

The opening of a *musallā* at the Magna Græcia University of Catanzaro and the controversies over the “Islamization” of society: an assault on identity?

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Prayer is one of the five pillars of Islam, and every aspect of it - each gesture, word, and thought - carries its own significance. Through the five daily prayers, Muslims fulfil a spiritual duty that, according to Islamic tradition, was instituted by Muḥammad during his night journey and ascension to heaven (*mi‘rāj*). This ritual, which structures sacred time and represents the most central expression of Islamic worship, allows believers to enter into an intimate dialogue with Allah and to receive the spiritual influences that shape and transform them¹.

The centrality of prayer for a Muslim believer is unquestioned. While performing it does not strictly require a dedicated place of worship, mosques (*masājid*) are traditionally regarded as the most suitable setting, and the expectation is that prayer should be performed correctly and attentively in spaces known as *musallā*.

One such *musallā* was recently opened at the Magna Græcia University of Catanzaro². The space - small and meant for quiet prayer and reflection - was created in a room that had no previous teaching function. According to the rector, it was established in response to “a genuine and deeply felt need within the university community, expressed by students, healthcare workers, and patients”³.

The decision to open this space - prompted by a request submitted in 2024 by a group of Muslim students⁴ - was the result of an agreement between the university and the Muslim Association of Catanzaro “Dar Assalam Odv”, an organization long known locally for offering spiritual support and coordinating a range of religious activities⁵. The inauguration was attended by representatives from the Public Administration, the State Police, and the Archdiocese of Catanzaro–Squillace, whose presence offered both a symbolic and concrete expression of the kind of interreligious and peaceful dialogue that is so widely hoped for today.

¹ AHMAD ‘ABD AL-WALIYY VINCENZO, *Islam, l'altra civiltà*, Mondadori, Milano, 2001, pp. 41-43.

² See: <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/moschea-universita-lega-rischio-islamizzazione-AHoHKyND> e <https://www.open.online/2025/10/27/universita-catanzaro-moschea-musulmani-polemica/>

³ The term “patients” is used because the area designated for the place of worship is within the biosciences building.

⁴ See: <https://web.unicz.it/it/news/124360/inaugurazione-spazio-di-preghiera-per-la-comunita-di-religioneislamica-dell-umg-il-messaggio-del-rettore-prof-giovanni-cuda>

⁵ See: <https://web.unicz.it/it/news/124751/il-rettore-dell-umg-giovanni-cuda-nessuna-moschea-uno-spazio-dipreghiera-per-i-membri-della-comunita-universitaria>

Similar initiatives have been introduced in previous years by other universities. Prayer rooms, worship spaces, and shared areas for silence and reflection - variously described as multireligious or multicultural⁶ - have been established at institutions such as the Universities of Turin, Milan, Brescia, Parma, Florence, and Padua, and, prior to Catanzaro, at the University of Calabria⁷. Their creation has at times sparked political debate, particularly concerning the principle of state secularism.

However, the Constitutional Court's guidance on this issue is clear enough to dispel doubts about the legitimacy of such initiatives⁸. Secularism (or, as Italian used to name it, *laicità*), as articulated in the landmark 1989 judgment no. 203, is not to be understood as state indifference towards religion, but rather as a commitment to safeguarding religious freedom within a context of religious and cultural pluralism. In this light, the University of Catanzaro, acting within its constitutionally recognized autonomy⁹, did not violate the principle of secularism; on the contrary, it fulfilled its deeper aims. The initiative responded directly to a religious need expressed from within the community itself and cannot be seen as an imposition of values – especially because the University already hosts a Catholic chapel¹⁰.

Another issue that has surfaced - particularly in some political quarters - concerns the preservation of identity. But the real problem is not the supposed danger of “identity replacement”; it is the act of publicizing this fear and framing it as something urgent and threatening. A basic familiarity with sociology and psychology would suffice to show that identities are not weakened by encounters with others; they are strengthened and enriched by them. This raises the question of whether the real incompatibility with religious freedom and secularism lies not in establishing prayer rooms on university campuses, but in the rhetorical strategies employed in political debates.

Why fuel a sense of threat by invoking the idea of identity? Beyond serving political interests, this approach appears to arise from a distorted - and distorting - perception of reality. By relying on tautological communication tactics¹¹, it succeeds in transforming unfounded anxieties into tangible fears. Focusing attention on “difference” through familiar tropes – i.e. the “dictatorship of minorities”, the “Islamisation of society”, the “rising criminality” - is enough to set the mechanism in motion. That otherness universally perceptible whenever one transcends the boundaries of the “self”, becomes reified

⁶ On the distinction between space and place, and on the legal issues related to the reification of categories in the semantic definition of places of worship, see MELISA LIANA VAZQUEZ, *La Torre di Pisa e la Moschea 'fuori luogo'. Libertà, diritti e spazio nella giurisprudenza costituzionale sui luoghi di culto*, in *Diritto e religioni*, anno XVII, n. 1, 2022, pp. 54-134.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of these experiences at the aforementioned universities, see GIUSEPPINA SCALA, *Gli spazi di accoglienza multireligiosa nel sistema universitario italiano*, in *Stato, Chiese e Pluralismo confessionale*, n. 13 del 2024, pp. 61-80.

⁸ On this topic, see also the following rulings of the Constitutional Court: n. 259 del 1990; nn. 195 e 421 del 1993; sent. n. 235 del 1997; sent. n. 63 del 2016.

⁹ See BENIAMINO CARAVITA, *L'autonomia universitaria oggi*, in *AIC*, n. 6, 2021, pp. 6-40.

¹⁰ See: <https://web.unicz.it/it/news/19577/inaugurazione-nuova-cappella-universitaria>

¹¹ On this topic ALESSANDRO DAL LAGO, *Non-persone. L'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2024.

as a cultural distinction that separates “us” from “them.” It makes no difference that “they” may have been born and raised in Italy: the romanticized notion of blood, complete with supposedly immutable genetic and cultural traits, is presumed to define the person. The implication seems to be that “one who is born Muslim cannot possibly become secular - or Christian.” As a result, “adapting to our values” - another persistent cliché in public discourse - takes on the status of a sacred dogma, an indispensable condition for integration.

But what exactly is “our identity”? What are “our principles”? Are not the willingness to include others and the promotion of interreligious dialogue among the most important principles and values that define Italian cultural identity? The history of the peninsula is, after all, that of an extraordinary melting pot of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity¹². Perhaps for this reason, in the comments responding to the opening of the *musallā* at the University of Catanzaro, some argued that it is inconceivable to make room for «a religion that considers us infidels, persecutes homosexuals, has no formal agreements with the State, and regards women as inferior beings». They also asked: «What will happen to female students? Will we witness the paradox in which they can attend lectures alongside male peers, yet, if they wish to pray in the mosque, are segregated into separate areas? This is not integration, but submission»¹³.

Precisely because Italians are considered “masters” of tolerance, they must, at all costs, avoid the Popperian paradox and show themselves to be unyieldingly “intolerant of the intolerant”¹⁴. Perhaps this is the conclusion to be drawn from the controversy. Yet it is worth noting that acceptance of homosexuality is generally (but not ever) rejected by all the monotheistic Abrahamic religions, not only Islam¹⁵. Furthermore, the accusation of female subjugation, rather than serving as a defense of Muslim women, appears to be a conceptual imposition by those who presume to decide for them what is right and what is wrong¹⁶. It is also worth noting that Article 8 of the Italian Constitution speaks of “equal freedom”, making the reference to the lack of agreements between the faith and the State somewhat misplaced. Finally, adherents of all religions that claim absolute truth, with varying degrees of fervor, label those who disagree with them as “infidels.” So, what are “our values” and “our principles”? If one were to attempt an answer, it could be argued that identity - the focal point where these values and principles converge - is, above all, a matter of personal choice¹⁷. Its emergence as the product of individual freedom,

¹² PAOLA CORTI, MATTEO SANFILIPPO, *L'Italia e le migrazioni*, Laterza, Bari, 2012.

¹³ The quotations are taken from the same newspaper articles cited in footnote n. 3.

¹⁴ KARL R. POPPER, *La società e i suoi nemici*, vol. unico, edited by D. Antiseri, translate by R. Pavetto, Armando editore, Roma, 2018.

¹⁵ On this topic see DANIELE FERRARI, *Libertà religiosa e orientamento sessuale. Percorsi e sfide nel diritto internazionale ed europeo*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2023.

¹⁶ MARTA C. NUSSBAUM, *La nuova intolleranza. Superare la paura dell'islam e vivere in una società più libera*, prefazione di STEFANO RODOTÀ, translate by S. De Petris, il Saggiatore, Milano, 2012, especially pp. 123-130.

¹⁷ ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *Intervista sull'identità*, edited by BENEDETTO VECCHI, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2003.

however, is conditioned by social interaction, so that identity and culture, socialization and individuality, are constantly created and recreated, evolving continuously in the flow of Being. Problems, if they arise at all, stem primarily from attempts to force or obstruct that flow, thereby undermining individual freedom. Or, more specifically, targeting certain types of subjectivities - those culturally deemed “irreconcilable” with the native culture.

What occurred at the University of Catanzaro, on the other hand, is an example of openness to freedom. The newly inaugurated *musallā* is a space for Muslims, but it is by no means closed or off-limits to others. The legitimacy concerns that were raised, which even led to a parliamentary inquiry, revolved around the entrance sign, because it bore the word “mosque”. It was this term that triggered worries, fears, and political debates concerning identity, values, and principles. Once the parliamentary process concluded, it became evident that no laws had been violated, nor had secularism been infringed upon. The room remained, along with its intended use, and the entrance sign was removed¹⁸.

The term “mosque” had purely symbolic significance: beyond its common cognitive association with “places of worship,” it represents - particularly for Muslims - a space imbued with social cohesion, spirituality, and solidarity¹⁹. The continued existence of the place, regardless of the terminology, is in any case a demonstration of commitment to constitutional values. Guaranteeing freedom allows the fullest expression of deeply felt personal identity. Conversely, restricting such expression lays the groundwork for violence²⁰. Even from the perspective of territorial security planning, the Catanzaro initiative should be interpreted as a step toward countering fundamentalist extremism, rather than as a potential security risk or a threat of “identity replacement”²¹.

¹⁸ See: <https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/2025/video/lega-smantellata-la-moschea-nell-universita-dicatanzaro-rettore-rimossa-solo-targa-errata-105641515-02k.shtml>

¹⁹ ANTONIO CUCINIELLO, *Luoghi di culto islamici in Italia: tipologie e dati*, in Fondazione ISMU, 2017, pp. 1-16.

²⁰ I would suggest two insightful works on the relationship between the oppression of freedoms and violence. On the topic of freedom, in general terms, I refer to ISAIAH BERLIN, *Libertà. A cura di Henry Hardy. Con un saggio di Ian Harris su Berlin e i suoi critici*, Italian version edited by M. Ricciardi, translated by G. Rigamonti and M. Santambrogio, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2010; on the topic of the oppression of freedoms as a precondition for violence, from a psychological and psychosocial perspective, see, instead FRANTZ FANON, *The Wretched of the Heart*, preface of JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, trad. by C. Farrington, Grove Press, New York, 1963; and XENIA CHRYSOCHOOU, *Diversità culturali. Psicologia sociale della differenza*, edited by C. Volpato, UTET, Milano, 2010.

²¹ See MAURO BARBERIS, *Non c'è sicurezza senza libertà. Il fallimento delle politiche antiterrorismo*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2017; FABRIZIO BATTISTELLI, *La sicurezza e la sua ombra. Terrorismo, panico, costruzione della minaccia*, Donzelli editore, Roma, 2016; NICOLA COLAIANNI, *Libertà di religione e sicurezza. Il test del terrorismo*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, fasc. n. 8, 2023, pp. 17-31, especially pp. 19-22.

For an overview on this topic, see ANTONELLO DE OTO (edited by), *Terrorismo di matrice religiosa, sicurezza e libertà fondamentali*, Bologna University Press, Bologna, 2023.

On European and international legislation on terrorism prevention and contrast, see: https://homeaffairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/EU%20Quick%20Guide%20to%20support%20protection%20of%20Places%20of%20Worship_it.pdf ; and <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/5/575167.pdf>

On the topic concerning the relationship among religious freedom and safety, see ROBERTO MAZZOLA, *La convivenza delle regole. Diritto, sicurezza e organizzazioni religiose*, Giuffrè editore, Milano, 2005; GABRIELE FATTORI, *Libertà*

Attempts to delimit a people's identity, reducing its semantic and semiotic breadth, and forcing it to orbit predetermined values imposed from above by a political agenda, culminate, instead, in a (symbolic) violation of both religious freedom and secularism. Symbolic violation of secularism occurs primarily because those invoking "our identity" arrogate the right to define what is "ours" on behalf of everyone²². Symbolic violation of religious freedom, meanwhile, arises because any action - whether discursive or practical - aimed at constraining religious liberty carries the risk, or results in the reality, of suppression, which ultimately only increases the potential for violence.

If the line linking religious freedom and security were imagined as an elastic band, securitarian and identitarian rhetoric could be seen as an attempt to pull it toward security. If this force becomes dominant, the elastic may snap, and the resulting shockwave could not only blow away freedom but also recoil, endangering those who exerted the pull.

Result: less freedom, less security... Which identity, then?

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religiosa e sicurezza, con la prima traduzione italiana delle Linee Guida OSCE 2019 su Libertà di religione o convinzione e sicurezza, Pacini Giuridica, Pisa, 2021.

²² *Laicità* indeed entails a pluralism of values. On this topic, see GIOVANNI BONIOLO (edited by), *Laicità. Una geografia delle nostre radici*, Einaudi, Torino, 2006.