article of his, ‘And Why Not Marriage with Apes?’ (*Liberio*, June 6, 2006), while *Avvenire*, on 26 May 2006, asked, ‘Different Types of “Marriage”: And Why Not Polygamy?’.

The official positions of the Church and the Catholic world did not change when, during the campaign for the 2013 elections, the center-left put the issue on the table again after some years of silence. Still, there were two major differences. At first, the Church appeared less consistent in its public opposition and more torn by dissenting voices. For example, Cardinal Paolo Urso stated that ‘when two people choose to live together, it is important that the state recognizes this fact’ (*Corriere della Sera*, January 13, 2012), and Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini stated that ‘it is not evil that two people, even homosexuals, enjoy a stable situation and that the state favors them’ (*Repubblica*, March 23; the latter statements were taken from the book *Credere e Conoscere* [2012], written by Martini with the center-left politician, Ignazio Marino, well known for his pro-secular positions). Only in the latter phases of the campaign did the Church officially mobilize against legalization proposals, and then it did so by adopting a new, broader rallying cry: the condemnation of so-called ‘gender theory’ or ‘gender philosophy’, allegedly also supported by EU institutions, according to which, in Pope Benedict’s words, sexual orientation is not ‘a given element of nature’ but ‘a social role that we choose for ourselves’ (Benedict XVI 2012; see also Benedict XVI, *Messaggero*, January 20, 2013; and Bagnasco, *Famiglia cristiana*, January 27, 2013).

Meanwhile, Catholic legislators, especially on the center-left, now rarely based their opposition to legislation on frames such as identity or natural law, but often just highlighted the need to ‘identify real priorities’ (Fioroni, *Il mattino*, June 13, 2012) such as the impact on families of the economic crisis and unemployment, or warned that ‘a coalition cannot be based ... on an issue regarding the conscience of legislators and every private citizen’ (Fioroni, *Pubblico*, September 20, 2012). Others, such as Rutelli, were now much more open than in 2005–06, even supporting the idea of adoption for same-sex couples or single people (*Il Giornale*, September 24, 2012) or rejecting Cardinal Angelo Scola’s opposition to the legalization of same-sex partnerships by stressing the difference between the ‘spiritual message’ of religious people and the legislators’ duty to protect ‘the general interest’ (Tabacci, *Repubblica*, September 25, 2012).

The center-right was also further divided on the issue, due not only to Fini’s liberal stance, but also to the new centrist coalition led by Mario Monti. This evolution from bipolar competition to a

multi-polar political system (in which the new *Cinque stelle* movement was also gaining ground) changed the political alignments, especially when it became clear that the Vatican was oriented towards endorsing Monti's project, now that they were faced with Berlusconi's scandals and his alleged involvement in underage prostitution. Same-sex unions played a crucial role in Berlusconi's strategy to counter Monti, with a twofold action. On the one hand, the main center-right newspapers attacked Monti's inconsistencies, and particularly the inclusion in his party's lists of an LGBT activist, Alessio De Giorgi, who, according to some reports, was involved in child pornography and was consequently forced to withdraw his candidacy (see *Il Giornale* and *Liberio*, January 17, 2013). The center-right newspapers, and especially *Il Giornale* (owned by Berlusconi's family), also denounced the alleged existence of a 'gay lobby' aiming at the conquest of power under the leadership of Nichi Vendola, the openly gay leader of the leftist party SEL, and even criticized the Church for its 'docility' on the issue (*Il Giornale*, September 20, 2012). On the other hand, Berlusconi timidly hinted at the possibility of a revision of his pro-family positions, with the endorsement of same-sex unions. This was explicitly interpreted by the center-right newspapers as 'a signal' to the Church, a 'happy revenge' for the 'treason' of Catholics supporting Monti (*Liberio*, January 8, 2013; *Il foglio*, January 9, 2013). It should be noted that this stance contradicted the position of 173 center-right MPs who had signed an open letter in support of a society based on the 'traditional family' (*Avvenire*, August 12, 2012). On the other hand, right-wing Catholics and the LN generally refrained from participating in this phase of the debate and intervened only to denounce the alleged intention of the center-left to grant adoption to same-sex couples – especially in 2013, after the sentence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) which granted homosexual people the right to adopt the children of their partners².

Today, the issue of same-sex unions in Italy is still open and controversial. At the time of writing (July 2015), a new bill on civil unions, the Cirinnà draft bill, is under discussion in the Italian parliament, officially supported by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.³ Although its approval is not certain, it has become more likely after the recent ECHR decision (21 July 2015) in the case of *Oliari and Others v. Italy*,⁴ which ruled that existing human rights laws require Italy to legally recognize same-sex partnerships.

The debate on the Muslim dress code

The debate in context

In Italy, the debate on the Muslim dress code, and particularly the full Muslim veil, started much later than in other countries such as France.⁵⁵ For the sake of simplicity, in this article the term ‘full veil’ will be used for clothes, such as burqas and niqabs, which hide women’s faces (as well as, usually, the whole of their bodies), and the term ‘headscarf’ will be used for those which cover women’s heads but not their faces. View all notes In particular, this was the consequence of a more tolerant approach towards the display of religious symbols in the public sphere. But it was also a function of structural factors, such as a slower immigration rate and a restrictive law on citizenship (based on *jus sanguinis*). These factors limited the salience of the issue until at least the 1990s, when the rise of the LN, with its anti-immigration stance, contributed to increasing discussion of immigration-related issues (Guolo 1999; Guolo 2011; Bertezolo 2011). The discussion was further enhanced by 9/11 and its aftermath, which created a new cultural climate marked by hostility and diffidence towards Muslims. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the first serious discussion on the Muslim dress code took place during the 2002 invasion of Afghanistan. In the following years, the discussion shifted to the European context, with debates on the French law banning religious symbols from public schools, especially when some LN-led municipalities began enacting local regulations banning full veils and other Muslim dress (such as the swimsuits commonly known as ‘burqini’). Still, it was only towards the end of the 2010s that this issue was embraced by most of the center-right coalition, with an attempt to pass legislation banning the wearing of full veils in public spaces.

Since the Italian discussion was deeply influenced by international developments related to the ‘war on terror’, almost every major terrorist attack in the West also triggered minor waves of debate focused on the Muslim dress code or other Islam-related issues, such as the location of mosques.⁶⁶ During the 2000s and the early 2010s, there were several local debates, which often spilled over at the national level, regarding projects to build new mosques in places such as Milan, Genoa, Turin, Padua, Naples, and Colle Val d’Elsa (near Florence), and controversies about existing places of worship regarded by the center-right as extremist, such as the mosque in Viale Jenner in Milan (Bombardieri 2011; Allievi 2010; Ozzano and Giorgi 2016). View all notes The news coming from neighboring France was also crucial in legitimizing the issue in the Italian public sphere, and the ban on face-covering veils approved by the French parliament in 2010 encouraged the Italian center-right to pursue the approval of a similar law. More broadly, European developments also

influenced the Italian discussion on immigration through the wider debate on the multicultural model, adopted in different versions in countries such as Germany and the UK (Okin 1999; Kymlicka 1999; Kymlicka 2003).

Catholic actors on the Muslim dress code

In comparison with the debates over ethical-religious issues related to sexuality, bioethics, and religion in the public sphere, the discussion over the veil displays some distinctive features. To begin with, at least in its early phases, it was largely confined to the intellectual world, and not very politicized. Moreover, there is a clear difference between the early phases of the discussion and its later developments (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016). Until 2004–05, the discussion largely took place within the left, and revolved around the imposition of full veils in Muslim-majority countries such as Afghanistan and, after 2003, around the French discussion on a law banning all ostensible religious symbols from public schools. However, an entirely new phase of the debate started in 2004–05, when controversies over the use of the veil in Italy began to arise and the LN exploited the issue in ‘civilizational’ terms.

If we look at the positions of Catholic legislators, it is interesting to observe that in the early phase they often hesitated to condemn the full veil and especially the headscarf as a religious symbol. Even an ultra-conservative Catholic such as the scholar and journalist Massimo Introvigne defined the French law (then still under discussion) as ‘a gift to Osama’ (*Libero*, December 18, 2003). An LN representative, Federico Bricolo, was also critical towards the law, not out of concern for Muslims’ religious rights, but because it also banned ostensible Christian symbols. He stated, ‘to try to suppress the use of the chador, they erased any sign of belonging to our civilization and our native faith, such as the crucifix’ (*Libero*, September 2, 2004). This concern was quite widespread at the time, even among moderate and centrist Catholic legislators, because a debate on the crucifix in public places was also developing in Italy. This mainly revolved around the case of Soile Lautsi, an Italian-Finnish woman living in Abano Terme, near Padua, who filed a series of lawsuits, first before national and later before European courts, against the presence of crucifixes in the classrooms of the school attended by her children. The case was resolved only in 2011, when, after initially ruling in Lautsi’s favor, the ECHR decided to uphold the Italian position on the crucifix (Ozzano and Giorgi 2013; Ozzano and Giorgi. 2016; Annicchino 2011). The concern that a ban on Muslim dress might negatively affect the struggle in favor of the crucifix was often raised by Catholic politicians and journalists (see, for example, *Il Giornale*, November 16, 2004; *Il Secolo d’Italia*, October 8, 2009; and *Il Giornale*, January 28, 2010). Here, however, the difference

between the position of many centrist Catholics and that of LN representatives is quite evident. From the very beginning of the debate, the former – and particularly the Minister of the Interior, Giuseppe Pisanu – generally opposed a ban on the crucifix as well as a ban on the headscarf (insofar as, unlike full veils, it did not prevent the identification of a person) on the grounds of freedom of religion and respect for religious traditions (Radio Vaticana, November 4, 2003). Cardinal Mario Pompedda echoed this view, declaring that the headscarf, the crucifix, and the Jewish kippah were all symbols of ‘religious belonging’ to be respected as part of the individual’s ‘private sphere’. In contrast, the LN seemed to see the headscarf as part of an anti-Christian crusade. For instance, a headline in *La Padania* on 8 November 2003 read: ‘Between Crucifix Denied, Islamic Veil and Female Genital Mutilation: Only a Culture with Solid Roots Can Resist Subjugation’. LN representatives even interpreted the admittance of the headscarf in the classroom and the removal of the crucifix as discrimination against Christianity, ‘deeply unsettling our social fabric’ (Boni, *Il Giorno*, August 31, 2004).

An entirely new phase of the discussion started in 2004, when a teacher was dismissed from her job at a kindergarten in Samone, near Turin, for wearing a headscarf, and LN-led administrations started to enact bans on full veils in small northern towns such as Drezzo and Azzano Decimo (for a comprehensive list of the bans, see Pastorelli 2012). Although the LN representatives enacting and supporting these measures appealed to all the legal, cultural, religious, and security-related grounds available, the common denominator among their statements was the idea of a cultural, or ‘civilizational’, opposition to the Muslim presence in Italy. As shown above, this was in turn seen as part of a wider crusade, including secularists and aimed at undermining a traditional social order supposedly based on Christian values. The LN’s representatives saw immigration as a ‘dangerous virus’ threatening Christian Europe and its cultural traditions (Borghesio, *La Repubblica*, October 3, 2006), and openly related Islam in general to the terrorist attacks in the West (*La Padania*, July 30, 2005). Other politicians outside the LN, such as Daniela Santanché of the Alleanza nazionale party, also supported a ban on headscarves in schools, but were more cautious not to frame their campaigns in religious terms, choosing instead to focus on women’s discrimination and the impositions of patriarchal cultures (see, for example, *Corriere della Sera*, April 23, 2007; *Stampa*, October 1, 2007; see also Santanché 2006). Some intellectuals and journalists also gained prominence in the years of the so-called ‘war on terror’ by adopting strong anti-Muslim stances. For example, Magdi Allam, an Egyptian-born journalist, was often quoted in center-right media in the early 2000s as an example of a ‘secularized’ Muslim. He increasingly radicalized his attacks against Islam in the following years, and particularly after publicly converting to Catholicism in 2008. In his view, Muslim veils are ‘the main tool for the penetration of the Muslim Brotherhood’ (*Corriere*

della Sera, October 22, 2006) and reflect an 'Islamic imperialist ideology' aiming at 'the conquest of religious, cultural, social, and political power' (*Corriere della Sera*, September 24, 2007).

Like LGBT people, though even more insistently and frequently, Muslims were also the target of politically incorrect language. Not only were they defined, as mentioned above, as 'a dangerous virus', but their prophet was called 'the imposter Muhammad' (*La Padania*, February 17, 2004) and headscarved women were referred to as 'imbacuccate' (muffled) in their veils (Allam, *Corriere della Sera*, September 2, 2006). This attitude was even shown in the frequent use of archaisms such as 'maomettani' (Mohammedans) to refer to Muslims, and of other colloquialisms, such as the recurrent use of 'Islamics' instead of 'Muslims'.

The mainstream center-right Catholics mostly refrained from participating in the LN's civilizational struggle. While usually rejecting the idea of a ban of the headscarf as a religious symbol, they either supported a ban on full veils on the grounds of discrimination against women or public security, often alleging that it was not to be regarded as a religious symbol (see, for example, De Albertis, AN, *L'Opinione*, September 26, 2004), or they avoided the issue by declaring that face covering was already forbidden by existing legislation (see, for example, Giovanardi, *Il Giornale*, September 23, 2004).⁷ In particular, article 85.1 of the Royal Decree 773/1931 makes it forbidden to appear masked in public places, except on specific occasions (for example, during a carnival), and article 5 of law 152/1975 bans 'the use of safety helmets, or any other device apt to making the identification of a person more difficult, in a public place or a place opened to the public, without a reasonable ground'. [View all notes](#)

The Church was clearly divided over the civilizational approach to the Muslim dress code issue, and more broadly to immigrant faiths. Among both the Vatican hierarchies and the grassroots clergy we can find examples of both support and rejection. A very critical stance towards Muslims was taken, for example, by Cardinal Giacomo Biffi, who in 2000 made a controversial statement in an interview on the subject. Biffi openly expressed the 'reciprocity' argument later adopted by many on the center-right (especially in relation to places of worship), according to which Muslims in Europe should be granted only those rights that are granted to minority religions in Muslim-majority countries. Moreover, according to Biffi, Muslims are 'resolved to remain aliens to our humanity ... waiting to be able to make us all like them'. As a consequence, Europe had to privilege immigration from Christian countries over immigration from Muslim ones (*Repubblica*, October 1, 2000). Such statements were very controversial, drawing praise from the LN and criticism from the left. In the following years, they were echoed by other high-level prelates, such as Cardinal

Severino Poletto, who intervened in the debate on the construction of a mosque in Turin with a much-discussed statement against the presence of minarets in a city marked by a ‘deep Catholic culture’ (*Repubblica*, January 18, 2009). In contrast, another part of the hierarchy was very positive towards Muslims and their demands. In particular, Cardinal Tettamanzi, the Archbishop of Milan, repeatedly defied the LN, which is very strongly rooted in Lombardy, by avowing the presence of ‘places of worship in every neighborhood ... for people belonging to non-Christian religions, especially Islam’ (*Corriere della Sera*, December 6, 2008). The official position of the Church tried to mediate between these different orientations, inviting Catholics to build ‘bridges between individuals’ and to encourage ‘comprehension and cooperation between the great religions of the world, especially Christianity and Islam’ (Pope John Paul II, *Corriere della Sera*, December 3, 2003). But the Vatican was also very circumspect towards clergymen and religious organizations that displayed a friendly attitude towards Islam, especially over the location of places of worship (see Cardinal Betori, CEI Secretary, *Corriere della Sera*, May 28, 2008) and in local contexts, such as Genoa, where the local clergy was deeply divided (*La Padania*, June 4, 2004).

It is also interesting that the LN representatives did not hesitate to criticize clergy who adopted favorable stances towards Muslims. They openly condemned priests ‘who bless mosques’ (*La Padania*, January 14, 2003); they were very critical towards religious organizations that offered their spaces to Muslims (*Liberio*, July 20, 2005); and they criticized politicians and prelates who ‘flirt’ with Muslim centers and ‘bow down faithfully to second their requests’ (*La Padania*, July 27, 2005). The future leader of LN, Matteo Salvini, even invited Tettamanzi to ‘host the Islamics [sic] in his enormous palaces’ (*Repubblica*, September 6, 2010), while Mario Borghezio defined the party, ‘with its consistent positions in defense of the founding values of Christian civilization’, as ‘the only bastion against this fundamentalist and intolerant Islam’ (*La Padania*, March 18, 2005).

The strategy of non-participation of many Catholic centrists, adopted also by many center-right secularists, was no longer possible in 2008, when the Council of State (an auxiliary organ of the Italian government, also acting as a special administrative tribunal) declared the existing laws banning face covering inapplicable to Muslim veils. The center-right, at the time engaged in an electoral campaign largely based on security- and immigration-related issues, then rallied around the idea of a ban on full veils. This position was further encouraged two years later by the French ban on full veils, which began to be cited as an example by center-right politicians (see, for example, *Il Giornale*, September 16, 2010). To justify its positions, the coalition also used Muslim voices critical towards the veil, including ‘moderate’ Muslim Italian organizations like the Comunità Religiosa Islamica (COREIS, an organization composed mainly of Italian converts to

Islam, claiming a membership of around 50,000) and former or critical Muslim activists such as Allam and the Moroccan-born Souad Sbai.

In this phase – with the focus shifting from the headscarf to the full veil, and the broader public discussion on ethical-religious issues shifting towards right-wing positions – only some left-wing secularists adopting a multicultural worldview dared to engage in a defense of the full veil (see, for example, *Il Messaggero*, October 19, 2006). Catholic legislators, and also the Vatican, were remarkably quiet in the debate. In the center-right, when they chose to intervene, they generally condemned the full veil as ‘a distortion of Koranic orthodoxy’ (European Commissioner Frattini, *Corriere della Sera*, October 20, 2006), as a ‘political, not religious symbol’ (Lombardy governor Formigoni, *Corriere della Sera*, October 26, 2006), and as ‘a symbol of segregation and submission’ (Bertolini, *Il Giorno*, September 28, 2007). And in the center-left, Catholic legislators generally endorsed the position of the coalition’s leader, Prodi, who in 2006 had praised the headscarf but rejected the full veil and face covering on the grounds of ‘common sense’ (Prodi, *Il Giornale*, October 18, 2006).

When the center-right proposed to parliament a law banning the full veil, the disagreement was over the recipe to correctly address this issue. While most actors seemed to agree on the fact that the full veil was not to be regarded as a religious symbol,⁸ This position was also endorsed by the documents of the Committee on Italian Islam, an *ad hoc* consultative body set up by the center-right government which some criticized as biased (Ayoubi 2010). View all notes their opinions diverged on the advisability of a ban: according to the center-right and to some center-left secularists, it was necessary to protect women’s dignity, while according to many in the center-left, it was the wrong strategy to adopt for integration, and, in any case, not a priority for the coalition (*Il Giornale*, September 16, 2010). A draft bill aiming at a ban on the full veil was approved in August 2011 by the Commission for Constitutional Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies, but could not be approved by the parliament because the Berlusconi government fell in November 2011. Also due to the rise to prominence of social-economic issues, the issue was then apparently dropped by most actors, and to date has not again been a matter of broad public discussion.

‘Centrist’ and ‘civilizational’ Catholics in comparison

Looking comparatively at the positions of Catholic actors in the two debates, the most striking point is their dishomogeneous alignments. On the one hand, their positions in relation to same-sex unions are quite homogeneous, with most Catholic actors opposing the public recognition of same-sex

partnerships. Even those of them who support this recognition generally do so, officially, out of their institutional duty to protect the rights of all citizens, irrespective of religious creed, while emphasizing that they agree with the Church on the matter of principle. This alignment is coherent with a discursive structure marked by a polarization between believers and secularists, described in the US as a ‘culture war’ (see, for example, Hunter 1991; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005; Hunter and Wolfe 2006) and in Europe in the softer terms of ‘morality politics’ (Engeli, Green-Pedersen, and Larsen 2012). On the other hand, on the veil and, more broadly, Muslim immigration-related issues, Catholic actors are deeply divided between a ‘pluralist’ or ‘centrist’ orientation, which generally supports the provision of religious rights to Muslims (albeit sometimes subject to conditions, such as reciprocity), and a ‘civilizational’ or ‘communitarian’ one which opposes their having certain basic religious rights on the grounds that Muslims are exogenous, incompatible, and undesirable to Italian culture and society. Thus, if we look only at policy stances, it seems that the ‘civilizational’ wing of Catholicism in politics is aligned with the Church and the centrists on same-sex unions, but not on immigration and the Muslim dress code.

However, if we also take into account framing and language choices, the picture is quite different. Although the LN and its right-wing allies agree with the Vatican in denying recognition to same-sex partnerships, they construe the problem in a different way. It is true that the Catholic Church uses harsh language to describe LGBT lifestyles, which it sees as ‘intrinsically disordered’, ‘against natural moral law’, and disruptive of a social order based on the ‘traditional’ family, as was written in the official document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (2003). But this language does not usually imply a denigration of LGBT people themselves. Indeed, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, quoting the Catechism of the Catholic Church, points out that they ‘must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity’ and ‘every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 2003). This is not true of the LN or other ‘civilizational’ Catholic actors, which – as seen above – often use offensive language not only in relation to LGBT lifestyles, but also to LGBT people themselves, calling them ‘capons’, *finocchi*, or *culattoni*. This difference of language casts a new light on our comparison, if we consider how politicians belonging to the same area talk about Muslims. As shown above, they have called Muslims ‘a dangerous virus’, their prophet ‘the imposter Muhammad’, and headscarved women ‘imbacuccate’ (muffled) in their veils.

Considering this, if we look again at the two debates, we see that, irrespective of policy choices, in both cases there is a significant difference between the ‘centrist’ and ‘civilizational’ uses of Catholic values. The ‘centrist’ use is undoubtedly focused on a specific vision of society based on

‘traditional’ values, and particularly on marriage between man and woman as the cornerstone of social order. Consequently, it views LGBT lifestyles, as well as, albeit less frequently, some Muslim institutions, as disruptive and/or immoral. In contrast, the ‘civilizational’ use of Catholic values seems to blame not just institutions or lifestyles, but *individuals themselves* for the alleged wrongs of society. In turn, this also implies very different conceptions of Italian society and citizenship. While ‘centrist’ Catholics accept that Italy is a pluralist society and – while not directly blaming individuals for their identity – focus on the protection of a ‘traditional’ idea of society, ‘civilizational’ Catholics reject the idea of pluralism itself: they seem to reject any kind of gender, religious, or ethnic identity which does not correspond to an ideal type of (northern) Italian, (male) heterosexual, white, and Catholic person.

Another notable point about the LN is its ‘monolithic’ character. That is, while other parties show a degree of internal pluralism and especially so in relation to sensitive issues such as religion-related ones, the LN does not: in all of the articles included in the database used for this research it is virtually impossible to detect any kind of disagreement, any statement that diverges from the official line of the party on either LGBT issues or immigration. This is also a consequence of the strong identity-driven approach adopted by the party – at least in relation to the issues considered here – which limits the possibility of adopting strategic positions or striking compromises. Other major political actors have shown more strategic flexibility and openness to compromise, as in the center-left’s tough stance on immigration after 2006 and in Berlusconi’s openness to same-sex unions in 2013. For the most part, centrist Catholics are no exception to this rule: while their specific Catholic identity does not allow them to accept drastic changes in policy choices, they can show their strategic side in changing their frame choices. As shown above, they can do so by shifting from identity-based frames to less assertive ones based on opportunity and priority, or by adopting stances based on their ‘double loyalty’ to Church and state, which allows them to vote on laws they personally disagree with out of their duty to protect the rights of all citizens, irrespective of their faiths.

This strategic side of centrist Catholics also helps account for some of the major trends that emerge from the analysis. On the one hand, in relation to LGBT rights and especially the legalization of same-sex partnerships, there is a clear evolution towards a greater openness. This is shown by the fact that the discussion of LGBT issues has become increasingly mainstream, by the growing disagreements in the Catholic field and in the Catholic hierarchies themselves, and by the substitution of identity frames with opportunity ones. On the other hand, the discussion of Muslims’ religious rights seems to have shifted towards tougher stances: while in the early phases of the

debate many centrist actors showed tolerance towards headscarves and even full veils on the grounds of religious freedom, in the latter phases the discussion shifted towards security and women's freedom arguments, with many actors now favorable to a legal ban on full veils. This can be explained by the fact that 'centrist' Catholics, while maintaining their focus on morality-related issues, show a degree of flexibility not usually found among 'civilizational' ones.

Concluding remarks: Catholicism and the Italian political system

The analysis provided in this article can also support four conclusions about the changing role of Catholicism and its implications for today's Italian political system. First, a significant point highlighted by the analysis is the persistent political role of the Catholic Church. The Church has not limited itself to an advocacy role (Warner 2000), but has often played an active role in Italian political discussions, both by giving specific guidance to Catholic legislators through the speeches of the Church's main representatives and official documents, and by directly lobbying Catholic political leaders. This was especially true in relation to the discussion of same-sex unions, with the Church playing a crucial role in making a broad appeal to public opinion, supporting Catholic organizations active in civil society (for example, with the organization of the 2007 Family Day), and arranging meetings between high-level representatives of the Church's hierarchies (such as CEI President Ruini) and the leaders of the center-left coalition. The decaying influence of religious values in society as a consequence of secularization in Italy seems therefore to have been replaced by the direct influence of religious institutions and civil society organizations. This direct influence is, moreover, accepted or at least tolerated by most political actors, with the exception of the secular left and the radicals.

Second, as explained in the previous section, at least two different forms of Catholic values in politics can be identified in Italy. One is proposed by the Catholic Church and followed by most centrist Catholic legislators. It is rather tolerant in terms of social and religious pluralism and supportive of human rights and social justice, but it puts a strong emphasis on the 'traditional family', based on marriage between man and woman, understood as the cornerstone of society. This explains the staunch opposition to any recognition of alternative conceptions of family, as displayed in the debates over the recognition of same-sex couples. The second form, proposed by the LN and by some other center-right representatives, can be defined as 'civilizational'. Although also relying on traditional values and the traditional conception of the family, it grounds these in a conception of

citizenship understood in terms of an ethnic and cultural community that excludes any pluralism, whether in terms of religious-cultural identity or in terms of gender. In this vision, Christian identity is not defined by the Church's teaching (as also shown by the LN's criticism of clerics who support the integration of immigrants, such as the Archbishop of Milan, Tettamanzi), but represents a marker of Western civilization in opposition to an allegedly cultural (but also territorial) Muslim 'invasion'.

Third, the center-right and center-left coalitions are both influenced by these two forms of Catholicism in politics, but in very different ways. The center-right alternates between these two visions, and thus between a civilizational and a more inclusive conception of citizenship. Sometimes – as, for example, in Fini's stances – it even shows signs of a French-style 'republican' idea of citizenship based on common civic values rather than identity. Its ability to overcome such differences, other than through Berlusconi's leadership, seems to be based on a common tendency to simply sweep its most divisive issues under the carpet. In this way, the center-right's conception of citizenship appears to be deeply influenced by a widespread attitude (particularly evident in Italy during the pre-republican and Fascist eras) of silent tolerance (which does not mean, however, acceptance or inclusion) of all differences that remain limited to the private sphere without entering the public realm and becoming an issue of public discussion.

In contrast, the center-left evidently struggles to negotiate the divide between its different souls. The centrist Catholic soul, much influenced by the official stances of the Church, has not managed to develop its own 'progressive' version of Catholicism in politics, or perhaps is not willing to do so for 'political marketing' reasons. The leftist and secular soul is sometimes at odds with the centrist one, since some of its representatives – particularly the radicals and the post-Communist and green left – are often critical towards the presence of religion in the public sphere. The difficulty in finding a compromise, let alone common ground, is evident even in the positions of individual center-left representatives, who sometimes resort to double positions, each justified by a different frame, to strike a balance between their duty as legislators and their loyalty to Church doctrine. The main 'glue' binding these different positions together is often the LN's civilizational stance itself, which, being at odds with both the Church's social doctrine and the left's multiculturalist stances, provides both souls in the center-left with reasons to oppose it.

Finally, as a whole, Catholicism in politics seems to be here to stay, and it is likely to continue to influence Italian politics significantly in the coming years. This is a consequence of the high level of legitimacy of the Catholic Church among the wider public, its privileged access to most political

actors, and these actors' eagerness to exploit religion – albeit in different ways – for electoral purposes. Still, globalization, and especially Europeanization processes, can impose limits on this influence, as shown particularly by the evolution of the debate over same-sex unions. This is a consequence of both the growing interdependence of domestic debates and the increasingly multi-level structure of governance and of the judicial resolution of controversies. In this context, and to use 'economic' terms, Catholic actors often seem to act as a monopoly trying to preserve its prerogatives in a market that was once closed but is becoming increasingly pluralist. As shown above, 'centrist' Catholics do so by reaffirming the broader meaning and legitimacy of Catholic values in a pluralist context, while 'civilizational' Catholics frequently reject pluralism itself.

Notes

1 This broader research project was undertaken by myself and Alberta Giorgi, of the Center for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra and GRASSROOTSMOBILISE, Eliamep. Its main results were published in Ozzano and Giorgi 2016.

2 [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/fra/pages/search.aspx?i=001-116735#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-116735%22\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/fra/pages/search.aspx?i=001-116735#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-116735%22]}).

3 <http://www.senato.it/leg/17/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/39314.htm> (accessed on 2 July 2015)

4 [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-156265#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-156265%22\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-156265#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-156265%22]}) (accessed 2 July 2015).

5 For the sake of simplicity, in this article the term 'full veil' will be used for clothes, such as burqas and niqabs, which hide women's faces (as well as, usually, the whole of their bodies), and the term 'headscarf' will be used for those which cover women's heads but not their faces.

6 During the 2000s and the early 2010s, there were several local debates, which often spilled over at the national level, regarding projects to build new mosques in places such as Milan, Genoa, Turin, Padua, Naples, and Colle Val d'Elsa (near Florence), and controversies about existing places of worship regarded by the center-right as extremist, such as the mosque in Viale Jenner in Milan (Bombardieri 2011; Allievi 2010; Ozzano and Giorgi 2016).

7 In particular, article 85.1 of the Royal Decree 773/1931 makes it forbidden to appear masked in public places, except on specific occasions (for example, during a carnival), and article 5 of law 152/1975 bans ‘the use of safety helmets, or any other device apt to making the identification of a person more difficult, in a public place or a place opened to the public, without a reasonable ground’.

8 This position was also endorsed by the documents of the Committee on Italian Islam, an *ad hoc* consultative body set up by the center-right government which some criticized as biased (Ayoubi 2010).

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